Never A Happily Ever After
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Summary

Post 2017 movie. Life is never easy, and royal life has its own particular set of complications and challenges. Despite title, happy ending guaranteed.

Notes

A/N: Some things to be aware of: The Prince's name is not "Adam" in this story. Sorry, I hope the change works for everyone. This is attempting to be kind of, sort of more in line with the France setting of the new movie. So it's kind of, sort of trying to keep in line with French nobility and politics of the (roughish) period setting of the movie. But research is a tricky mistress and mistakes will be made. As always, comments and critiques are appreciated as they fuel the incredibly egotistical soul that lies within the author.
"Mademoiselle!"

Belle turned, white dress rustling. The castle was bustling; happy villagers and happy servants, the Maestro's orchestra playing a constant stream of joyous music. Halls draped in garland and glitter. The sun had set below the mountains, and the castle was warm with lights as a breeze lapped in through the windows.

"Oh Belle, you were a vision on the dance floor!" Lumiere glowed, his smile as bright as his old flame.

"Why thank you, Lumiere." She beamed, extending an arm as he came to her.

"You my dear owe me a dance." He purred playfully, ever the flirt. Taking her hand he twirled her, making her laugh. "We shall spin and dip and make the others so jealous!"

"After the dinner, you'll have your dance, Monsieur." Promising with a kiss pressed to his cheek. "And the celebration is lovely. You did such an excellent job planning the entertainment."

"Two months of planning, it's my finest party yet!" He kissed his fingers to the air. "Anything for you and the Master. We're so grateful for you in our lives." Patting her hand, he looked past her. "You should go, Mademoiselle, Your prince awaits."

Belle turned to see him. Tall, handsome, refined. Turning back to Lumiere, she smiled. "Our dance after dinner."

He flashed an excited grin, walking away and nearly running into Cogsworth who was not as nearly as glimmering.

"And what are you smiling about?" He huffed like he had just discovered his clock was off by five minutes.

The former candelabra threw an arm around the majordomo's shoulders. "Oh Cogsworth, lighten up! Look at this castle, it's alive again!"

"We need to get to the hall, or have you forgotten?"

"And what were you doing with Lumiere?" The prince asked, genteelly offering an arm to escort her with.

She slipped her hand over arm, palm atop his. "Enjoying this day with one of my good friends. And what have you been up to?"

"I owed Mrs. Potts a dance before dinner." He announced, proudly leading her down the hall. Back straight, chest swelling, blue eyes bright, smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. The charming prince in her books. "And this day is a wonderful one. All because of you."

"Us." Correcting him, she watched his eyebrows lift. "It was both of us."

He chuckled. "Us then, Darling."

"B-Ansell." She quickly corrected herself, but it was too late. He laughed. Deep, amused, rolling.
"Well, you're improving. It's been a week since the last slip." Drawing her hand up, he kissed her knuckles. Eyes so teasing, she was still getting used to that. This Ansell fellow was a little more lighthearted than her beast. Or perhaps her beast was more lighthearted as Ansell. She was still sorting it out.

"You know, I knew you by one name for over a year." She pointed out keenly "And now you have an entirely different one-"

"It's been two months, Dear."

"It's still an adjustment, Prince Anselme." she bumped him playfully with her hip, and he kept chuckling.

"You know, I-"

Hearing a pack of small shoes clattering down the hall, they turned and ducked out of the way as Chip led a large group of children. Each one was in their Sunday best and each and every one of the articles of clothing tousled and askew.

"Hi Chip." Ansell smiled.

"Hi Belle! Hi Master Ansell!" He hollered back at them, skidding off as someone shouted something about hunting ghosts and breaking curses.

"Bye, Chip." Ansell waved his fingers with the least amount of effort as it was clear the gesture would be unnoticed.

"What on earth." She pulled her hand to her mouth, laughing at the sight.

"Well I for one am glad everyone is having fun." Slipping an arm around her waist, he stole a kiss. One that wasn't as chaste as he had initially planned.

Belle snaked a hand up, stroking his jaw with the pad of her thumb. She felt breathless afterward and closed her eyes when he pressed his lips to her forehead.

"I love you if you haven't noticed." He whispered, his eyes sparkling happily.

"I love you too." Smoothing a hand over his silk waistcoat, she smiled up at him. "I love you so very much."

"Even without a beard?"

"Even without a beard, but possibly a little more with a beard."

He laughed, his voice echoing through the stone that glowed in candlelight. "We should probably go." He nodded towards the end of the hall. "Everyone is waiting for us. Come on."

The dining hall was packed. Long tables, more in other rooms, each cascading with food. Everyone chattering, laughing, drinking so much wine.

Cogsworth rose from the center table. He was seated towards the middle, all polished and powdered. An overstuffed, over prepared sentinel.

"Here we go." Ansell breathed out, squeezed her hand. Giving her a more proper elbow once more to walk with.
The entire room rose up. Servants, friends, love ones. All of them looking at the handsome pair expectantly. Suddenly the room felt too warm, and Belle's face too hot with blush.

"Presenting Prince Anselme Louis Fredric Ives-" Cogsworth boomed, pride peeking out from under his mustache. Clearly relishing his ability to announce royalty once more. Belle and Ansell stopped paying attention to the long name and even longer title, stealing glances at one another, trying so hard not to grin too widely, blush too red.

Ansell bowed to the room, and she followed his lead with a curtsy. He guided her to the middle table, the head of it in the back. Gilded and elegant, lions and scrolls adorning the legs. Glossy, brightly colored foods making the air heavy with enticing scents. Two large, sweeping chairs for them to sit at the head of it like rulers.

Maurice, the Potts', and all of their friends stood down the length of it. Beaming with pride and cheer.

The prince's chest felt fit to burst as he stole a glance at Belle. She was too beautiful for him, too good. And yet she was there, on his arm, shimmering and sweet. Her dress simple with blossoms twisting around it, glossy hair pulled back, eyes smiling at him when they made contact. At him. He still wasn't sure why he deserved it. Taking his place at the table, Belle by his side, he placed his fingers on the silk runner resting on top.

"We are so glad to have you here with us." Stately voice carrying as everyone watched him. Their golden prince; lions mane tied back, eyes so bright and shining. He made it hard for Belle to breathe in her dress and she had refused a corset. "This is a day I never thought would happen. Yet here we are, with old friends." He smiled at his staff, who bowed their heads. "And new ones." He looked to Le Fou with his irrepressible grin. "To celebrate our day rejoining the world. So we welcome you tonight, friends, family, villagers we've yet to meet, to be our guests."

The room roared with applause, and he gestured to the courses of food.

"Please, eat! And remember, we would love if you would join us in the ballroom afterward." Everyone sat, a loud clang of plates and chorus of happy conversations filling the castle. Turning, he met Belle's eyes. Clearly seeking approval from the one person it meant so much from. "So? How'd I do?"

She patted his arm. "Very nicely done." He pulled out her chair and she took her seat. Dancing had made her famished, and one of the servers immediately filled her goblet with a generous amount of wine as she eyed a small mountain of roasted game birds.

"That was quite the speech." Maurice smiled after a sip of his wine.

"I was never the one to give loud proclamations, so I had to practice this morning." He said, straightening a jacket sleeve with a hint of lingering nerves. "Several times."

"In the mirror." Belle added. "In his robe."

Maurice chuckled as the prince gave her a withering look.

"I thought that was just between us." He raised an eyebrow at her.

She looked breathtakingly mischievous. "I never agreed to that."

"And just how do you know what his robe looks like?" Mrs. Potts asked curiously, reproachfully. A twinkle in her eye.
Belle's face was flushed as Ansell's eyes widened in guilt.

Maurice's eyes darted from one to the other.

Ansell turned slowly to his right. "Anything else you'd like to tell them, Belle?"

She cleared her throat and reached for her wine.

Mrs. Potts burst into laughter as she watched them twist. Which in turn, radiated down the table, though only the first few chairs had caught any of the conversation. "Oh you two, I'm just teasin'."

"That was a pretty good one, Mrs. Potts." Her father laughed into his cup. His daughter was not as graceful in her affections towards the prince as she thought herself to be. And as her father, it was hard to not be amused as she navigated new waters.

"Papa."

"You brought it on yourself, my dear." Maurice took a heaping spoonful of steaming vegetables. "Can someone please pass that lovely looking ham?"

Ansell soaked in the merriment at the table before remembering he needed to eat.

"May I?"

Lumiere looked up at his prince who had an arm outstretched. He had twirled and danced with Belle through three songs. She was smiling gaily, still stepping with him. "Only if the Mademoiselle is ready, Sire." He told the prince.

"Don't you have a beautiful lady of your own to dance with?" Belle asked her friend. "I'd hate to steal you away for so long."

Lumiere bowed, all aglow. "You are correct, Ma Cherie. And it has been a pleasure." Allowing Ansell to step in, he headed to Plumette to fetch her from a sous chef.

"You have a very full dance card." Ansel told her, placing his hand up next to her own. Even after dinner, the castle was still full of guests. Everyone was having a grand time under the shimmering chandeliers. Madame Gardenrobe relishing the spotlight, her voice clear and angelic.

"I'm not the only one, you've been quite popular yourself." He was in his dark blue suit, her favorite one. The tailor had remade it after he had shrunk back down to human size, and she had been sewn a new golden gown.

"Tonight has been magical." He said softly, slipping his hand around her waist and dancing more closely as the Maestro slowed the pace and the Madame sung a romantic aria. "But I must admit, I look forward to having the library all to ourselves tomorrow."

Belle smiled tiredly into his jacket. Her feet were beginning to hurt, and an aching need to be reclusive and reading was spreading within. "Oh that sounds so nice."

"Nice and wonderfully lazy." He said enticingly. "Maybe you'll even see me in my robe again."

She laughed. "Are you ever going to let me live that down?"

"Never." Flashing a wicked grin, he gazed deeply into her eyes. "You know, it's nice to-"
The door to the outside flew open in a gust of summer wind.

The entire castle froze.

All of the servants turned as white as sheets.

Ansell turned towards the door, still holding Belle's hand.

A man, bedecked in silks and jewels, entered the ballroom. Chin out, shoulders back, eyes shrewd. Cold. Pompous. An entourage of well-dressed men, soldiers trailing behind, following his wake.

"Mon Dieu." Cogsworth muttered under his breath.

"Oh no." Mrs. Potts sighed in defeat, turning to look sadly at her husband.

A man stepped to the side as bannermen brought in flags. "Introducing the Duke of-

The pronunciation that followed was longer than Ansell's, and Belle didn't hear half of it as she watched her prince. First rippling with anger, then slowly retreat into himself.

"Father." Ansell growled.
Chapter 2

The castle was clearing out, the night soured by the Royal procession. Servants quickly disappearing to their stations, their home suddenly chilled and dim.

"Ansell, who is this." The Duke asked quickly.

"Hello, father." The prince grumbled, bowing deeply. "I missed you too."

Lumiere took Maurice by the shoulders and pulled him towards the kitchen.

"Someone should go get Belle." The Maestro said from the safety of a corridor. His lovely wife was huddled next to him with their beloved dog, peering out.

"She has certainly shown she can take care of herself." One of the footmen interjected.

"Against the Duke though?" The Madame shuddered. "Perhaps you're right, my love."

"This is Belle." Ansell hesitated in presenting her, keeping her back ever so slightly. "She lifted the curse on the castle- helped me lift the curse on the castle."

Belle studied Ansell carefully. Normally confident, intimidating; here he was cautious. Shoulders not so square, head slightly down so his eyes were forced upwards. Her prince, submissive?

His father looked down his nose. "And where are you from, my dear?"

She kept an eye on the soldiers and noblemen fanning out, invading their home. "From Villeneuve, your Grace." she pulled away from Ansell, forward, no fear shown. Curtsying, looking up at the Duke carefully. Noting the cold ice of skepticism seep over his face. It was quickly hidden and charm took over. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Sire."

His walking cane, encrusted with jewels, rapped on the marble floor. Ansell shrinking to the noise like a young lion cornered by a larger male. Paying his son no heed, he looked the girl over as one inspected a freshly purchased horse. Reaching out, the Duke took her hand and kissed it. Such a plain, simple thing. Not even a wig. "Pleasure to meet you as well my dear. And your family? Where do you hail from?"

"My father is an artist in the village." Black, thick worry crept into her stomach, hardening into a knot. His eyes were shrewd, holding back so much darkness.

"Lovely." His sudden lack of interest was palpable. "I'm sure you must need to go home, it was wonderful to meet you. I can see why my son is charmed."

A brazen lie, she drew in a breath. "Thank you, you have a wonderful son." Belle was livid and wanted to tell him she was already home. That, however, felt dangerous.

"Wonderful?" He was puzzled as if he was going to ask if she had confused the prince with another man. "Well, I suppose he's changed some during all these years. Though I can see you still have a penchant for parties, my son."

There was a snicker from the shadows, and Belle could see a young man done up in the finest Parisian fashion, watching them from the wall. Ansell's eyes darted to the man, seething at his presence.
"Anselme." The Duke called out firmly.

He jerked his head back into the conversation. "Your Grace, we were celebrating the lifting of the curse tonight-" The prince began.

"Ah yes, well, son you and I have some very important things to discuss." Studying all of the common folk leaving, tilting his head ever so slightly. "Tomorrow of course, after we've recovered from our long trip from Paris."

"Of course, Father." Ansell dipped his head. "If I may, I'd like to have a word with Belle."

"Certainly, I'll be in my chambers."

Watching the man leave, Belle felt a dread she couldn't shake away.

"Your room." He whispered, guiding her up the stairs and slipping into the bedroom.

"Brother!"

Belle watched Ansell bristle. If he had still had fur, she was certain his scruff would have been standing on end.

The young man in the finest Parisian fashion came forward. Smiling, but studying carefully. His mind a finely tuned piece of clockwork behind the eyes. "Anselme-"

"Leon." He said stiffly leaving Belle to give a forceful hug. "You're looking well."

"You look handsome as always." Glacier blue eyes slid to the girl his brother was clearly so enamored with. "And who is this?"

"Belle." She spoke up, curtseying. "And you, Monsieur?"

"Did this old boy never mention he had a brother?" He asked, playfully. "Leon de le Blanc, Viscount, the prince's older, half-brother."

"Always so quick to remind us all you're older." Ansell puffed.

He ignored the prince, taking her hand and kissing it. "He actually has two of us to annoy him but the other's away. It's a pleasure to meet you, my dear. You were telling father you're from Villeneuve?"

"Yes."

"You must show me around sometime." He was an excellent liar, but not good enough to slip past her.

"Whenever you'd like." She flashed a veneer of a smile. "And it was lovely to meet you, Sire, but I'm afraid I must be going."

"Of course, Mademoiselle." He bowed, looking up at his brother. "Anselme," He brother clearly did not like being called by his full name "let us have a drink tonight. Catch up. I brought a lovely armagnac to celebrate your health."

"Yes, that sounds wonderful." He lied poorly, leading Belle up the stairs.

"Your brother?" She asked as they slipped into her room. Reeling from the news.
"Two half brothers. From my father's mistress." He explained, carefully shutting the door. "His favorite mistress." Anxiety rattling around in his chest, making his ribs feel too tight for his lungs.

"You looked like you wanted to strike him."

"It's how he raised us." Pulling at the neck of his shirt, everything began to feel too constricting.

"And they actually knew about the curse?" She asked quickly, angrily. A flash of fire in the brown eyes. "That you were suffering?"

"My father thought intervening would curse him as well. My brothers are… my brothers." He told her. Watching the door cautiously. "And this is technically my father's castle, I can't kick him out. He's always hated the country so he let me take it, left me to my own devices."

Belle wrapped her arms around herself, voice low. "Do you want me to leave?"

He sighed heavily, a great stone on around his neck shaped like a Duke suddenly dragging him down. "I don't want you to." Walking over, placing his hands on her shoulders, his sad eyes locked onto her own. "But it might be safest. I haven't seen the man in years and I'm… not the son he raised me to be anymore. I can't see him liking that."

Belle was silent, hesitant. Not wanting to leave him to fight by himself.

"This shouldn't be that long of a stay." Rubbing her arms, he pressed a kiss to her forehead. "He'll want to go back to court, enjoying the riches of his very shallow life. And then we'll have a bit of peace." Resting his forehead against her own, he gazed deeply into her eyes. "A bit of peace and quiet in your library."

"Be careful." Linking her arms around his neck, the air felt charged, uneasy. In the glow of the candles, she kissed him in a way that already missed him more than words could tell. "I need to change and gather my things." She whispered.

"Take one of the horses from the stables. He won't miss it." There it was. That familiar pain behind those blue eyes. The sadness that used to lash out. She hadn't seen it in ages, it had left so long ago when he was all hair and horns. But the beast's eyes were back because of the Duke. Staring right at her, breaking her heart.

"I suppose Papa could use some company." She managed, not wanting to let go of him when he seemed to need support more than ever.

"I love you, Darling." He told her, feeling her hands slip away. Wishing they wouldn't.

"We have so much food leftover you must take some." Mrs. Potts insisted in a way that was clear she was trying to hide worry. Hastily, all thumbs, she was rolling large portions of meat into parchment.

"Mrs. Potts, thank you but Belle and I simply couldn't." Maurice began. He was mildly worried, and somewhat anxious Belle had not yet found him as he had been given a short edification on the Duke.

"You must, you must." She began to sound aggressive, tucking wrapped baguettes and cheese into a saddle basket. "We simply can't go through it all."

Most of the staff was huddled between the kitchen and the servants quarters. Avoiding the invasion, watching their beloved Englishwoman become more and more unraveled.
"We were going to give so much of it to the vill-" she struggled with tying a knot. "To- OH BLOODY HELL." A server ducked as a wheel of Brie went soaring through the air.

"Mrs. Potts!" Her husband quickly enveloped her in a hug as she wept.

"I can't stand that man. I can't stand him, John." She held onto her husband, shaking her head. "It's been so lovely since the curse broke but now that wretched old man-"

"Oh Love," he kissed away the tears as Maurice and a scullery maid went and cleaned up the brie. "He was always gonna come back. We all knew it."

The door creaked.

Everyone turned to see Belle. Their Belle. Back in her simple dress, boots on, cloak resting on her shoulders as she carried a large satchel.

Mrs. Potts nearly sobbed.

"Bernard, could you please saddle Roman and Philippe?" she asked a stable boy kindly, shuck off the bag and briskly clearing the space between herself and Mrs. Potts. Before she knew it, Mr. Potts had been released and she was the one being squeezed so tightly.

"I'll see to the horses myself." Mr. Potts said as he slipped out.

"No one wants you to leave, Deary." A rattled sigh came from the older woman.

"I'll be back." She hugged, pulling back and staring into her friend's kind eyes. "You can't get rid of me that easily."

Lumiere chuckled as he came over and joined the embrace. "You are nothing if not resilient." He kissed the side of the girl's head.

"Having you here all summer, uninterrupted, has been a blessing." Mrs. Potts tucked a stray lock of hair behind the girl's ear. "I know you'll be back, but we'll all miss you. No matter how short your time away.

She nodded, but her brows knit in concern. "Mrs. Potts, ever since his father arrived Ansell is so-"

"We won't let it happen again." Mrs. Potts kissed her forehead in her customary motherly fashion, determined to not repeat history. "We'll protect him the best we can, we will."

"Thank you." Stifling back tears she scanned the room. "Where's Cogsworth?"

"Oh, you know, running around the castle in a state of panic." Lumiere quipped. Letting them go, he gazed at Belle fondly. "This castle will not be so happy with you gone, my mademoiselle."

Taking a deep breath, steadying herself, Belle stooped to catch Chip as she went around saying her goodbyes.

Ansell breathed heavily, trying to brace himself as he stood in the hallway near the door.

Belle turned the large gray horse around, looking back at the castle glowing in orange lights. The other villagers were heading out as well in their carriages, carts, and on foot. Maurice stopped Philippe from a distance, giving her time and silence.
Ansell tugged at his collar. Breathing through his nose and mumbling to himself how much he wanted out of all of the frippery the Chapeau had insisted he wear. The hall was dim, people he didn't know nor care to know bustling back and forth. The entourage of the Duke infesting their once happy home.

It was times like the one before him where he wished he was still seven feet of teeth and claws. It would have made it so much easier.

Peering out the hall window, he saw a small red dot on a horse out on the grounds. Paused, looking at the castle, not moving away with the others.

"Are you okay, Belle?"

She turned to see Le Fou. He was saddened and concerned, guiding his pony towards her.

"I'm alright, thank you." She pulled the hood of her rose colored cloak up, turning the Percheron around and riding off with Le Fou and her father.

The dot left.

Everything was heavier around him, harder to breathe, harder to move. Taking one last breath, he went to the door and turned the knob. The room felt darker, an undercurrent making him feel anxious. A suit adorned with a wig and heels stood by the window.

Leon turned, giving an easing smile. "Brother! Please, come, come." Gesturing the prince inside, he walked over to a filigree adorned table, crystal glasses and bottle of dark amber liquid carefully laid out.

"It's good to see you, Brother." He said cautiously, walking over.

"No wig? Rather dressed down for your tastes."

"I'm trying something new." He watched Leon uncork the bottle, carefully pouring out a generous measure.

"For the girl? Her name- Belle. That's right. Was it Belle?" He shifted an eyebrow, reading the prince like one of the books he cherished so much. "Wanting you more… Simple?"

"That's enough, thank you." Ansell watched Leon pour another. "I see your tastes haven't changed. Is that suit new?"

"From a fine tailor in Paris." He preened.

"It's very…Opulent. Very royal."

"Thank you. My mother always said red was my color." Handing Ansell a glass, he raised the other. Liquid shimmering like stained glass by candlelight. "Brother, to your health."

Ansell hesitated, but toasted his brother and drank slowly. "To our health. Where's Francis? How is he?"

"Oh, you know baby brother." He wet his lips slowly. "Beautiful, popular. A man of very expensive tastes in everything. In love with Paris, in love with court. Currently at Versailles, sampling the
delights." Setting the cup down, he breathed deeply. Invigorated. "You must come enjoy our little paradise. It'll be like old times. And the court would love to see you, the *heir returned.*"

"I never really cared for court." He said, tactfully. Running his thumb along the top of the glass. "Never suited me. Which is why I stayed here, traveled in when needed."

"How could I forget, you were never one for the social politics. Ever the young lion of the house." Leon's chuckle was calculated, his eyes sharp. "And why would you travel so far to be with people you hated so much when you could live here and be worshiped. Slathered in riches and excess of your own choosing."

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He took a sip. "It's different now, Leon."

"Oh yes. Your little party for your servants and villagers." He chortled through his teeth. "Very sweet of you, brother. Very *unlike* you."

"*Leon.*" Ansell rumbled. His posture stiffening.

"Just a bit of teasing, Ansell. You must remember how much I loved to ruffle your feathers- or fur if that's more appropriate now." Taking a sip, the viscount watched his brother. Stronger than before. Bigger. Not a soft, weak muscled noble who had spent his days moving minimally inside a palace. The carriage of a man who went outside and worked, the presence of a man who could seriously injure him in a fight. Perhaps some of the monster's physical exertions affected his human form. Running in the forest, dragging a buck down with his fangs and claws, fighting bears, murdering wolves. Gnashing, clawing, brutalizing. What a horrid thing. Perhaps the savage monster was still there under the surface. "I *will* be sincere, give you a bit of advice."

Ansell shifted his weight, cautiously watching Leon take a long drink.

"I know you've been away for quite some time. So you may not remember how things are, what's expected." Raising his glass up to the light, he studied the cut of the crystal, the way the light danced over his drink. "As a courtesy, as your *brother,* I wish to give you fair warning." His keen eyes locked onto the piercing blue ones. "Father expects you to come to court. You are his heir, you have been away for some time. You must make an appearance to announce to the court you are well again. He is here to take you back. For a week a least, though he may expect a month. You'll have to attend court and play the games you loathe so much." Leaning in, he said gravely. "And she will *not* be allowed to come with you."

He wanted to growl like the beast. Instead, he let the silence, the gravity, consume the space between them.

Leon finished his drink in one fell swallow, carefully setting his glass down. "Now, I must go to my quarters. It's rather late and there is a girl from Spain who wanted to come with us and see the *sights.*" Brushing past the prince, his heels clicked towards the door.

"Your armagnac." Ansell reminded him.

"Yours, I brought half a case of some less-aged." He sniffed, opening the door.

"*Leon.*" He called out, but would not turn to face the door.

Leon paused in the doorway, hand on the knob.

"If I would have died, or had the curse not be reversed-" His voice grew. "You would have become a legitimized prince."
"That is correct, Ansell." It was like a barb, twisting into Leon's chest. His fingers tightening on the knob, he released his grip and slipped away. "Welcome back."
It was hard for Belle to rest.

She rose too early and found herself unable to return to sleep. Holding her pillow, staring at the simple wooden wall. Wanting to wake up in a much bigger bed with a view of a strapping young man sitting in a thick armchair by the window. Idly sipping his coffee and reading, waiting for her to wake so they could go down to breakfast.

After struggling some, she rose and dressed for the day. Taking her time, slowly going downstairs. It was far too early for all of the household chores. Nonetheless, she did what she could. Lighting the fire, sweeping the floor, making a list of things that could use repairs or tinkering, making a bracing cup of tea the way Mrs. Potts had shown her before settling into one of a few books she had managed to pack.

Curling in a chair, wrapped in a blanket was how Maurice found her before sunrise. "My daughter has never been an early riser." He exclaimed, making his presence known. "Seeing her up so early often means things are wrong."

Ansell was seated at the servant's table, staring into a miserable cup of coffee. Slouched, distant, dim-eyed.

"And what's got you here, Master?" Mrs. Potts knew all too well. The boy was hiding; his family would never stoop to even considering the help's quarters.

"I couldn't sleep, needed the silence." He muttered, golden hair tumbling into his face.

"I couldn't sleep." She said, tucking a ribbon between the pages of her book. "And I didn't want to wake you, Papa."

"You wouldn't have woken me." Walking over he bent over and kissed the top of her head. Rubbing her shoulder soothingly, wishing he could do more. "I know last night ended rather… Tragically... but I am glad to see you."

"Do you always get up this early?" He muttered into his cup.

"Every day." She walked over to him, briskly. "Someone has to make sure the castle starts. Who made you coffee?"

"I didn't want to bother anyone." Ansell hunched.

"No wonder it looks like the dog made it." She pulled it away from the prince before he could protest. "You're good at a lot of things, Master. Noble things. But you could stand to learn a thing or two about basic skills. And I know that's seen as work for the staff, but I suspect you'll find yourself married to a woman who doesn't like to be waited on."
"I know I'm not back often but I do miss you." She squeezed his hand, leaning her head against his arm.

Her daughter felt much smaller in that moment. More vulnerable, though she was fighting it. Ever his stubborn girl. "It's quite alright, Sweetheart. You're having a rather… Unique courtship."

"You know, if you've got something on your heart-" Dumping the sludge in the bin, wiping it out with a rag. "I won't judge, Master. And I won't gossip."

His ears turned red, he looked up sheepishly.

"You two aren't as discreet as you think you are." She hinted.

"But you lived with Ansell for over a year." He said with great understanding, looking down at the melancholy face. Wishing it was just as easy as it had been to cheer her up when she was little. "Before you knew what he really was. And… Well... you've never been one for tradition."

Belle smiled into his palm.

"So things are different, Belle, and I understand and accept the changes going on." Leaning forward, wanting to hug her, keep her safe from all the ills around them. "And it's okay to be upset and to express it."

She looked up into his kind eyes. Clearly frustrated. It crackled across her face like the embers popping in the fireplace. "Let me get you some tea."

"Belle." He watched her go to the kitchen and pace.

"Fine. It's awful not falling to sleep with her next to me." He managed. Honest and raw. "Or waking up with her there. To know when I'm out that she'll be home when I return. Or if she's out she'll return. She belongs with us! She's apart of our home, Mrs. Potts. And to feel his presence in our home." Scratching his nails across the tabletop, hands balling into fists, eyes burning. "I can't stand it."

Bowing her head, bracing herself against the kitchen table were the kettle sat she drew in a deep breath and closed her eyes. "I know I've come back before to stay with you but this is different." Shaking her head, her words finally wavered in anger. All she could see were their eyes, so cruel. And the son anguished by their presence. "This is so painful."

"I know this has you all knotted up inside. And it was a terrible ending to an otherwise joyous night, but perhaps you can work on your patience and tact right now." She said gently.

The young man's mouth dropped into a slight pout.

"You've grown by leaps and bounds this last year or so. But it wouldn't be life without some unneeded stress." She patted his shoulder. What a long way their boy had come. A year ago she could have never been so honest. He would have roared. "It's okay to miss her. I know she misses you too."

He was quiet, in thought.
"You two have gone a stretch or two without one another."

"This feels different." Her face. He couldn't get over the sadness it wore when she had slipped out the kitchen entrance with her father. Not allowed to stay in the place she considered home.

"Because you were forced out." He went over to her, his heart breaking at her sadness. "I know it hurts, dear." Maurice began slowly. "But perhaps this is a lesson in patience."

Belle looked up at him.

"Life is rarely ever easy." He explained. "And I suspect the royal life of Prince Anselme is a tad complicated. You two will have your own trials, and those require patience."

She exhaled, deeply. Looking up at him with wet eyes. "I suppose you're right."

"Sometimes I do know a thing or two."

Belle studied the floor in thought, nodding slowly in agreement. Taking the kettle she poured him a cup. "The latch on the gate needs to be fixed again."

A small smile emerged as he took the cup. "Do you need any materials?"

"No, I think we have everything in the shed."

"Are you feeling guilty?" Mrs. Potts moved away, bustling about the kitchen as there was work to be done.

The golden head nodded.

"Then why don't you go do something that makes you feel less so." She hinted, rustling the wood and the tinder in the massive stone fireplace.

"She didn't want to leave." Every other time she had gone back to the village it had been of her own volition. "I made her."

The Englishwoman paused. Gathering up her skirts, she quickly left, rustling around in the back before returning with something wrapped in brown paper. "You know, it is awfully early out. The way your father and brother drink, they won't be up 'til near midday."

Ansell looked up, firelight dancing on his face.

Mrs. Potts tossed the package on the table in front of him. Watching him rip open it slowly. "Maybe you can use these since they finally arrived."

A smile came across his lips as he pulled out simple brown hunter's boots.

"We had to send one of the boys to the town to find it all for you." She watched him lifted out folded blue fabric. "I know you didn't specify, but she always seems to fancy you in blue."

Getting up, still clutching the shirt, he hugged her tightly.

There was a knock at the door.
Tossing a fresh log on the fire Belle wiped her hands on her apron and walked over. Tilting her head suspiciously as it was far too early to have anyone poking around.

Opening the door found a familiar, handsome face hidden by a tricorn hat and dressed in commoner's clothes. Rugged and unassuming. A new look that suited him well.

Maurice glanced up from a sketch he was working over breakfast.

Ansell lifted up a basket in his hand and opened his mouth. That look, she knew it. His smug, self-satisfied look from surprising her.

Belle raised a wry brow. "I'm sorry, Monsieur, I don't need to buy any eggs and milk for the day. We have plenty."

His eyes widened, stunned, as she shut the door.

Barely suppressing a chuckle, her father shook his head. "That's a strange way of missing someone.

Taking a sip from his cup, he ignored the face his daughter made at him.

"You're not very funny." The prince's voice said from the other side of the door.

She giggled, opening it.

"And it's coffee." He corrected, coming in, taking his hat off and hanging it. Before he could say anything else, arms were around his neck and he was the recipient of a long, deep kiss. A kiss that made his heart feel too large and too fast.

Belle released him, smiling into his jacket after he pecked the tip of her nose.

"What do I get for also bringing some books?" he asked playfully, seductively. Toying with her skirt. Turning, he saw her father and his face became red. Even clearing his throat didn't save Ansell's voice from cracking. "Hello, Siiir."

"Good morning. Nice to see you here." The poor lad, he was so awkward from time to time.

Belle watched Ansell stew but kept on. "Why on earth are you in the village so early?" pulling playfully on his waistcoat, the brown eyes studied him. Hair down, a bit of rakish stubble, that navy blue shirt. She was having so many thoughts not appropriate for mixed company.

"You know how I get up early and go for a walk before coming back for coffee." She took the basket from him and he followed like an eager puppy.

"Yes, but you have coffee in the parlor in your chambers." she began taking the contents of the basket out.

"True, but I decided to take a walk… to the stables… so I could have coffee elsewhere."

"Ah, a change of scenery." she pulled out a freshly baked baguette and pursed her lips. Looking around the kitchen at the heaps of food they had already been saddled with.

"I wasn't the one who packed the basket."

"I can tell by the excessive amount of sugar, cream, and butter." Belle put the kettle on. "Papa would you like some fresh bread with your breakfast? Coffee?"

"You know, I'm quite good." He said, wiping the corners of his mouth, taking his plate away. "I do
believe I need to take a walk. He said, pointedly.

Belle watched him as he set the plate away, kissed her cheek, and slipped out.

Ansell waited for a moment. Listening to the door latch, to Maurice's shoes disappear on the cobblestones. Finally, he hooked an arm around Belle's waist and stood behind her, smiling into the nape of her sweet smelling neck.

She giggled, eyes shutting blissfully. "You couldn't wait a day?"

"Not after the way you had to leave last night." Pressing his lips to her neck, his fingers stroked her hip. "Hmn." Belle turned and kissed him passionately, feeling him flex forward to her in anticipation. A dangerous game to play with him after being apart. Soon she was lifted up on the table, the kiss long, deep, full of unspoken promises. She pulled away and gazed dreamily at his mouth before finding his eyes. Intensely blue and fixated on her. She placed a palm on his chest to stop him from ducking back in for more. "Whooaa." She shuddered, catching her breath.

Ansell stopped, looking a bit flustered he was being asked to halt his proceedings. "Huh?" The prince breathed out in a hormone-addled stupor.

"A-Ansell." She swallowed thickly, shaking her head. "As uh… Much as I enjoy this-us. We... can't."

Exhaling, looking like a drowning man coming up from air he titled his head to the side.

"We're absolutely terrible at practicing restraint when it comes to this." She reminded him, gesturing from herself to him.

Bracing himself against the table, his pained eyes flickered to Belle. "You know it's not every day I hear "no" from you." Clearing his throat, he shifted his weight uncomfortably.

"And trust me, I'm very sorry. It's very hard to stop you." Her eyes lingered all over him longer than she would have liked. "But my father won't be gone nearly long enough for us and I do have things to do. Things that will never get done if we… do... what we're very good at."

He wanted to put his hands on her hips again but pulled them back towards himself, pursing his lips. Needing a moment, several moments to compose himself. Finally seeing the light at the end of his stupid, he remembered Mrs. Potts' words. "Could...I help you I with your things that need doing?" Fumbling through the words, having to relearn how to talk. God, he could use some of that coffee.

Belle cocked her head in surprise. "Really?"

"I haven't done… Most things I assume you do." He hedged, still trying to settle himself down. "But I can try?"

She chuckled in amusement. "First of all, Dearest, they're called chores." Sliding off the table, she tugged his waistcoat to get him to follow. Knees still a bit wobbly. "Well, there's a first time for everything. I can teach you." Looking over, she gestured to the kettle. "We can start with making coffee? Move from there?"

Maurice paused at the garden gate.
There was the prince, ruler of their province in hunter's boots and course breeches. Shirtless, hauling a large cord of wood into the house as Belle came around the side of the house with the chicken eggs in a basket.

"Did you have a nice walk, Papa?" She asked. Gaze trailing up, following Ansell, idling on Ansell. Those impressively defined back muscles she enjoyed very much.

"Yes, it was quite… nice." He cleaned his glasses as if it would clarify the scene. His daughter came over and leaned against the fence with him.

Ansell came back out. All noble milk bottle tan and not so noble rippling muscles. Stopping, he grinned. "Hello, Sir."

"Your highness." He tipped his hat.

"Please, Ansell."

"Sorry, force of habit. Ansell." The lad went back to the chopped wood and began stacking the excess. Turning, he had to do a double take of his terribly distracted daughter. "Belle?"

"Hm?" The brown eyes squinted thoughtfully.

"Why is the prince chopping wood?"

Ansell bent over and her head absentely tilted to follow. "I told him I had these things called chores… and…. he wanted to help." Her hands twisted on the basket's handle. "So he's been learning."

"Like chopping firewood?"

"He's good at that." She mused, dreamily. The din of the village bustling through its morning having disappeared all around her.

"Uh-hm." Seeing why exactly his daughter thought the prince excelled at chopping firewood, Maurice drew up a brow. "You didn't happen to tell him chopping wood requires him to take his shirt off?"

"He said he was getting too hot."

"Hmn. Anything else he's good at that isn't princely?"

"He helped me fix the latch on the gate."

"But mostly firewood?"

"He's really good at that. Very strong."

Maurice raised his brows, continuing with his business, entering through the gate and heading up the stairs. And here he thought his daughter was more into the intellectual type. Belle trailed behind him and he was mildly worried she may trip on a step. "You know, might be nice having another set of hands here if he's keen to learn. It'd certainly keep him out and away from his father."

"I do like the sound of that," Ansell agreed as he brought some extra firewood, grabbing his shirt from a chair. "And I do like helping and I wouldn't mind learning more." Using his shirt to wipe his face off, he slipped it back on. "But I have to sneak back. So maybe another morning?"

Belle set the basket down and walked over. Stopping in front of him, taking the time to tie his shirt.
"I'm glad you came."

"Me too." Stealing a kiss, he smiled against her mouth "I do love you, desperately."

"I love you too." Tying a bow with the laces she pecked his lips. Picking up his waistcoat and handing it to him. "Don't be a stranger."

"Never, Darling."

"Son." The Duke stood up from his desk, watching his heir walk in. "We searched the grounds for you-

"I prefer an early morning ride." Straightening his cravat, he entered quickly. The room was so dark, intimidating. Smelling of oak and expensive flowers. "Then I went to my chambers and changed into something more befitting my Grace-"

"Yes, except you look inappropriately plain." A dismissive sniff of the air. "This fashion may pass as noble in this little province of mud and twigs, but it will not pass muster in French Court."

"You wish me to attend." Taking a seat across from his father, he cleared the dryness out of his throat. Rolling his shoulders, feeling far less tightly wound since he had gone to the village and seen Belle.

"I wish you to attend, yes." He poured wine into a goblet, then another. "You've been out of the noble world for a long time. You must assert your power." extending a glass, he looked at his son firmly.

"As you wish, father." Taking the wine, he pressed it to his lips. "I hope your trip was easy."

"It was fine." The Duke took a long drink, slowly twirling the stem of the glass between his fingers. "It is a winding road to Paris, and coming back to this country reminds one how small and insignificant our province is."

"I'm sorry you feel that way." Ansell inspected all of his father's new, glittering rings. "I find our lands quite rich. Our forest full with game, farms bountiful with food, our towns bustling-"

"Yes, our towns." Pounding a finger on a stack of papers, he tossed them across the desk. "Will you explain this?"

Ansell took the papers and skimmed the contents. "My decree for lowering taxes."

"And why on Earth would you do that?" The Duke leaned back in his chair.

"Because I no longer spend our money so frivolously." Chin tilted up, eyes blazing in earnestness. "I now prefer a life more simple. One with much less excess. And I would like our subjects to know they are appreciated."

"Simple." He chuckled deeply. Jaded. "And your soiree for the village? That was hardly simple, my son."

"Paid with money leftover from my old coffers, father." He took a sip, needing it. "My parties will now be fewer, and more open. Friendlier to those who we depend on."

"Your last party, before your… most unfortunate accident." The elder pulled the paperwork back, studying the lines on his son's face. The boy was different. Not so slight. He hadn't noticed the
change until then. No longer lithe in body. Strong, a bit common. "You were looking for a noble wife."

Ansell's gaze darted to the side. "You know the stipulations of the enchantress' curse."

"Yes, how could I forget." Drumming his fingers on the desktop. Irked, impatient with magic that had never been asked for. "True love."

His son cocked his head to the side in anticipation. The barb. The needling at Belle.

"We can discuss your prospects later." He dismissed with the wave of a hand. "You have just returned to us, I expect you to have a bit of fun, get it out of your system before we begin thinking of finding you a suitable, noble match."

It wasn't the time, nor the place. Ansell nodded his head in the most non-committal way.

"Now, while we won't speak of who will warm your bed." The Duke raised a brow. "We will speak again of this tax cut."

"The crown has their taxes, and we have ours. What I was taxing before was unconscionable. I-"

"You will not lower the tax."

Setting his goblet down, he sat up straight. Leaning forward, the tenseness returning to his shoulders. "Excuse me?"

"Did I stutter?" Raising his voice, the Duke was a deep, foreboding man. As dangerous-sounding as his eyes were to look at. "You. Will. Not. Lower. The. Tax."

"Father, this was my tax."

"And I will keep it, boy." chest out, eyes cold, he looked down his nose at his son.

"I wish to show our people-"

"You do not seem to remember who's castle this is-"

"You do NOT have to educate me, father." No longer able to restrain it, Ansell snarled, hands gripping the arms of the lacquered chair.

"PERHAPS I DO." Rising from his chair, he roared down at the prince. "This is NOT your castle! The money that flows to you is NOT yours. Nothing is yours until I take my last breath, boy."

Ansel jumped up so abruptly his chair fell over. A growl formed deep in his chest. The house, the home at risk. The territory challenged.

"Do not cross me." He warned. "You may have been a beast for years but in this body, you are but a whelp."

His eyes narrowed. "Choose your words careful-"

"DON'T YOU DARE TELL ME HOW TO SPEAK TO YOU!"

"WHERE WERE YOU ALL THESE YEARS!" Ansell roared back. "WHERE WERE YOU? WHEN THIS CASTLE FELL INTO RUIN? WHEN YOUR SUBJECTS SUFFERED? WHEN YOU ABANDONED THIS PROVINCE? WHEN YOU ABANDONED YOUR SON?!"
"These are not your things." Looking his wild-eyed heir up and down he felt disgust towards the prince. Still savage in the heart, the fool. "You are an instrument of this family. And it would be wise of you to remember your place."

Ansell huffed. Turning away, pacing, golden mane falling out of its tie in large loose locks. Nervously he pushed it back and out of his eyes.

"If you cannot understand your station and listen to instruction then perhaps you need to be moved, permanently."

His son looked up.

"Perhaps you don't deserve the time to recover." Threatening, snarling, commanding the room. If the objects had still been alive the candles would have quaked. "Perhaps you need to be at Versailles, wed to a woman of nobility. Providing me an heir." He threatened, resting his hands on the table, leaning forward, challenging the young lion of the castle. Locking eyes with him, watching him bend ever so slightly. "And if you decide to fight that then perhaps half a dozen of my men will drag you kicking and screaming all the way back. Unless of course, that's too easy for the animal in you."

A moment passed between them. A beat. Ansell dipped his head, snorting through his nose. "That will not be necessary." He grumbled.

"I didn't hear you."

"I said that will not be necessary." He lifted his voice, his words full of too many teeth as he tried to stay strong. "I understand my station, father."

"Address me properly."

"I understand my station, Your Grace."

"And you understand you own nothing?"

The prince nodded his head.

"Say it." He barked.

"I own nothing," Ansell said through clenched teeth.

"And you understand your life is not your own, but the crown's."

"I understand my life is the crown's." Trying desperately to remember the happiness of the morning, the thoughts failed him.

"And you know your place."

"I know…. My place." Ansell forced out.

The Duke lifted his chin, drawing his hands behind his back. His son before him, head down, eyes averted, boiling in submission. "Good." he exhaled. "I will be leaving soon. This castle is mine, but my place is in Versailles. Leon will stay, as will some of our staff. They will prepare you for your arrival to court where you will preside for a month at least. Do you understand?"

"Yes, your Grace." Shoulders slouching, desperately wanting to be the biggest monster in the room once more.
"I'm done with you. You may leave." A dismissive hand was flicked towards the door. "Cogsworth will have you until supper. You must be caught up on world affairs."

Ansell said nothing as he prowled out of the room, slamming the door shut as he left.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: There you have it; first three chapters. There's plenty more, but I think there'll be a bit of a break for a few days before another couple is posted (perhaps Wednesday, Thursday, Friday? Perhaps every other day? Will I feel that generous/productive/in need of praise? Who knows). Please let me know how I'm doing in the comments, and please favorite and follow! This thing does have a beginning, middle, and end. It's going places, I promise.
*Day One*

Ansell held his boots in one hand, carefully tip-toeing through the sleepy hallways of the castle in his stockings. He had timed his escape perfectly. By the time he rode into Villeneuve, it would be sunrise. Which meant spending another warm morning with his favorite bookworm.

The door that led out to the stables was so close. It taunted him. Beyond it lie his horse, his saddle, and a brief dalliance with freedom.

Claws clicked rhythmically on the stone floor.

Freezing, he slid around a pillar for cover but it was too late. The paws pattered over and Froufrou gazed up at him expectantly. Wide, open doggy smile as the tail that could be mistaken for Plumette's duster wagged.

"No." He whispered.

Froufrou cocked his head to the side, letting out a frustrated grumble.

"No, Froufrou-" gently he nudged the dog with his foot. "Go back."

Snuffling the stocking, the little dog licked a toe before letting out a soft, short bark.

Ansell flinched. "No. Bad dog." Hearing the shuffle of slippers, all of the color left his face. The damned dog, his downfall.

Cadenza rounded the corner. Robed, hair down, groggy, a touch too cold for his liking. He became much more alert at the figure his dog was whining at.

The prince looked at him like a deer caught in a trap.

Silently scooping up Froufrou, his mouth opened and closed like a bewildered fish. Turning, noticing the door, he traced the path back to his prince.

Ansell held his breath, cow-eyed with dread. Watching the Maestro's brows furrow for a brief moment.

Meeting the boy's worried gaze, he mimed zipping his mouth shut. Patting the prince's shoulder before wandering back to his quarters and a sleeping wife.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Ansell resumed his arduous journey to the door. Slowly wrapping his fingers around the elegant handle, he winced as it clicked softly to his coaxing. Cracking the door open, he allowed himself to relax.

"Master Ansell!"

Nearly collapsing in a fit of despair, he looked over his shoulder.
Cogsworth, still in his nightcap, candle aloft, cup of tea in the other hand. "Master ANSELL." He chided gruffly. "What on Earth are you doing?! With those commoner's clothes? You look like some awful woodsman."

Ansell pressed his head against the doorframe in defeat. Cogsworth's stream of reproachful questions bleeding together in the twilight.

"Pere Robert?"

He smiled when he saw his favorite avid reader come in through the door, toting a stack of books secured by some twine. "Belle! What a pleasant surprise."

"I hope you're well." she smiled.

"I am, I am. I must say, you and his majesty put on a lovely party. I think I'm still full." The smudge of graphite under her cheek amused her friend. The last time he has seen her she had looked like one of the princesses from a far-fetched story. But there she was, unchanged by her royal romance. Still ever the town's curious girl. "Though I'm a little surprised you're here when you have that gorgeous library you gave me a tour of."

Belle smiled at the one person in Villeneuve who also enjoyed her favorite room in the castle. "Actually, I have something for you." She patted the stack of books. "I was doing some nosing about and I found we have some doubles of quite a few books. I was hoping your library could use them?"

"Really? It would be my pleasure to give them a home." He took the books gratefully, reading the spines.

"There's some more, but I didn't have time to get them all." She explained. "The rest are yours though if you'd like."

"Thank you, Belle." He gazed sincerely at her. "This is very thoughtful."

"I wanted them to go to a place where they'll be loved." She smiled, watching him untie the twine and carefully find her books a spot on his shelf.

"Ah! Have you seen this?" He pulled a thick leather book out and handed it to her. Watching the brown eyes light up.

"No, not at all." Running her palm over the cover, feeling the embossed lettering.

"It just came in from Paris, fresh off the presses." he said excitedly.

"Oh, it's brand new." She marveled, inspecting every inch of the book.

"Would you like to read it?"

Looking up at him, puzzled, her fingers still admiring the craftsmanship. "But you haven't even opened it yet, much less read it. The spine is uncracked."

He shrugged. "It'll be awhile before I find any time to dig in. Besides, how long will it take for you to devour it?"

She smiled wryly. "I don't know what you're talking about." Looking at the title, she tucked the book against her chest. The smile turning into an eager grin. "Thank you."
"It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you too. And I'll take good care of it."

*Day Two*

Ansell slunk through the castle once more. Sunrise, Villeneuve, Belle. So easy, nearly at the door.

There was a loud, demanding meow.

Turning, he saw the large, fluffy cat that was formerly a very vocal throw pillow. Yaowling, preparing to dive under the master's legs and twine around them. If he tripped him this master would have to pick him up.

"Capitaine." He grumbled. Another yaowl made him jump as he scrambled silently to get the furball. Bare stockings slipping and sliding across the polished marble. Very nearly taking a fall, but managing to recover at the last minute.

Capitaine purred as soon as he was picked up. Eyes shut in contentment as he had resumed being the center of someone's universe. Shoving his large orange head against Ansell's palm, stretching his claws out happily, rumbling.

"Alright," He breathed a sigh of relief that the animal had shut up. "just keep-"

"MASTER ANSELL"

Ansell growled. Slowly, petulantly turning to Cogsworth. Capitaine blissfully oblivious.

Belle sat on the small wooden bench next to their horse paddock. She took up the entire space, sitting lengthwise, legs out and crossed over. A warm summer's afternoon, her father inside tinkering, chores done, a half-read book in one hand and fresh apple in another. Nearly the perfect setting, though she was missing one thing.

Two passersby looked at her, whispering to themselves, clearly talking about the artist's daughter. She watched them suspiciously, but ultimately ignored the pair.

The crisp crunch of the first bite of the apple brought Philippe's head over the half door. Nostrils flaring, ears perked, shifting his weight with large expectant eyes.

His friend Roman followed suit. Bigger than the other horse, he stretched his mighty head and began snuffling towards the girl as Philippe encouraged with a knicker.

Belle, still chewing, raised a brow as she turned her page, careful to not smudge it with juice.

As she returned back to her book, a large velvety nose bumped the side of her head. A big wuff of air blowing her hair forward.

Turning around, she saw the two horses, begging. Roman nudging her again at the shoulder, Philippe stamping and stretching as far as he could. Balancing her snack on her leg, she dug into a pocket to produce two apple halves.

Their ears swiveled to attention. Philippe let out a small, desperate whinny.
Extending a half up, she fed the one horse and repeated the action with the other. With her friends placated, she settled back into her book and apple.

*Day Three*

"MASTER ANSELL."

"For God's sake, Cogsworth." Ansell lamented, staring at the old man blocking the door. The cool waning moonlight making his frustration glow silver. "Just let me go."

Cogsworth came over, leaning on his cane as his joints were stiff so early in the morning. "Follow me, now."

Ansell followed the majordomo into a small room. Watching the old man use his candle to light a candelabra.

"Shut that door." He ordered, blustering in an angry whisper as soon as it clicked shut. "What on earth are you doing, you foolish boy?!"

"Cogsworth, I'm a prisoner in my own home!" He whispered back. "All I want to do is go out for a few hours-"

"And lead his minders to Belle!"

The prince was taken aback. Silent, watching the man who was closest to a father to him.

Tears filled his old eyes. "Do you want him to know how much you love her? How much we all love her? Where she lives?" Batting back the urge to cry, a hand came up to shield his eyes. "Your impulsive nature could be the downfall of everything."

The guilt crept in. His arms suddenly felt heavy.

"I don't have the time to even address the other issues at hand. But quit trying to go see her." He huffed, dabbing his eyes with a handkerchief. " Appease your father, play his games." Cogsworth suddenly felt weary. Shaking his head, he shuffled past the prince. "I'm getting too old for all of this."

"Agatha?"

The spinster turned, finding the kind, gentle face of Villeneuve's most misunderstood girl. "Belle."

"I never got to thank you for helping Papa." She explained sincerely. Ignoring the looks she was receiving for interacting with an old woman who begged in the street.

"I was only trying to do the right thing." Tugging on her threadbare shawl, Belle reached out and touched her shoulder sincerely. A rarity, few people bothered to talk to her much less touch her.

"But you did the right thing." She sighed. "That doesn't always happen here, unfortunately."

Agatha pursed her lips, nodding in agreement. The village clattered on around them. Eyes from windows and doors peeking at them every so often.

"We didn't see you at the celebration," Belle stated, rocking on her heels.
"I had nothing to wear."

"The dress code was fairly loose. More of a suggestion." The girl reassured. "But you were missed, I
know Papa wanted to have a word with you." Turning, she fiddled with a basket she was carrying.
"I wanted to share with you some of the leftover food. Mrs. Potts gave us so much, there's no way
we can eat it all."

A wrapped hunk of cheese, some salted meat wrapped in paper. Bread and butter and a heaping
bundle of vegetables all tucked nearly in a small towel. Agatha smiled as the basket was held out to
her.

Cogsworth could talk. And talk. And talk. Honestly, he was beginning to think the majordomo had
been more tolerable when he chimed ever hour.

Ansell was trying with all his might to listen and learn, but they were coming upon hour four. What
little attention the prince had disappeared like a snowflake falling into a torch.

"Master are you even listening?!"

The prince looked up from his desk. Ink quill in hand, looking bored out of his mind.

"What on Earth are you-" Cogsworth snatched the paper he had been scribbling on to find a crudely
drawn, ink spattered beast fighting a dragon that sported a monocle and mustache amongst sparse,
poorly written notes. "$\text{Master Ansell!}$"

Ansell sighed, slouching in his chair. "It's been four hou-

The Duke entered the room, eyeing his stubborn heir. "$\text{ANSELME.}$"

The prince jumped slightly, unaware of his father's presence.

"Cogsworth," He said. Cane clacking on the floor, hands glittering with jewelry like sun on dew.
"Perhaps I should take over my son's education for the time being."

Cogsworth blustered a "$\text{yes your grace}$" before giving the poor lad a look of pity. Bustling out of the
room like a goose being chased out by a hound.

Oh, his claws. And teeth. And fur and size. Why couldn't they return just long enough to drive this
monster out and bring back Belle?

Using the cane glimmering with rubies, he smacked his son across the back. The insolent boy
yelped, and the Duke ignored it. "Sit up straight, or I'll use other measures."

Rolling his shoulders, straightening his spine, he folded his hands neatly on the tabletop and paid
careful attention to his father circling the room.

He'd beat it out of him if he had to. "$\text{Where did you and Cogsworth leave off?}$"

Ansell looked out the door, catching his brother watching in amusement.

Leon raised his glass in a silent toast.
A/N: I think Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday may be a feasible schedule from here on out. Maybe? There are a few chapters already done and awaiting posting so we're not winging it here.

Also welcome to a three parter. Wooooo.

Please be sure to follow and give kudos. Love it? Hate it? Meh? I do enjoy reading all comments.
"Well I hear the prince is going to Versailles."

Belle stopped in her tracks, Pere Robert's book carefully tucked under an arm.

"Same. The Duke will be presenting him to the court." Another woman announced as they scrubbed their laundry.

"It was bound to 'appen." Someone piped. "That strapping young man can't stay locked up in that castle forever."

Belle slowed her pace, listening carefully.

"The soldiers have been drinking at the tavern, spilling it all." One explained. "I talked to one last night, Jean. He says the Duke is taking him for a month or more. Wants to groom him again so he can take over."

"Maybe he'll turn out better than the Duke." A mother shook her head. "His taxes! They're outrageous."

"You think he's any better?" One huffed. "Look at that fancy party he threw, wined and dined everyone. Where do you think that money comes from?"

"Do you know what's happening with that girl of his?"

"You mean Belle, the artist's daughter."

"I hear she's back in town."

"Maybe he got bored."

Hugging the book, Belle lowered her head and quickly walked off.

"And what do you possibly do for fun here?" Leon tapped a fingernail on his wine glass. Obscenely bored, draped over a chaise, he gazed out a window into a gorgeous late summer day. "The rumors were you were hip deep in beautiful women and golden caskets of spirits."

Ansell sighed, seated powerfully in an armchair, staring listlessly into his cup. Dear God, he just wanted peace and quiet. "I prefer horseback riding, hiking, swimming, reading-"

"You're an outdoorsman now?" He scoffed, draining his glass. "You never so much as wanted to see a tree unless it was through a window."
"I've found fresh air and good company to be beneficial." Hearing a stampede of small feet, his heart lifted. "Speaking of company," Waiting, the small shoes skidded to stop at the door. There was a pause before it creaked open slowly.

Leon was unamused at the little boy that shuffled in.

"And what do we owe the honor, Chip?" Ansell smiled for the first time in what felt like ages.

Chip held his hands so stiffly at his sides, feet together like a wee soldier, trying extremely hard to be professional. Fidgeting. "Mum wanted me to announce that dinner is ready."

"What, we can't afford a full-sized servant?" Leon muttered under his breath.

The prince's fingers tightened around the velvet arm. Turning his attention to the shaggy haired boy, he beckoned him over. "You did a fine job, little man." Grabbing the child playfully, he growled to get a giggle and hauled him up to his knee. "How are you?"

"I'm well! Are you feeling better, Master Ansell?" Such big, hopeful eyes.

"I was talking about going out exploring with friends and I instantly thought of you." He poked the boy's stomach, getting a laugh for his efforts.

Chip was suddenly enraptured. "Do you remember that time we went horseback riding and I rode with Belle?" He leaned forward earnestly.

"I do. We had a picnic." Ansell allowed himself to get lost in the pleasant past. "It was a little warm, and Chef packed us a lunch big enough for an army."

"We wrestled." The boy beamed.

"Yes, and you beat me. Strong Englishman that you are." He squeezed the child's biceps. "And then there were pirates-

"And Belle was a pirate."

"Meanest pirate in all the seven seas."

"And we had a sword fight!"

"To the death!"

"She killed you!"

"Well, now she cheated."

"And then you threw her in the lake." Chip laughed. "And she was not happy."

"No she certainly wasn't," he chuckled, remembering riding back at sunset. Belle sopping wet and promising vengeance. Chip tucked against him, arm around the boy to hold him in place as he dozed in the saddle.

"We should do that again." Chip told him, eager for another sunny day.

"We should." Patting the boy's back, he helped him off his knee and rose stiffly. "Thank you for the happy memory. And for telling us dinner is ready." Ruffling his hair, he watched Chip charge off. Slowly, reluctantly, he turned to the viscount. "Brother, shall we?"
Leon eyed his brother suspiciously, slowly passing him out the door. "You like children now too?"

Ansell brushed past wordlessly.

"And you like riding." He mused, mind turning. "You know what we should do, brother? We should put together a hunt."

Ansell stopped dead in his tracks, eyes dilating, looking over his shoulder. "No."

"Come on!" He prodded, smiling like a fiend. "You still have that fine horse of yours? I have mine and I brought hounds." Leon puffed his chest out. "They're magnificent dogs, positively massive. Use them for bear hunting."

Steadying his breathing, he fought old memories of being mistaken for a bear. The crack of a gun, the baying of a pack of relentless dogs. Their paws churning the earth behind him. It still woke him up some nights. He never told her what the nightmares were about, or why hounds made him so nervous, but it was a fear that was tucked deep inside his mind.

"We'll get father and find ourselves a bear. Enjoy chasing the brute-"

"I'M THE PRINCE AND I SAID NO." He whirled around. Eyes piercing, commanding.

Leon narrowed his gaze before giving a spiteful little bow. "As you wish, Your Grace." Turning, he stalked off to the dining room.

Dragging his hand across his mouth, he did his best to let the animosity go.

But it was getting harder.

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*Day Five*

"So she is back in town."

"Well, I'll be damned."

"A month at court in Versailles. Does she really think they'd let her in?"

Belle took a deep breath as she weaved through the market. Desperately not wanting to hear the gossip, nor be the topic of it so much of it. However, it had begun the moment the Duke's soldiers had started drinking and running their mouths off and there was very little she could do.

Le Fou saw her approaching and smiled. "Bonjour, Belle."

"Bonjour, Le Fou." She scratched his pony's nose. "I was told you brought back some supplies for Papa?"

"That I did." The saddle was laden with his deliveries as he unclipped one particular bag. "A bunch of different sized gears and some oil paints."

Taking the bag, she carefully inspected the order. Making sure the paints were the right colors, the gears the metal her father preferred to work with. "Thank you so much, it keeps him from having to take a few trips to get what he needs." Taking out a bag of coins, she passed it over.

"Not a problem." He began to remove the other bags as people began to cluster for their goods.
Pausing, he caught the brightly dressed royal soldiers walking into the tavern. Looking at Belle, speaking in low voices, some laughing to themselves. The more he looked around, the more he saw gossiping throughout the town. Stolen glances directed towards an increasingly uncomfortable young woman.

"I hear his father already has a noble woman picked out."

"Well, I hear his brother is reteaching him how to be royal."

"That's funny because I heard that Belle-"

"Belle?"

Belle turned to Le Fou's voice, unable to hide the discontent that was growing in her eyes.

"You know, I don't have to go back out for a few more days." He said carefully, handing a basket of seeds to a farmer. "Would you like to have lunch or tea sometime? We could talk… or not." A woman waiting for her goods was gossiping and he glared at her until she shut up.

Belle twisted the strap of the bag in her hands, wanting to go and hide. It was worse than when they called her funny. She would have taken being called funny over what was being spread around. "Oh Le Fou, I don't think now's the best time."

"Okay," he nodded understandingly. "If you change your mind I could always use the company. Ever since Gaston died." Sighing heavily, he suddenly appeared lonelier than she had realized. "I've been finding out who's a friend and who's not."

Looking down at the dusty cobblestones thoughtfully, Belle began to nod her head. "It just a minority, you know."

"A very vocal minority." He reminded her.

"Perhaps tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow then." He agreed.

"Thanks again." She took off, walking briskly, trying to get home as quickly as possible. While there were still friends around Villeneuve, the pit of her stomach churned with homesickness. Hurrying up the steps, she found her father sanding small pieces of metal for his next project. "Your paints and gears arrived." Taking the items to him, she set them nearby, smiling as he looked everything over carefully.

"Well, it's certainly nice not having to leave town for them." He smiled up at her, though it quickly disappeared when he saw her expression. "Belle, what's wrong?"

"I think I need to go, Papa." Frustrated, she went to grab her jacket off of the hook.

"Wait, the castle?" He rose up as she pulled it over her shoulders and grabbed her satchel.

"I'll be back in the morning." She huffed. "Love you."

"But isn't that-" The door shut. Taking a deep breath, hands hanging limply at his sides, Maurice was left alone. "dangerous, Belle?" Looking towards the door, he shook his head. "She fought a mob, Maurice. She fought a mob and a crazed man who shot a beast who was secretly a prince." He breathed to himself, heading back to his work. "She'll be fiine."
"Are you reading children's books now, old boy?"

Ansell looked up in defeat from his spot against the window frame. He had hoped no one would consider the fencing hall and sporting room. Leon had appeared to be mostly focused on the liquor cabinet and his Spanish girl.

She hung off of his older brother as he pointed a finger to the prince. "That, my dear, is a book by Perrault. He wrote fairy tales. For children."

The book shut with an audible snap. "I was going to read to the castle's children later." They had been desperately missing their usual storytime with Belle. She was irreplaceable between reading to them and assisting them with their own reading; a champion of learning and being curious. However, he had been hoping to attempt to fill in the gap in some small way.

"What a changed man you are, Anselme." Discarding of his young woman from Spain he circled the sabers and swords. "Tender hearted some may say."

"And why are you here, brother?"

"Crippling boredom has sadly claimed me once more." Running his fingers gently across the pommel of a sword as one would caress the body of a woman. He looked up at the space. A long room of gilded wood and mounted beasts. Mostly windows, bright light shining through, making the space and all its weapons gleam. The animals above appeared appropriately frightened. "Apparently you just can't drink all day."

Ansell, immensely unamused, rose up.

"Don't you have lessons with father?" Pulling a sword out of its scabbard, the draw of the metal down the case sang crisply in the hall. He noticed how his brother shivered ever so slightly.

"I was released. Seems I've suffered enough for one day." He said, padding off to find a new hiding place. Since his family's arrival, he had read so little that it had been beginning to feel like a deficiency. With Belle, there was always time to read, whether it was together or on their own to indulge their separate tastes. Books used to be casually displaced everywhere, but due to the duke being in the castle the maids had quietly tucked every book back into its place. Gone were the uneven stacks, the copies of a play unceremoniously resting on a table in some random room of the castle. He hated it.

"So you're free for a bit of fun then?"

Ansell turned back to look at the viscount, who tossed him a sword. Catching it, pulse quickening as Leon drew another blade he drew a deep breath as the memories connected with the weapon flooded through. "This isn't a foil, Leon."

"You were always better than me, Your Majesty." He reminded, pulling his blade up as he began to walk carefully towards the prince. "Come on, then."

His arm slackened. Not wanting to participate.

"Anselme, you're so dour. Regale us with your skill." playfully he rolled his wrist, circling the blade at his brother. "Don't you remember this being one of our favorite pastimes? The ladies always found your talents so rakish, used to compare you to a Musketeer."

"I remember it always being a competition. Father's competition."
"If you'll duel that boy but not me I'll be positively bereft." Leon feigned a pout.

Ansell sighed. "Leon, I said no."

Lumiere was walking down the hall when he caught a glimpse. Stopping, he found a place to watch and not be noticed. The older son approached the prince like a hungry wolf. And then there was poor heartsick Ansell, taking a step back, having no taste for a duel. Lumiere held his breath as Leon clearly prepared to spring at him.

Leon attacked, and with lightening speed, Ansell's eyes snapped at attention. A circle parry to dodge the attack, a moment to catch his stance. A wobble as he was so terribly out of practice. There had been no need for swords when he had come built with his own weaponry.

"You're a touch rusty, Your Grace." He goaded. "Come on, don't you remember this? Even if father urged us a bit it was still playing with one another."

Their blades clanged, feet stepping. A dance of metal. "I remember you never playing by the rules, Leon." He thrust, barely catching the counter with a clatter.

"You really must be more flexible. You're so stiff." A feint, an attack, circling Ansell and watching him struggle. "You need to limber up, old boy. That little farm girl of yours clearly hasn't helped with that."

Ansell's eyes flashed. He slid his blade up Leon's, disengaging him.

"A little bit of a sore spot, eh?" A wicked smile pulled at the corners of his mouth.

"No, master, no." Lumiere breathed. "Don't fall for it."

Ansell became reactionary, aggressive. Lunging and attacking as Leon stepped gracefully backward.

"Temper, temper." The viscount tisked. "I was always surprised Francis would never play with us."

"Francis prefers to lounge more than anything else." The prince remembered. He refined his movements, not wanting to fall for his brother's provoking.

"Father always did favor you when it came to lessons." A clang, a clatter. His brother was getting too confident, the fool.

"I would rather not have his favor." Their blades sung. "But that's not up to me." Tucking his other arm behind his back, the cobwebs were being swept away.

"I never got that." Leon bristled. "He could give you the world."

"The world he wishes to give." Ansell corrected.

"A world of luxury, power. Just because you were born to the right woman." A growl, a crack in Leon's facade.

"That wasn't my choosing, Leon." He parried. "Nor was it mine to have everything a competition for his affections."

"Oh Ansell," he steadied his breathing, telling himself to not think about what upset him. The injustice of it all. This prodigal son returned no longer fit to inherit. "You've been gone for years because you were a brilliantly narcissistic cad. It's no longer a competition."
"And I've changed." He grunted, attacking.

"But how much?" A parry, a reposte. Still smarting from the words he allowed his blade to slice through Ansell's waistcoat, making the heir stumble back.

Ansell touched his side, a thin line of blood painting his palm. "Jealousy is ugly on you, Leon. It always has been."

"Jealousy can easily be hidden in court." Tilting his chin up, he smiled smugly. "Now rumors of a prince living out his years as a snarling, drooling animal that killed a decorated soldier? Those never go away."

Baring his teeth, he attacked viciously.

"And it's already started, Your Grace." He hissed, pleased with the reaction. "Gaston, was it? Medaled, a great war hero. Torn asunder by the big creature at the top of the crumbling castle. That chatter will be there the moment you step off the carriage."

Lumiere winced. Plumette sidled up to him and covered her mouth. They turned just to see Belle wander into the doorway.

She froze, eyes widening as she saw Leon draw blood from Ansell's shoulder, making him stumble back and fall. "ANSELL!"

All the brothers heard were feet racing in and the sound of a sword being drawn from the rack. Leon paused, mid strike, looking up just as steel caught his blade. The farm girl in front of his brother. A ferocious thing in a blue dress, blocking him from any further attack.

"Belle, what are you doing?!" Ansell scrambled to his feet.

The viscount gave a surprised smile. "Come to save the day? There's no cause for alarm here, we're just playing, Mademoiselle."

"Then why is he bleeding?!" She snapped, struggling against the strength of his arm.

He rolled his eyes, quickly stepping out of the way. With a few flicks of his wrist, her sword clattered to the ground as she flew forward, skidding across the floor. "This is a man's game, girl. Don't-"

Ansell rushed Leon, sending the viscount to the ground. Struggling to keep in check, keep the rage at bay.

Leon laughed, eyes burning dark. "Oh, Ansell." Thrusting a leg out, he swept it and hooked his brother's boot. The prince went backward.

Ansell threw his sword to the side and rolled out of the way. Landing in a crouch, he suddenly pounced like a cat as Leon was getting back on his feet. A roar, ringing through the entire castle, making everyone jump. Plowing into him, driving him into the floor. The two tumbling, struggling, slamming into one another to gain the upper hand on the mirror shine of the hardwood. Getting on top, he pinned Leon down and clenched a fist. Drawing it back, baring his teeth as he sat astride his weaker sibling. Wild-eyed, an utter terror to behold.

She forgot to breathe, watching him, the enraged blue eyes full of fire and hate. As if Leon was one of the wolves so long ago.
A rapier thrust in front of Ansell, keeping him from striking.


Still frightening the servants that had clustered by the door, he raked a hand through his hair and caught his breath. A growl formed in the back of Ansell's throat, ready and wanting to leap back at Leon and show him exactly the kind of snarling, drooling animal he was.

"Just a bit of fun, father." The viscount licked some blood off of his lip. Smiling, pleased with himself. A touch scared of Ansell, though. His brother was now a brute, he had to remember that. "Just clearing the air, being boys like old times."

The Duke slid his rapier back into the shaft of his cane. The round jeweled pommel clicking back into place, the rubies bright like fresh blood from a deep wound. "Leon, you know better." He snapped, turning his attention back to his heir. "And you." looking down his nose at the young man sitting floor like an insolent, panting child. "Control yourself, boy. You're no longer lumbering around this palace on all fours. Act like a goddamned man." He turned to the peasant girl who was catching her breath. She seemed stunned. "And what do we owe the pleasure?"

"I was just visiting my friends on staff." Purposefully, Belle placed herself between the Duke and Ansell before she bowed "I heard fighting and I was worried when I saw the viscount draw blood." He looked over to his eldest.

"It's not the first time we've sliced one another in a duel." Leon reminded him. "And he was the one who used to get me."

Nodding his head, he turned to the girl. Belle, was it? Something, didn't matter. She looked like she should be scrubbing floors in that dress and apron. "He's fine, he just needs to be quicker. Fence with grace and dignity, not rolling around on the floor like a sailor in a tavern."

She stood there, plainly disagreeing yet unable to speak her mind. Loathing every second of it.

"I have reports to read." The Duke announced, much more important things on his mind than dealing with his nuisance sons and some girl from the village in a fraying frock.

Leon got up. Dusting himself off, putting his sword back, offering his Spanish girl an elbow. The clicking of his shoes disappearing.

Ansell sat in the middle of the sunny room in silence. Cradling his head in his hands.

Belle came and crouched next to him, silently placing a hand on his shoulder as a small group of servants led by Lumiere and Plumette came forward.

He looked up, showing her her red-eyed, miserable face.

"Come on, let's go the library." She murmured, helping him up. Turning to the staff she heard him hiss in pain. "Could I please have some wound dressings, water, soap, needle and thread, and Mrs. Potts has-" A footman nodded and quickly took off. She turned to Ansell, who was holding his side. "Do you need help?"

Silently, he shook his head. Limping off, the group of staff parting like the red sea.

Belle followed, quietly, watching the sullen prince. Taken aback at what she had witnessed as she
hadn't seen his pure, unbridled rage since the beginning of her stay over a year ago. Yet there it was, deep down inside. Perhaps it would never leave him, it would be something he would always have to battle.

"I didn't want to fight." He grumbled, finally. "I tried, I tried so hard, Belle."

"He obviously pushed you." She reassured, but there was a hesitation. She felt it, as did he. It had been so long since there had been one. "You didn't have a choice."

"It doesn't feel that way." Ansell was silent all the way through the rest of the castle. They trekked their way through, winding up the stairs and opening the door.

"Go sit." She ordered, shutting the door and taking off her jacket. "Shirt off, please."

"Why the library?" Doing as he was told, he sat on the chaise, tossing the bloodied garment aside.

"Because your family will suspect we retreated to the bedroom, and I really don't want them checking in on us." Going to the hearth, she added some wood to build the fire up. "I've had enough of them."

"You saw them all of five minutes." He winced.

"And that was clearly enough." There was a knock on the door and the footman who had previously been a serving tray had returned with a large tray of medical supplies. "Thank you, Georges."

"Of course, M'lady." Pulling a side table up to the prince, he set it down and bowed. "Is there anything else you need?"

"No, thank you." Georges slipped out. Before she sat, Belle bent over, cupping the sides of his face and pressing onto his lips a deep, loving kiss. Parting for air, her thumbs stroked his cheeks, forehead resting against his. "I love you so much." She reassured.

His head turned, his face to show her he felt he didn't deserve it. Hair stubbornly falling into his face.

"Here." Digging around in her pocket she pulled out a spare ribbon, walking around and taking his hair, leaving it half down, braiding the sides back. "We can fix this."

"Braiding?" He asked.

"It's messy, but it won't get in your face." She explained, quickly wrapping the bunch of hair and fixing a secure bow. Going back around, she watched him reach around and fiddle with it. Ignoring his fussing she poured some hot water from the kettle into the basin, carefully washing her hands with the soap, dipping a rag in.

He started wincing.

"I haven't even touched it yet. Don't be such a baby." Belle told him, gently working on his side first.

"I'm not a child." He reminded gruffly.

"You certainly could fool me whenever you need mending." She was careful with him. He was such an overdramatic soul when it came to medical attention. He could valiantly fight through pain in the heat of the moment, but when it came to sitting down and getting cleaned up Ansell was all wincing and whining. "It's not too deep, so no stitches. But we'll use the ointment."

"Aren't I supposed to be the one protecting?" He muttered, struggling to look her in the eye. All he
could see was her with the sword, strong and stubborn. Her bravery melting into shock. She had seen him be so monstrous, so beastly. While he had been yearning to scare them away, he had never wanted for her to see him that way. Never again.

"I think we can take turns." She responded, looking up at him sincerely.

Plumette quietly unlocked and opened the door to the library.

The master and Belle were on the chaise. Belle lying atop the prince on her stomach, head resting on his chest, eyes half open as she stroked his face and hair. The poor tired fellow was fast asleep with an arm slung around her, a blanket up to their backs to ward off the chill.

Belle stiffened a bit to the maid entertaining while they were very much in the nude save for their blanket.

"Oh Mademoiselle, don't worry." She said, carefully shutting and locking the door. Clothing draped neatly over an arm. "We've all seen the master with far less on and in far more compromising positions."

Despite being aware of his past Belle didn't want to think too much about what that entailed. "What time is it?"

"Well past dinner, but Chef has food waiting when you're ready." She said, getting closer. "Madame ordered you a large lot of clothes you can try on at a later date. But it included a house robe I thought you may want, I also brought a nightgown."

"Oh thank you." Belle eyed the silk banyan robe, light blue with gold beading and stitching. Flowering vines and soaring birds wrapping around the cuffs and down the sides. "Thank you so much. Instead of the gown can I just have my shift?" She watched the maid go and pick up the discarded article of clothing. Their clothes had wound up in a frantic pile by a table that had been just the right height for a few things. Taking it, she carefully pulled the undergarment on and then took the robe.

"Chapeau asked if I could bring something comfortable for the master." She said, laying out his similar robe of hunter green adorned with pale green stags and thorned roses. A pair of loose linen breeches for sleeping were also set aside. Chapeau was well aware their prince wasn't one for much clothing when he took to bed.

"Please tell him thank you." She said as Ansell began to stir. "I know I don't make his job easy with my discomfort of having him dress Ansell while I'm in the room."

"He understands, Mademoiselle." She smiled. Gathering up the forgotten clothes, folding them neatly, musing over how well the prince was as soon as Belle was in the room. "It is an adjustment for you to have so many staff members with different functions now that we're not just feather dusters and furniture. Ladies maids and valets are a bit more invasive than the average maid and butler."

"And I would like to thank you as well. I know I'm not the best lady to wait on." She often felt bad for Plumette who had been promoted to her Lady's Maid. Being self-sufficient meant there was little to do other than taking dirtied laundry and draw baths. Occasionally Belle wanted her hair done, or to wear a nicer ensemble for a night with Ansell, but there was little actual waiting on a young woman constantly in motion.

"Belle, you are fine. We have a rhythm now. Though I hope you can find yourself more comfortable
with me entering the chambers for morning and night service since Chapeau is respecting your wishes." Stacking everything carefully, she gathered the clothing up.

"Yes, of course."

"I'll have these washed and returned to the royal chambers. Would you like me to get you a dinner service?"

Tiredly, she squinted in thought, nearly yawning from the warmth of the fires and the dim glow of the candles. "Could you please bring dinner and tea service to his chambers?"

"Our chambers."

Looking down she found the prince's groggy, dopily smiling face. Backs of his fingers coming up and caressing her cheek.

"They're ours, it's not the same when you're not in them." He corrected in a deep drowsy voice.

Plumette smiled at the pair. "What tea would you prefer?"

"Mint if you could." She turned to Ansell, who was lazily playing with a piece of her hair.

"Mint for me as well, please."

"As you wish. Is there anything else?"

"No, thank you that's all." She watched Plumette leave before turning to the tired prince. "You look better."

"Hrm." Taking a deep breath his hands found the clothing on her. "It's been hard to sleep without you, Darling. Plus, you know how to exhaust me in the best ways."

Belle smiled seductively, finding his mouth. Holding his face in her hands, kissing him tenderly, humming pleasantly. Oh, how she had missed the smell of him. Spice, cedar, musk. The scent on his clothes, their blankets, and pillows. It was a soothing reminder she was home. Pressing her nose to his neck to get a lungful, Belle kissed the spot.

"What's all this?" He whispered, toying with the fabric on her.

"Nothing you can't push out of the way." She reassured, feeling a hand go up and stroke her torso before finding her thighs.

"You're so thoughtful." A lopsided, sleepy smile.

"Plumette was nice enough to bring you clothes too." Stroking his shoulder, it was clear as day he did not want to dress. "Which you need to do if we're to go to our chambers."

"Now why on earth would we do that?" He asked, guiding her to straddle him and sit atop his muscled torso. A slight wince from the bandage. "It's so warm and comfortable here. So many throws if we need them, and so many surfaces. Not to mention books. I hear certain women can be seduced by poetry."

Belle chuckled, petting the arms at her waist. Strong hands stroking and temptingly massaging her hips. "Because I want to be seduced in our bed. There's a lot more space for us to do certain things in it." Listening to his low growling laugh of agreement, she watched him and noted how much more relaxed he was. The ache that sat behind his eyes had nearly gone. "And eventually I'd like to sleep
in it."

He yawned, frowning when she got up and lashed her robe, bringing him over the clothing. "Well, if we must for certain things." Ansell smiled mischievously as he took the breeches and slipped them on under the throw. "How did you even get up here?"

"I was snuck in through the servant's quarters, I wanted to visit my friends." She said, helping Ansell up and handing him his robe.

"Friends, right." He said sarcastically.

"I do miss them." Belle pushed back against the needling. "Also, I hadn't heard from you in days and was feeling homesick. I was going to see everyone, however, I wasn't prepared to assist my damsel."

Ansell raised a confused brow.

"Were you not in distress?"

He snorted as she laughed softly and stole a kiss from his pouting mouth.

"You've saved me plenty of times," She lovingly reminded her prince "we really should trade off every once in awhile."

"I suppose. I do like it when you're gallant, it raises a tremendous amount of concern and fear in other men." Smiling in amusement at the fact, he pulled on his robe, allowing it to hang loosely off of his body. Wrapping her up he applied the most loving of kisses. "I've missed you so much you don't even know."

"I think I have a feeling." She murmured, leaning against his chest. Remembering how distraught he had been just a few hours ago. Wanting to protect him from the ills of his family. "I love you."

"I love you too, Darling." Pressing a kiss to her forehead he rested his own head against it. "Shall we sneak you into our rooms?"

Belle nodded her head, feeling tired, wanting the comforts of their quarters. "I'll leave in the early morning." She sighed sadly.

"We'll make the most of the night." Everything felt so much more manageable with her there. His father, his brother, the court. Ansell couldn't bare to tell her about the month away. It would ruin their fleeting moment of happiness.

"If I didn't know any better I'd think Anselme wasn't nursing his wounds." Leon said as he and his father strolled the garden, sharp eyes watching the west wing suddenly flicker with the light of freshly lit candles. "But had a certain farm girl on her knees up there."

"That will run its course one way or another." The Duke reassured.

"Never thought I'd see him sooo… monogamous." He scoffed. "And so melancholy now. So soft! There's no fight in him. It's like that curse changed him or something."

"Better he than us, son." His father said, admiring the topiaries. "Your constant needling is getting him out of his shell, though I take issue with your methods."

"Extreme times call for extreme measures. Though once he's at court I think it'll sort him out."
"I certainly hope so. I need an heir, not a sniveling man-child preoccupied with keeping sequestered away in the province, ruining our finances, and thinking he can get away with some peasant."

Curling his lip, he eyed the west wing.

Leon took a deep breath, studying his feet as he kept his anger in check. "She's protective of him." He noted with a hint of disdain. "Odd girl, standing up to me. And the staff is so fond of her. And so lax at that. Horribly casual with Anselme and her."

"She's a peasant girl, things can be done." He said, the stars clear and bright on their faces. The hedges rustling in the wind. "I didn't wish to stay this long, however, he's been so unraveled by that blasted witch. So weak and tender-hearted now." Shaking his head, the curls bounced on his shoulders. "We must pray Versailles will change him."

"Yes, Father," Leon said shiftily. "We must."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And here I was trying to break all of these parts up into more digestible sections. All I did was end up making an enormous Part II. Nevertheless, I hope you enjoyed Part II and all its damsels and duels. To everyone who's commented, bookmarked, kudos'd, offered up sacrifices to the great fandom elder gods, ect, ect. Thank you! Please quit sacrificing things as it weirds me out despite it also being very sweet. But seriously, thank you so much for your support. I hope I can continue to keep you entertained. Let me know how I'm doing/not doing in the comments below.
Belle awoke when Plumette came in, quietly laying out her washed dress and brushed boots.

Ansell was hopelessly tangled in her. Holding her, limbs hooking her own, his warm breath on her neck. Carefully she turned to lay on her back and he reacted by curling himself, nuzzling his head up on her shoulder. Blissfully asleep, free of whatever stresses had pursued him during their time apart.

She didn't want to leave him.

Sitting up, pressing her back to the plush headboard, he groaned and she guided his head to her lap, carefully combing the hair out of his face.

He looked up, sadly.

"I know." She sighed, gathering his head up and pressing it to her chest, kissing his crown as he wrapped her in a forlorn, lonely hug.

"Thank you, Le Fou." Belle said as he handed her a cup, setting a small platter of food on the rough-hewn table.

"I don't find myself at the tavern anymore, but this place has a good cheese platter." He explained, taking a seat.

"And how are you?" She took a sip from the mug, trying not to make a face but ale was not her favorite. Perhaps the next time they spoke she would suggest elsewhere.

"I'm alright, business is… okay." He stared into his mug, shrugging. "I used to transport more game and furs but since Gaston isn't running around shooting everything that doesn't stand on two legs it's been a little slower."

"You know, I heard Chef up at the castle complaining about finding someone new to deliver the morning produce and goods." She suggested. "The house will supply the cart, and I know for a fact everyone just got a very comfortable raise."

"Really? That would be lovely." He said, talking quickly, eagerly. "I could really save up with that kind of job. But- your father and his paints and everyone else-"

"We can manage, Le Fou. Don't stop yourself for anyone else." Belle encouraged. "Just ride up to the castle and talk to Mrs. Potts. She adores you."

"Thank you for letting me know." He grinned appreciatively.

"My pleasure, what are you saving for?" She took another sip, hoping she would get used to it. "Unless of course, that's a topic you-"

"Oh no." Le Fou beamed. "See, I'd like to buy an inn."
"Really?" Her eyebrows shot up as she leaned in.

"I really like people and hospitality, and I'd like to think I'm friendly enough to welcome people." Le Fou was all aglow with his dream. "Maybe not an inn here, it's not like this is a vacation spot, but the next town over always has fairs and events and it's on the way to Paris."

"That's a lovely idea." Belle smiled.

He dipped his head sheepishly. "You really think so?"

"Of course I do. I think you'd be quite the innkeeper." Softening, she could tell he didn't hear praise over his dream very often. "And you shouldn't listen to anyone putting you down."

The man's shoulders heaved. He stared into his ale, bits of foam floating across the surface like lazy clouds on a warm day. "It's not everyone, you know? A lot of people still are very friendly and we do business and they have nice things to say about you-" He gestured to her. "It's just that group... all those people at-"

"The tavern?"

"There's a mural in there of him." Pointing a thumb towards the tavern where people were filtering in and out. "Not exactly the warmest place for the folks who ended up having a problem with Gaston."

"Oh yes," Belle sighed, heavily. Her face betraying her and showing how rankled she was of the entire situation. "I hear lots of colorful stories about me that come out of there."

A short silence grew as they both looked out the grimy window to see people watching her. Watching them. The onlookers ducking and going about their business once realizing they had been spotted.

"You know," Belle thoughtfully studied the grain of the table. Swirls and knots that had seen many drinks, meals, and hands. The clatter of plates and grumbles of conversation filling the gaps in the air. "I didn't really hear any of it for the first couple of days I came back, but now it's like I can't get away from it." She shook her head. "Most of it isn't true- but..." fidgeting with her mug, she found the courage to say it out loud. "I think some of it is."

"Like what?"

"Versailles." Belle was pensive at the prospect. "It sounds about right for his father, the duke."

Le Fou was reluctant to be the bearer of bad news. He hesitated, wetting his lips before leaning in. "Belle, I've been riding around the province for the past few days." He offered. "And the only thing I've heard from the other towns that matches up? They're taking him there for a month. Prepping him right now. Getting him all-" He gestured rather wildly "princely."

She sunk lower into her chair, muttering more to herself than the man across the table. "Well, that'll take awhile at least."

Le Fou tilted his head to the side.

"His majesty is a bit unrefined in some royal aspects... and... kind of goofy? Just between you and me." A thoughtful smile broke across her face towards her big, sweet Ansell. He could put on a good show play the part of the handsome prince well. At the celebration, he had reveled in it, though he had been clear it was because she was on his arm the entire time. But at the end of the day, he was
also the excited young man who came to the house with a basket of coffee, attempted to do chores with her, and playfully argued about Coriolanus. "Not terribly princely sometimes."

"Maybe that's what makes him a good prince." Le Fou supplied. "If it's any consolation, all of the rumors about you turning into a crow at night and eating children haven't left town."

Belle laughed weakly, finding some solace in his humor. "If you believe all of the stories together I'm not only a witch but I'm also expecting five illegitimate children, all from different men." He laughed with her. "One of them apparently is going to come out a little beast."

"People are absolutely terrible here." His giggle trailed off into seriousness. "They don't deserve you."

"They don't deserve you either. Except for Stanley, how is he?"

"He's well." Suddenly bashful, blushing bright red across the table. The man shaking his shoulders happily. "He also wants to run an inn, but we're not trying to get too ahead of ourselves."

"I'm so happy for you." Reaching over she took and squeezed his hand.

"Thank you, Belle." He looked up at her, cheeks still red. "Don't let them get to you. They all worship the memory of a really terrible guy. A guy who gave out awful nicknames, by the way." He scowled. "My name isn't Le Fou. It's Gustave!" He threw his hands up in the air. "But it sounded too similar to Gaston and then I accidentally got too drunk one night. One thing led to another, a bet happened, I ended up in a pig pen one time and all of a sudden I was Le Fou." Grumbling, he rolled his eyes. "Stanley's real name is Stephane. Stanley's not even a French name."

"Well Gustave," Belle said pointedly. "I wish you and Stephane all the best."

Gustave smiled warmly.

Ansell was trying to hide.

Between his father's determination in prepping him for a success debut in court, his brother's drunken serpent-esque charm, and all of the joy being sucked out of the castle, he desperately needed a place to relax.

Stopping at the large, familiar double doors, he produced a key from his pocket.

"And what's in there?"

Turning, he saw Leon sauntering over. Ever slippery and honed, like a dagger dripping with poison. Turning back around to ignore him, he unlocked the doors.

"Not going to share?" The viscount needled. "Not that you were ever taught to."

"This room is a private space." He explained firmly. "As is the entire west wing of the castle, not that you follow the rules."

"You keep this up and they'll think you a bore at court."

His head snapped up, eyes narrowing as he bristled. There was little patience left. "See, that's the difference between you and me, Leon. I don't mind being unpopular, I was left to my own devices, in solitude, for years. Meanwhile, you slaver for every scrap you can get."
Leon's thin mustache twitched as rage bubbled up from his chest.

Before he could speak, his enormous red hounds came tearing through the halls. Slobber flying from their wide, open, snarling jaws. Snapping, skidding, running full speed.

Froufrou and Capitaine were both fleeing the horrid canines. The cat's hair on end, the dog yelping.

Ansell let go of the door and raced over.

Capitaine slipped, and one of the dogs leaped on top of him. Yet the cat screamed a war cry, grabbing the monstrous hound with his claws and climbing up the massive body. Tearing and biting before jumping off.

The prince scooped up Froufrou and soon found Capitaine up on his shoulder. Lunging down at the dogs he bared his teeth and let out a loud, savage roar. A roar that was far from human.

Leon stopped snooping around the unlocked door.

The dogs slid to a stop.

He locked his eyes on them. A deep, threatening rumble in his chest.

Ears pinning back, growls more fearful, the large hounds began to back up.

Standing up, dog tucked under an arm, cat's bottle brush tail curled about his neck like a frightened scarf, Ansell briskly headed back to the door. Stopping, gaze narrowing on his brother, he growled out. "Tie your dogs outside or I'll be willing to see how much of my former self is left."

Pushing himself through the door, he slammed it shut, rattling the hinges. Locking the door, setting Froufrou down, he slid to the floor and caught his breath.

Looking up at the library, precious memories encapsulated in one place.

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*Day Seven*

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With the seasons readying for a change a warm, rolling thunderstorm cascaded through the valley. Fat, dark blue clouds swallowing up the mountains, soaking the town. Villeneuve's energy slowed, most keeping inside and dry as the weather passed through.

Maurice shook the rain from his cloak, setting his hat on its hook as he turned around. The fire was roaring, his little house warm and pleasant, the familiar sounds of tinkering filling the air.

He wandered over to find Belle at a smaller table, carefully taking apart their clock.

She looked up, rather frustrated. Trying to hide it with a tired smile.

"You might give Cogsworth quite a fright if he saw you gutting that poor thing." Stooping, he pressed a kiss to the top of her head. Well aware she hadn't been sleeping well.

"Something's sticking in the gearwork." She explained, setting her tools down and wiping the grease from her hands with a rag. "Did you get your stockings?"

"I did. The poor old ones they're replacing have so many holes you can see all my toes." Maurice watched her sigh absently. His heart twinged at the lovesick brown eyes he adored so much. "You
know, people would pay you to repair little things. Actual money, not just bartering for goods like you do when we need it." He noted out loud. "You've always had a knack for the more mechanical."

His daughter didn't appear to be listening. She fiddled with a tool, spinning it against the tabletop. Furrowing a brow, he silently took the empty teacup next to her and ambled to the kitchen.

"So many people grumble about the rain, muddying up the streets-" Carefully he poured her a fresh cup, then poured himself one as well. "But I have always found it most soothing. Good for nerves" Coming back around, he set the cup in front of her.

She finally looked up, drawn out of her thoughts. "Thank you, Papa."

"Keep you warm, darling." Patting her shoulder, he pulled up a chair. "I hear it too, by the way."

Belle paused, meeting his eyes.

"It takes quite a bit of fortitude not to strike any of them." He announced protectively, rare anger in his naturally warm voice. "Particularly when it comes to the rumors specifically about you. No matter how ridiculous they can be." Taking a sip, his eyebrows raised as he remembered a particular piece of information. "Did you know you're a werewolf?"

"That's a new one." She played with her hair anxiously. "But that doesn't bother me, it's just gossip."

"Oh I know, however, it's hateful gossip." Maurice drew his cup to his lips.

"He is going to Versailles though." The thought dropped her shoulders. "For a month. That's all true, Papa."

"Are you worried about him?" There was a long silence, the rain pattering on the windows. A soft rumble of distant thunder.

"More worried about his family." She managed. Her mouth going slack, head sagging down. "His eyes, Papa."

Maurice reached out and touched her knee.

"He was happy when he came over, but I could still see it. That look, all of that pain he was trying to hide that came back with them arriving." Fingers braiding her hair to give them something to do. "It was worse yesterday. I haven't seen that rage and sadness since-" She looked up at him earnestly. "I don't know if he can manage a month. And I don't know if I'll even get to see him before they throw him in a carriage."

"I suspect they'd have to drag that boy kicking and snarling all the way to Versailles if he didn't get to see you before leaving."

Belle chuckled at the truth in is words, releasing a painful smile.

"A month will soar by." He reassured. "And then you'll have him back, and he'll be tripping all over himself like he does when he sees you arrive."

"But for how long?"

Maurice furrowed his brows.

"Papa, I'm not stupid." Belle wanted to cry but carried on bravely. "I've been trying to ignore it since he became a prince. But that's it. He's a prince."
"I heard about the sword fight."

Ansell looked up from his spot at the servant's table. He was done up as his father liked, sans wig which was resting on a chair. All silks and finery, looking somehow out of place both down below and up above.

Mrs. Potts set a steaming cup and platter with cookies in front of him, pulling a chair up next to her prince. The lightning clap sent a burst of light through the small windows.

He tilted her head silently at her about the rather childish cookies.

She nudged them closer.

"I tried to control my temper." Holding the dainty little bit of porcelain between his big hands, rubbing a thumb along the gold on the rim. Watching the ropes of aromatic steam curl up into the chilling air.

"Lumiere was concerned by what he saw."

The blue eyes looked up at her, unaware his friend had watched. "What did he see?"

"Only you fumble through the whole thing until you pounced on that bloody drunken snake and nearly cleaned his clock."

Ansell sighed heavily.

"You brother is trying to goad you, Love." The housemaid kept an eye on her maids and footmen as they hurried about to plate the dinner. "They both want to break you. Bring out the worst in you."

"They don't know what they're toying with." He pushed a fist across the table. "I only got meaner when she cursed me. Until Belle came of course." The prince curled a lip. "They've never seen him."

"And you don't need to use that to scare them." The poor boy. He was never good at playing the game of politics. Never a pretender, a liar, a serpent in the grass like the rest of them. His weakness had always been he had worn his emotions and opinions on his sleeve. It made him a terrible nobleman. "Master, we don't want you to fall back into your old ways."

"I'm not going to become a selfish playboy again, spending money left and right." The grumbling made him sink lower into his chair. Stomach sour with loneliness. "That's all changed, Mrs. Potts. I don't have a taste for that anymore."

"I don't think you remember it, Master." Folding her hands neatly in her lap, she studied the wrinkles coming in. "You were such a young thing when your mother passed. And you were so sweet and bright, gentle little soul you were."

His eyes flickered up.

"But when you father took you and put you in with your brothers, the first thing they all did was work you over. Teasing and bullying, making everything a competition. Making you mad, making you furious." Tears welled in her eyes, she fought back her anguish. "That's when your father made you selfish and unkind. They had broken your spirit so they took the pieces left and built you up again a monster."

Ansell clenched his jaw as her gaze found his and held fast.
"You be careful." She ordered. "They're aiming to break you all over again. And when they take you to court, we can't come and watch over you."

"Mrs. Potts I'm trying really I am-"

"If you lose yourself, you lose her." Mrs. Potts impressed fiercely. "Don't you dare let that go. Keep that in the back of your mind every time they're spoiling for a fight."

He was about to say more when the door opened and Lumiere popped in. "Master, dinner is served."

Rising up, he straightened his waistcoat and jacket. "Thank you, Mrs. Potts." Voice sincere as Lumiere fitted the wig back on.

"Anytime, Dearie." Getting up, she sighed. "Well, I need to go see about getting the parlor fixed for when you retire."

Nodding his head, he swiped two cookies. Sticking one in his mouth, stealthily passing one to Chip as he headed out the servant's entrance to the dining room. Tousling the boy's hair.

Lumiere chuckled as he followed his prince to the dining room.

*Day Eight*

"Are you sure you don't want to come?" Maurice asked, lashing his easel down in the cart. His daughter was lingering behind, melancholy in her normally bright and curious eyes. "It is Paris. You could always have a bit of an adventure, see the sights."

She sighed, arms wrapped around herself. "Someone needs to stay home and look after everything." Surveying their modest grounds broodingly she added. "The rain left some work."

Stopping his preparations, he cupped her cheek. "I'm always happy to have your company on these outings."

Smiling into his palm, she held it there. Kissing the inside of it. "I'll be fine, Papa, really. I'll keep myself busy."

"I expect nothing less." He pressed a kiss to her forehead sweetly. "And I saw you have a fresh pile of books on top of your projects."

"They'll be read and completed." She reassured, watching him climb creakily up onto the bench of the cart.

"A rose?" He asked, fixing the reins.

"You know me well." She patted Philippe's flank.

"I love you, Belle."

"Love you too, have a safe trip." She watched him tug his cap down and flick the reins, Philippe walking off. Letting out a deep breath, she watched him disappear before going back inside.

"What are you thinking, brother?"
"That this wig is too hot." Ansell sighed, not touching his cognac as he watched his father smoke. Belle liked a nice red wine, normally a Bordeaux, he mused. Thinking about how it would stain her sweet lips.

"You'll have to get used to it, son." The Duke replied, drawing a long pull of smoke from his pipe. The clouds swirling up to the ceiling made him look like a dragon near a horde of gold. "I'll be out come tomorrow, but you'll be right behind me in a few days."

Ansell's eyes wandered about the parlor. A soft violin playing nearby, the light warm and dim by night. How many times had he and Belle retreated to the parlor for a book by the fireplace? She would get so sleepy he'd have to pester her up to bed.

"You'll be quite the sight at Versailles." His father said. Carefully snuffing his pipe, shaking the tobacco out and into an ashray. "Tailor should finish your fitting, final touches here and there. You must be ready for your debut." He pressed. "Everyone will be watching you. Make an impression, show them who is the heir to my lands."

His son held his tongue, taking a breath instead. "Yes, sir." He finally managed, serious eyes fixated on the clock. How many hours left until morning, until the duke was climbing into his carriage.

"I must retire." The Duke said, slowly rising up. "I have a long trip in the morning. Goodnight."

Both sons wished his highness a good night and watched him exit the room like the stately man he was. The sharp blue gaze of the prince narrowing, ears honing in on the fading footsteps.

They finally disappeared. "Oh thank god." Peeling off his wig, he placed it on the globe next to his armchair. Untying his hair, running his fingers through it to relieve some of the heat.

"You should just crop it short," Leon suggested, ignoring the cat winding into the room.

"Oh no, I couldn't." He held his tongue as to the reason why. That clever girl from Villeneuve who loved to play with it. Standing, Ansell shucked off his coat and tugged loose his cravat. "I can't believe I used to enjoy wearing all of this." Sinking back into his chair, he picked up his glass.

"The light at the end of the tunnel for you, brother." Leon sipped.

"Yes, only to head into a much longer, colder tunnel." He grumbled, kicking the heels off as he reached down to pat Capitaine. He never wore heels when she was around. "You should be downright pleased, Leon. returning back to your paradise, away from the unrefined country."

"The Spanish girl has lost her charm." The viscount admitted, looking at his sibling half dressed. "And her lady's maids if I'm to be completely honest. I take it you were dressed more simply during your years in exile. The way you mope the more layers you're stuffed in."

"Didn't need so many what with all the fur. I ran warm." Ansel took a long pull of his drink, not liking the chit chat with Leon. It was always so duplicitous, a test of his wits. And he was at the end of those.

"I take it there are other influences that have made you prefer the more simple ways of life."

The prince looked up tensely.

"Seem to have made friends with your staff, friendly and as lax in their places as they are." He tossed back his drink. "And that Belle."
His jaw tensed, grip on the crystal tightening enough to force him to set it down.

"I must admit, I'm surprised. I remember your taste." Tsking, he drummed his fingers on the rich blue velvet arm. "She's such a plain thing, not as ravishing as your others, no? Looks so out of place in this castle." Reaching over Leon poured himself another measure. "I can imagine her washing laundry, dirty children clung to her skirts. Or." Eyes shifting wickedly. "Perhaps someone to tend to you in your chambers when you tire of your wi-

"DON'T YOU DARE SPEAK ANOTHER WORD." Ansell roared, baring his teeth. Leaping out of his chair. Bits of his wild nature crackling to the surface. Eyes absolutely blazing. Feral.

The viscount grinned in malice. "There he is. There's the brother I know. Almost thought I had you during the duel but that blasted girl." Getting up, sauntering over, looking his brother up and down as if he had just been discovered. "That's the spirit. It's good to see you're still in there. Meanest animal in the fight. Lord of all he so cruelly surveys. Took awhile, I was afraid you'd gone too soft."

"Don't you ever speak of her again." He turned, the two beginning to slowly circle one another.

"I take it this is more than just a conquest this time around?" Leon's eyes wanted a reason to draw a sword. "You love this one? That broke your stupid curse, right?"

He glowered silently. Trying to take deep breaths, to keep himself in check as Mrs. Potts had told him to.

"Is she really that good?" He chuckled. "Lord, if you weren't so possessive I'd ask for a g-

Ansell threw him against the wall, pinning him.

Leon's eyes flew open, the whites like saucers.

"Don't you ever come near her." He snarled.

"You were never good at sharing your favorite toys." He coughed meanly, beginning to regret the move. His brother was much stronger than before. Even after the duel, quite bit stronger than he had anticipated.

He lifted Leon up off the ground by his lapels, one hand adjusting towards his throat. "I'll send you through the window you SLIMY LITTLE-

"It's not me you need to worry about." The viscount struggled to breathe and pawed in vain at the hands keeping him up. The shock of fear coursing through him as he most certainly regretted his last few sentences. "He'll trace all your changes back to-

Ansell dropped his brother, sending him crashing to the ground. A gasping, coughing mass of silk and rhinestones. "Did you horrible people ever consider I had to change drastically to break the curse?" He began to pace like a caged thing.

"So you had to lose your fight? That's not what anyone wants in a ruler."

"I had to lose my selfishness." Chest heaving, wanting to be cruel to get him to leave. It always worked when they were small. Be the biggest, meanest, most entitled son. Leon couldn't fight that. A viscount couldn't fight with a prince. "Perhaps you may benefit from the same thing."

"And that meant kissing a farm girl?"
Ansell looked ready to throw him into a priceless vase.

A sense of self-preservation overcame Leon. His palms turned upward in surrender. "Very well, I won't speak of your peasant princess anymore."

A threatening glare at his brother was followed by the viscount's quick escape.

Steadying his breathing, he sank into a chair. Looking up at the clock, shutting his eyes, counting the hours down.

*Day Nine*

The subjects stood on the steps of the castle, waving to the royal carriage and procession as it disappeared into the woods.

"Thank goodness." The Cadenza said under his breath to Mrs. Potts.

"Careful, Maestro." She whispered under a tight smile, as Leon and a remaining procession that was to take the prince back to Versailles stood on the other side of the steps.

"That man has terrible taste in music." He lamented, wild hair bouncing in the gentle breeze. "When do we get our Belle back?"

"It's not the same without her." His wife agreed. "I miss her singing to herself in the halls."

"And she has excellent taste in music." He noted, which received a nod of agreement from the Madame.

Ansell drew his hand down, pausing for a moment to make sure they were out of sight. Whirling around, he stormed back inside.

Leon tilted his head before following.

"Oh dear." Mrs. Potts sighed, gathering her skirts to take up the chase with Lumiere and Cogsworth. Chapeau also trailing behind.

The Prince ripped his ornate jacket off.

"Brother-" Leon began.

"COGSWORTH." Ansell boomed, running up the stairs. "Prepare my horse. Commoner's saddle."

"Brother, where are you going?" Leon pressed, a wig being flung in his face. It tumbled carelessly down the steps after slowing him down.

"Out." He barked, charging into his chambers. "I swear Leon if you follow me any more before we leave or I find you anywhere near the west wing I'll toss you over a balcony."

Leon stopped dead in his tracks as the double doors slammed shut. The viscount turned as white as a sheet as the wood rattled on its heavy hinges. He straightened his coat, gave the help a scathing look, and slipped off.

"He can't go anywhere!" Cogsworth exclaimed as Mrs. Potts told a maid to get the stables and have Mr. Potts prepare the prince's horse. "He still needs to be caught up in-"
"Cogsworth!" Lumiere backhanded his friend's sleeve. "The Master has been trapped in the castle with his father for nine days."

"Miracle they didn't kill one another." Mrs. Potts muttered to herself. Thankful the screaming and roaring would no longer continue.

"And he's not prepared for court yet he leaves in three days." the majordomo huffed. "Of all the times to be so careless-"

"He barely saw Belle, Cogsworth." Mrs. Potts reminded him in a hushed tone.

"And that was days ago! And they are young." Lumiere hinted.

"Cogsworth, you're not going to win him back." The head of the house announced. The rustling in the royal chambers clearly clothes being stripped, boots shucked. "Give him some time." She turned to Lumiere. "When he comes tearing out of there fit to be tied, make sure he's at least half dressed. That boy doesn't have much sense as it is right now."

Lumiere nodded his head as Mrs. Potts hurried off. Turning, he raised a brow. "Cogsworth, are you going to fight him when he opens that door?"

Cogsworth looked at the enormous hand-carved doors. Lions and bears battling amongst gold trees. Big, heavy, suddenly threatening. Grumbling to himself he shot Lumiere a venomous look and fuzzed over his cane. "I have too much to do to expel the energy to fight him." gathering his composure, he headed out.

Lumiere chuckled, folding his arms, nudging Chapeau who was not as merely amused.

Ansell came bursting out of his chambers wild with determination. Tricorn hat clutched in hand, cloak billowing behind him, he raced down the stairs.

"Master!"

Without a word, he went charging into the kitchen where Mrs. Potts walked towards him.

"Mrs. Potts do we-" she tossed a bottle, and he caught it. Inspecting the label, flashing a toothy smile. "Perfect."

"Now you tell Belle we miss her to pieces and we all want her home." She instructed. "And pace yourself with that Bordeaux."

"Thank you!" he caught her in a brisk hug.

"Horse is waiting out the door." She shooed, flicking him away with a towel. "Go on now, you big sod!"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Annd three parter done. But, there's a lot more left! We just need to give our intrepid couple a little time to breathe, right? Kind of? We'll see.

Again, thank you so much for reading this story. And double thanks if you've
interacted/bookmarked/kudo'd in some way. I may not respond to all of your comments, but I read each and every one.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The first thing he saw was Belle's furrowed brow.

The first thing she saw was how he was trying, and failing, to not look so rapturously excited to see her. She knew it so well, that smile. Mouth slightly open, corners of it somewhat lopsided, and his eyes so bright just like the first time she saw him after he had transformed into him. That big, boyish smile of his couldn't be suppressed.

"And what do I owe the pleasure?" She asked, playfully leaning against the door frame. Doing her best to not smile. No easy task. That look on his face was always adorable.

"A certain ruler left." Breathless from running his horse as well as seeing her for the first time in days, he waited to be invited in. The village hummed about its morning business like ants on a hill, the breeze winding through Villeneuve cool and sweet with late summer blossoms. Clearing his throat, he tried to compose himself. Collected, calm, smooth. He could do it.

"Really? Your father?" It was hard to toy with him. The time apart had affected her as well and there he was; tall, striking, and ever so slightly eager. Trying so hard not to be. It made him all the more endearing.

He nodded his head, slowly.

"My father's gone too-"

The blue eyes widened at his sudden good fortune. "Oh?"

Belle nodded her head demurely, looking up through her eyelashes. "To Paris, he's painting a portrait for a noble."

"Hmm." The prince struggled to keep himself composed as her eyes languished up his body. It was torturous when her lower lip rolled into her mouth as if there was some delicacy presented before her.

"He won't be home for a few days at least."

His mouth felt so dry.

"So I shouldn't be inviting men in." She began to slowly close the door, grinning as a brief moment of shock passed over his face.

"Oh, you wicked-"

"I'm sorry, Monsieur. People would talk."

A big hand stopped the door from shutting.

Belle shrieked playfully as he pushed his way in. "Monsieur!"

"They already talk!" Grabbing her and lifting her up, laughing with her Ansel spun his love around. "They say "how did such a beauty end up with him?""
She kissed her prince passionately. Holding his face in her hands, letting out a whimper. His boot swiftly kicked the door shut.

He came up for air and it took a while for his eyes to focus. "Oh, I have missed you so much." Ansell grinned at the sweet mouth that mocked him so, setting her down.

The blue gaze still held so much pain and exhaustion, dark rings rimming them, but they already looked brighter. A playful half-smile was on her lips as she fingered a loose lock of golden hair. Brown eyes dark, burning, passionate. "Prove it."

A wolfish look broke across Ansell's face, followed by a hungry growl. Belle felt hot as she flushed from her head to her shoulders, fingers quickly going to work on his waistcoat. He dipped his head to kiss her, but then pulled back, stopping her hands.

Breathless, Belle stared up at him in confusion. Frustrated they weren't already up the stairs, puzzled as to why he would stop. "What-"

"You sure you don't want to just read?"

Narrowing her eyes, she took him by the wrist and dragged him, ignoring his smug laughter. "You think you're so funny-"

"Well, you started it."

Ansell felt heavy as he awoke. His sleep had been deep, restorative, and the quilt folds had left lines on his skin. It took his eyes a while to open, and he smacked his lips to help his dry mouth.

Belle wasn't next to him.

Confused, the prince pulled himself out of bed, scooping his breeches and shirt off the floor and putting them on before wandering downstairs.

She was in the living area, curled in a chair with a blanket covering up her legs and feet, reading a book. Breathtaking in her simplicity, face twitching every so often as she turned a page.

Taking a step a floorboard creaked, giving him away.

Belle looked up, tickled by how groggy her love was. "You really wore yourself out there, Your Highness."

"How long have I been out?" He yawned, padding over.

"A few hours." Carefully she tucked the ribbon of her book between the pages. "I woke up about an hour and a half ago."

Standing behind the chair he bent over and gave her a quick kiss. Such a simple act felt so good after days apart. "Thank you for letting me sleep."

"You were exhausted," She noted. "That and after I got up you sort of sprawled across the bed and took up the whole thing. It was rather cute." A hand reached around, stroking her cheek, and she leaned into it. Oh, how good it felt to feel such a small action. She had missed being touched.

"Do you have anything to do?"

"Just spend time with you." Taking his hand, she kissed his wrist. Missing his hands, as gentle as
they were.

“I like that answer.” Watching her get up, he cocked his head to the side and caught her by her wrist. “Where are you going? I just got here.”

Smirking, she tugged her arm away but was suddenly stopped by him taking hold of her apron and tugging gently. “I was going to put the kettle on.”

Huffing forcefully, he dropped his shoulders, pulling a little harder.

A brow quirked in amusement. “I’ll be right back.” He refused to let go, a small smile spreading ever wider across his striking face. “So how long do I have you?” playfully leaning back so he had to keep her up, Belle watched his expression sink.

“Until late morning tomorrow.” Ansell sighed, pulling her over to him, Belle’s hands on his arms as she slipped into the spot against his chest. Reaching up, his fingers brushed back a stray lock of brown hair that always seemed to escape her braid. “But I plan to sneak back after that.”

“Oh, you do?” Toying with the corner of his shirt she enjoyed watching his mischievous lips. They twitched, trying to conceal the joy that wanted to break across them.

The prince's eyes sparkled as he fiddled with her skirt. “I feel it's my obligation, as a gentleman, to offer a young lady companionship when she is alone by herself.”

Belle giggled. “Oh really?”

It was so hard to not grin at her. “Oh yes.”

“How genteel of you.” Smoothing her hand across his chest, she enjoyed their little game. Back at home they had so many. The chocolate eyes flickered seductively while she reached down and tugged at the waistband of his breeches. “And you'll be an honorable man I suppose; protecting her virtue.”

“I'm beginning to think my virtue may be the one that needs protecting.” It fell apart into laughter. Kissing, petting, nuzzling. Wanting to remember the moment, wanting it to last forever. The sunshine through the windows, the simplicity of the day. Her sweet, playful face. His handsome, eager smile. Just themselves, no obligations nor monsters lurking about. It was heavenly.

In the end, she was leaning against his chest, facing outwards, arms wrapped around her, a stubbled chin on her shoulder. “What do you want to do?” She whispered.

“Be lazy with you.” He mumbled contently. Belle smelled like summer; wildflowers and sunshine. It was intoxicating after days apart. How was he supposed to go a whole month? “Read, rest, maybe go back upstairs after a while? We never got our day to recuperate in the library after the celebration.”

“Hmm, that sounds perfect.” Feeling a soft kiss on the side of her head, Belle patted an arm. “If you let me go put the kettle on I'll be right back and we can be as lazy as you want.”

“I'll hold you to it.”

"Where is he?!" Cogsworth looked fit to burst a gear as he stormed through the halls. The dining room had been empty, devoid of anyone who should be eating the hearty spread the chef had presented.
Leon stepped out of his apartment, looking around keenly. His lithe Spaniard girl at his side and draped on his arm as an accessory. Carefully, he went down the stairs. Always listening.

The Spaniard opened her mouth, but he gently pressed a finger to her lips, clinging to the walls.

"He hasn't returned?!" The Englishman's voice rose in dread. "It's NIGHT!"

Ansell came padding back into the room, back in his breeches and shirt after a rather long stint without them on. Her bedroom was warm, musky, lit by the flickering candlelight. Small, simple, a far cry from the gilded chambers of home.

Belle turned, in her nightgown and wrapped in a quilt, smiling. "There you are."

"I was feeling peckish." He explained, setting a platter of bread, cheese, honey and summer berries on the nightstand. "And thought it may be wise to subsist on something other than a bottle of wine."

"You opened it." She said as he climbed back into her bed. His back rested against the headboard with a stray foot dangling over. Soon her head was settled on his leg, arm thrown over his lap, the rest of her curled sleepily on the mattress.

He took a moment to stare at her, so peaceful. Slowly he began combing his fingers through the brown locks. "You were thirsty."

She looked up at him. "I asked for tea."

"What do you mean he's not back?!"

"Cogsworth, one can assume by the way he looked he won't turn up until the morning." Lumière noted calmly "The poor fellow was fit to climb zee walls."

"That's not an excuse when there is so much more to do!" He lamented. "So much is expected of that boy now-"

"Let him have his time." Lumière dismissed. "He'll be gone for a month. Away from her for a month! Give them time, give them space."

"He has duties-"

"He is in love, Cogsworth! He has desires." The servant had a knowing smile while a seductive raise of his brow came over his face.

"He still hasn't told her he's leaving for a month!"

Ansell smiled playfully as he tossed a berry into his mouth. "You still drank."

"Because you're a bad influence." She stretched, lazily, enjoying his presence. His fingers playing with her hair, his warmth, his breath.

"Why thank you. Do you think they can add that to my title? Prince Anselme, Future Duke of Bad Influence."

Belle laughed, kissing his knee. "This was a good day."
"I agree. We did very little." Rubbing her back soothingly he thought how thankful for the time he was. The night not only felt well-needed but also precious with the shadow of Versailles looming in the quickly closing distance.

"The variety wasn't anything special-" She picked at his breeches. Seeing as they had been off most of the day she wasn't very fond of them being on.

"Reading, napping, having lots and lots of-"

"But what we did do we did it well." Belle finished her sentence.

"Veerrrrry well." He grinned, content and listening to her let out a tired laugh. "I have to admit, the napping was also nice. I haven't been able to get any rest since you left."

"Same." Closing her eyes, Belle felt his fingers running alongside her back in a soothing motion.

"He needs to talk to her!" Cogsworth squawked.

"It's not that easy." Mrs. Potts shook her head slowly. "That poor boy has been so busy fending his father and brother off he hasn't even thought about telling her. Let alone knowing what he'd say."

"But as nice as this is, and as much as I've appreciated having you all to myself, we should probably talk." Belle's voice became somber as she drew circles on this knee. She could feel him pause in hesitation. "About how you're leaving for a month, even though you don't want to tell me about it."

"Surely you're not too old to remember what that was like? Or are all those gears a bit rusty?"

"I remember my youth, you overgrown candlestick!"

He was quiet, dazed at the topic.

"It's a small village, Ansell. People talk. Especially about the nobles." She reminded him, sitting up. "The prince going to Versailles, going to court? That's quite exciting for a place where the biggest scandal is a habitually loose cow."

Eyes downcast, he pushed the plate of food away.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Belle asked, hurt the information had been through all of the terrible gossiping. A pang sunk her stomach with worry and quickly flooded through her. "You could have at least sent word. And even then, you could have told me when I visited."

"The time they have is precious." Mrs. Potts voice rang clearly, sorrowfully. "Heavens knows how long they have before the court demands he begins his royal duties."

"How do we break that to them?" Lumière's voice peaked sorrowfully. "That the curse is over, but the French Court will be even more difficult?"

"I didn't want to spoil our night." He hedged softly, guiltily.

"It wouldn't have spoiled it. I need to hear these things from you." She pressed in earnest.
"Belle, I didn't want to say anything because I…" Ansell exhaled heavily "I suppose if I told you, then it would be real. It would be really happening." Running his fingers pensively through his hair, he took a steadying breath. It did little to help. "Not to mention I just wanted to come here and be with you and forget the last week or so." Lifting his head, hair cascading into his face, the prince of the province looked at her forlornly. "Belle as much as I don't want to think about it; since we are? It's not just going to court. It's-" suddenly, it felt harder to breathe with the thought, the topic. What he dreaded and wished he didn't have to say the most. "Darling, it's-"

"The fact they're not going to let us marry." She finished. Bitterness seeping into her heart with every word.

"Everyone in this castle is so eager to let those two do whatever they want, whenever it suits them!"

"Cogsworth, they're young and in love." Mrs. Potts tried to give a reasoned explanation. "And the road ahead of them-"

"We need to be realistic my dear Mrs. Potts." He stuffed his hand into his waistcoat, mustache twitching with anxiety. "The court doesn't care about what little time they have or how deep their love is." He shook his head as Lumiere began to open his mouth in protest. "I know I sound cold, and I apologize, but we need to be pragmatic. What they do care about is Belle's lineage. Does no one remember the rules of the court? And is no one concerned about letting them carry on like this?"

Cogsworth sank into a chair in a fit of exhaustion. Taking out his handkerchief out of his coat sleeve he dabbed his face, bits of powder flaking off.

Lumière was clueless, but the housemaid looked away. Her eyes went to the intricate wood floors, the boards laid in perfect geometry.

"You know what I'm talking about." Wagging a finger at her, he sighed.

"Cogsworth, what on Earth are you talking about?" Lumière began.

"I'm talking about this frequent expression of the Prince's virility inevitably causing an added complication." the majordomo watched their faces fall. "You all know his father wouldn't stand for a girl like Belle-"

"You mean a peasant girl," Lumière said defensively.

His eyes were suddenly red. Wet, hot, furious.

Belle swallowed thickly, soldiering on. "The fact that a peasant girl would never be welcome in court, even as your mistress."

"I would never want you to be my mistress." His voice cracked, struggling to look at her.

"I would never agree to that." She corrected. "I'm just saying it because it's the truth. Because it means I'll never be accepted as a princess, much less a kept woman." Sliding her hand into his own, she squeezed it. Her face felt hot, numb. It was the last thing she wanted to think about as they were nestled so comfortably, yet it was necessary to their survival together.

"You've been thinking about this?" His voice was low, crackling with emotion. "You've-"

"I happen to read a lot."
Ansell let out a strained chuckle even though he felt like he was sinking into a morass of despair.

"A girl of the lowest station," Cogsworth put delicately "producing an heir with the prince."

"Well, Cogsworth, that hasn't happened yet now has it." Mrs. Potts huffed, her voice protective towards the pair she loved so dearly.

"With their amorousness, it's only a matter of time." Suddenly his expression shifted. Cogsworth was no longer upset, he was deeply concerned for their mademoiselle. "And his father is a terrible man. A terrible man who has already done terrible things."

"He wants to marry the Master off to the biggest dowry." Lumière agreed, shaking his head slowly. "He always has."

"You father," she chose her words carefully "he strikes me as the type of man who becomes very dangerous when things don't go his way."

"Yes, yes." The blonde head nodded as he whispered, "He's a cruel man."

Unable to look him in the eye, she studied their fingers. Intertwined, so strong when linked together. "This was never going to be a happily ever after for us."

"He'd harm her for far less than an heir." Mrs. Potts dragged her hand across her mouth. "And he'd harm the Master too if he needed to. We're going to have to be careful with them. He'll tear them both to pieces if the Master pushes back."

"This is what I've been trying to say!" Cogsworth agonized.

"Well, you've been saying it terribly while the Duke has been running you ragged," Lumière responded.

"I have duties!"

"Cogsworth we know that." Mrs. Potts reassured. "Which is why we're taking the time to come together now before they shove that poor lad into a carriage and take him away from the only good thing he's ever had."

Bringing their locked fingers up Ansell kissed Belle's. "I wish it had been." her prince muttered sadly, the sorrow back in the front of his blue eyes. "I don't want to go. I don't want to play their stupid games and watch some king put on his shoes and take his rings off every day." His chest heaved and he began to curl his lip in disgust towards it all. "I don't want to hear about marriageable women who would improve our standing. I don't want to be a part of my father's awful legacy. I want to be with you." Ansell squeezed her hand. "I want to give it all up if that means we're together. I truly mean that, Belle. It's nothing without you, without us."

"Do you know when he expects you to marry?" She asked. Hating the question, hating it had to be asked. The thought of him being pushed down the aisle made her ill and her head ache. Everything a dense, sad fog laced with a pulse of anger towards his horrid father. Running a palm up his muscled torso, she splayed her fingers out over his chest. Pressing a gentle kiss to his shoulder. Feeling Ansell relax to her touch, a small amount of the worry leaving his body. Belle wished she could take all of it away. He was so worn down.
"He said we didn't have to discuss for awhile since I need time to readjust." Wrapping an arm around her, Ansell pulled her close.

"Which is why the Master needs to be here." the majordomo pressed. "He needs to be able to placate his father when he's at Versailles while we come up with some kind of plan!"

"Cogsworth," Mrs. Potts shook her head slowly, tiredly. Two months of peace just was not enough. "as practical as that is, we need to let him be unpractical for just a bit. He needs to find his center again, and nothing in the castle can do that."

"Then we have time." Leaning against him, she nuzzled, letting go of his hand and settling in closer. Feeling so uncertain, yet so safe in the small bedroom in Villeneuve. "We'll figure this out. We've been through worse."

"How are you so-"

"Hopeful?"

"I was going to say stubborn but I suppose."

Belle smacked Ansell's arm playfully, gently. Listening to his soft chortle of amusement. "Because I love you so much I'd fight them all off to keep you," She said honestly. "And I know you'd do the same."

Ansell smiled down, kissing her tenderly.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This is posted a bit later than I would have liked, but life gets in the way. We're getting dangerously close to my preferred buffer of pre-written chapters, so the next chapter may be the last before a bit of a break. It's a good one though with a natural break, cross my heart and all that.

Again and again; thank you so much for reading, bookmarking, and giving kudos. You help keep this train running down the tracks. If I don't respond to your comments, I'm sorry! But I do read them and enjoy knowing how I'm doing whether it's good or bad.
Chapter 8

Ansell awoke to a crick in his neck.

Looking down he found Belle against him in peaceful, deep sleep. They were both in the nude, clothes cast aside during a rather soothing round of lovemaking after such a difficult discussion. He took the time to watch her; enjoying the feeling of the weight of her body on the mattress, the warmth of her against his chest, head nuzzled under his, arm thrown over his torso, leg hooked around one of his own. Entangled in him, as if to moor him to the province.

Eventually, he carefully disengaged himself from their cozy little spot. Doing his best not to disturb Belle as he dressed and made his way down the stairs.

Ansell stood there for a long while, looking about the small house as morning crept over the tops of the village in the faint, dusty pink of sunrise. There were no servants already up lighting fires and answering rung bells. No trays of food that could be brought into a perfectly set dining room. All of those uniforms and customs didn't exist in the little house in the little village. Simply a hearth that had burned down to embers and the small stores of food in the kitchen.

This is what she was used to waking up to.

Furrowing his brows, hands rubbing together in determination, Ansell rolled up his sleeves. He had hidden in the kitchen and watched Mrs. Potts enough to know what to do. At least he thought and hoped he did.

Belle came down the stairs. Tying her hair back, smiling at the prince in the kitchen making coffee. As she looked at the bottom level, she began walking much more slowly.

Ansell turned, golden and buttoned in his commoner's clothing. "Good morning, Mademoiselle."

"Good morning, Monsieur." Keenly studying everything as she wandered over to him, she peered into the other room. "Did you get the fire started?"

"I did." He smiled. "Coffee?"

Distractedly she took the cup from him. The house tidier than they had left it before.

"I swept but… I don't think I did a very good job of it." He nudged milk and sugar over to her, observing her reaction.

"Oh, thank you." Taking the time to add the cream to her coffee, she looked up to the basket on the kitchen counter. Her head tilting to the side. "You got the eggs from the chickens?"

"Fed them too, as well as fed and watered the horses. I also brought some firewood and water in." He explained, watching her mind at work.

Belle, realizing, looked down at the bottle of milk. "Wait, where did you get milk?"

"From Monsieur Laurent." He took a deep breath, when her eyes met his he suddenly became
sheepish. "I was going to buy it but then I realized, unfortunately, royalty doesn't carry money which… come to think of it… is rather stupid." He parsed out "So I may have traded a few eggs?"

Squinting, her mouth fell open ever so slightly. Pensive, bemused, silent.

It was killing him.

"Ansell?"

He looked at her expectantly, big-eyed and awaiting approval.

"You got the house started all by yourself." Amazement and pride surged through her. Getting up on the tips of her toes she gave him a kiss.

"Do I get one of those every time I learn something around here?" He asked playfully, sliding a hand around her back.

Belle rolled her eyes at him. "No, because we'd both get too distracted." Watching him pout, she took a sip of her coffee. "Won't work."

"The only thing I didn't start was breakfast." He admitted. "I dare say I'm not quite brave enough for that yet."

"Well, breakfast isn't a very formal affair in this house." She explained. "It's bread, cheese, ham, and whatever fruit we can get." Moving away from the prince, she went about getting all of the food together. "Occasionally, if we're feeling daring, there's an omelet."

"The former sounds fine." Ansell watched her get out a stool. Reaching over he grabbed the package on the shelf that was too high for his love.

"Thank you."

"I'm sorry if this sounds tone deaf and aristocratic, but what do you and your father cook?" He asked with a sip, watching her carefully slice a baguette.

There was a light laugh, a shaking of her head as she stopped what she was doing for a moment. "Nothing, if we can help it." Seeing Ansell's puzzled brow she kept slicing. "Papa is a terrible cook and he taught me. So this kitchen doesn't get much use with the two of us." Carefully she laid the slices out on a wooden board. "We have a garden and eat a lot of fresh vegetables and fruits in the summer, and I barter with some of the housewives. I'll trade them some of the food we've grown or I'll fix something in their house and they cook a meal for us or can some preserves. That way we have something hot or something that lasts through the winter."

"Hm. You know, that's pretty clever." His eyes shifted to the side to catch a glimpse of her. Setting his cup down he slid behind her and snaked a hand around her waist, pressing a kiss to the back of her head. "Not that I would expect any less from you."

"Clever is how we've lasted this long." Closing her eyes, setting the knife down, she patted the hand on her flat belly. There were a smattering of kisses on the side of her neck, and she reached behind her to stroke his face. "Ansell-"

"Hm?" He grinned into her neck.

"Remember what I said about getting too distracted?" She chuckled, trying her hardest to not get swept up in his moment.
"Breakfast, right." Reluctantly letting go, he took a step back. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, just hold that thought."

He grinned at the prospect of returning to that thought as he watched her unwrap the cheese. "So is this lack of culinary skill why Mrs. Potts is always sending you over food?" Taking the bread he wrapped it and put it back where she had taken it out.

Belle nodded her head, still trying to recover from his detour. "She's scared we'll starve to death between the two of us. But really, we're alright. We've always managed." She watched him help with breakfast, going and getting the fruits he had discovered the night before. Musing over his willingness to learn more about her way of life and not just steal her away into luxury, she blushed a bit. He was trying, truly. "I must say, your surprise visit was very welcome."

"I'm glad I wasn't the only one with that the feeling." He rumbled happily as he used a ladle of water to wash a handful of strawberries covered in a thin film of dirt and dust. "Though your bed-".

"My bed?" She quirked a brow.

"It's very… slender."

"It's not made with suitors in mind." Setting her knife down she watched him put the fruit in a bowl, furrowing his brows, scowling playfully.

"Well that's ridiculous," he scoffed, turning to her, watching her walk over. "Why would anyone want a bed they couldn't-"

She shut him up with a kiss. It was so hard not to kiss him, not after all of the petting he had just teased her with.

His eyes glazed over for a moment. "And also?" He caught his breath, a loose, dreamy smile threatening to come across his mouth. "It's a very short bed. Clearly made for a slight young lady who hates doing laundry."

Trying so very hard to keep a straight face and not smile at him. "Sounds like it's the right size then."

"My feet were hanging off the end." An overdramatic, joyful, impish lament. "Do you have any more chores I can help with? Things on high shelves? I'm pretty good at that."

"I'm sure I can put you to work somewhere." Grabbing the fingers, she kissed them.

"Mademoiselle, your wish is my command."

"My wish is to eat." She pressed, smiling mischievously. "Because I'm famished."

"Thank you, Monsieur." Belle smiled as she took the loaf of bread from the baker, paying him with two coins.

Ansell tipped his cap, pulling it down over his sharp eyes. He rather gamely carried their basket of goods, which was growing by the minute. It had started with some eggs and produce from the garden Belle had used to barter for ripe summer fruits and a pot of honey. She sold cabbages to a woman, giving her the coins to pay for the bread. Gradually, more things had been added to the haul. A small bag of salt, preserves that were owed from a trade, and other groceries.

"Your hair down and your stubble really do make you invisible," Belle said as she tucked the bread
into the basket, grabbing a handful of grapes they had just bought and snacking idly. Mulling over how nice the stubble looked.

"I rather like being invisible." He admitted, following her through the throngs of people in the market. Ducking as a chicken burst in front of him, determined to outrun a clumsy butcher.

"So what are you doing at the castle today?"

Groaning, he rolled his eyes. "Cogsworth has been schooling me ever since my father returned."

Belle shook her head, mildly amused by how this prince could be so petulant.

"He's so boring. He goes on and on and on." Using his free hand he mimicked a mouth endlessly chattering.

"So what are you learning?" Taking his arm, she tugged him out of the way of a fish monger throwing a catch from a cart into a stall.

Ansell shrugged, lip curling. "Things?"

Belle looked at him, taken back, slowing her pace. "You do know things have happened since…" the brown eyes shifted around the market cautiously to make sure there weren't curious ears nearby. "You had your accident."

"Well, yes-but-"

"We just lost a war, a very big one, with England."

"Wait, we did?"

Belle hit him in the shoulder disbelief, glaring at him rebukingly.

"Belle, he's a terrible teacher." the prince whined. "And my father is a terrible teacher too. He took over for a spell and it was mostly court politics. Ugh, boot kissing some king. Some Louis." The words were grumbled out in annoyance. "I can't even remember what number we're on, they're all named the same thing."

"You know, learning all of this sounds fascinating to me." She stopped, petting one of the vendor's donkeys.

"Really?"

"You're learning about the world from the people are are important enough to have a say in it." She explained, eager towards the prospect of education. "That's amazing."

"It's just a class."

"I've never been in a class."

Taken aback, he cocked his head to the side. "Really? But you're so-"

"Self-taught." She explained, a touch of wistfulness in her voice. "My father taught me in the beginning, but I've always tried to find books on things that have interested me so I could keep learning." Belle glanced over her shoulder to the school. How desperately she had wanted to go when they had arrived in Villeneuve. How crushed she had been when Maurice had gotten into a shouting match with the headmaster about how his daughter was forbidden to learn in school. "There
aren't many options here, or any, really. Luckily, I have a friend who's always lent me books. And Papa has always tried to buy me ones when he can find them used."

Catching her line of sight, he looked at the school and through the windows. All boys reciting their readers, a gloomy headmaster slapping a desk to straighten up an insolent student. "Oh." A wave of guilt overcame him. He had taken his entire education for granted while Belle, clearly smarter than him he felt, craved to learn and had been denied. Good god, he probably sounded like such an entitled ass. Ansell looked out over the market thoughtfully. "Then why don't you come and listen?"

Belle gazed up at him, her hands under the donkey's cheeks, the creature happily nuzzling her.

"Well, you could learn with me in class and see how agonizing Cogsworth makes all of it." He suggested. "Then we can slowly die of boredom together. Mrs. Potts can find our skeletons hunched over the table afterward."

She laughed, rolling her eyes at him. "I thought I was in exile while your family's still around?" They started walking again and Belle waved to her friend who she was teaching to read. Ignoring the headmaster who had come out of his small kingdom and scowled down at her from his steps.

The sharp blue eyes narrowed at the headmaster. "Let's just say my brother and I have come to an understanding."

She stared at him suspiciously.

"What?" He asked cagily.

Belle shrugged, knowing it would be discussed later. "If I'm invited to sit in on these sessions, I'd love to." She replied. "I'd also love to see all of my friends. And this time actually see them and not just rush in to save you with a sword."

He dismissed her teasing, though she always looked so lovely doing it. "They miss you terribly. I've been told *multiple* times to let you know the castle isn't the same when you're gone."

"That's very sweet." A rising argument down the path made them turn. Two men shoving one another.

"The price is too high!" The more portly one said.

"If you want a better price, go and hunt yourself!" The young man shoved.

Ansell arched a brow, moving forward out of instinct. Belle held a hand out, blocking him to keep him from getting involved and exposing himself.

"The game prices are just so high now that Gaston is gone." A woman clucked to another, adjusting the toddler on her hip. "Such a good hunter that one was."

"No one else was so successful." The other shook her head. "And decorated! A soldier!"

"And what do we have now? A *prince*?"

Belle's eyes dropped. Gently, she took his wrist, pulling him through the market. "Come on, we don't need to hear this."

"A prince who fell in love with that artist's daughter. The *odd one*. What a scandal! A commoner and a prince! I hear his father."
Ansell snorted air out his nose, rolling his shoulders to shake it off. Turning his attention to Belle, he saw how her spirits dropped. Another dig. Another reminder she was out of place. The odd girl. "Why did we throw a party and invite all of them again?" he muttered broodingly.

"Because the people upset are a loud minority." She reassured. "But they're very loud." Taking a deep breath, Belle steadied herself and tried to lighten the mood once more. "That's just the regular gossip. You should hear the outlandish ones."

"Oh really?"

"Apparently I'm a werewolf."

Ansell laughed loudly, deeply. "You?"

"I am." She laughed, playfully bumping him with her hip as she stole more grapes.

"Well, where were you, all big and hairy when I was big and hairy?" He said dryly. "I really could have used the company. Some creature of the night you are."

"I'm sorry I'm such a disappointing werewolf." Belle quipped.

"Suppose I can live with you." The prince sighed mischievously. Walking in stride with her he nudged her with his hand, catching her attention. "You know, we should just run away together."

The announcement was met with a curious smile. "And where would we go?"

"Anywhere we desire." He offered. "We can do whatever we want now that I don't quite literally stand out in a crowd. The world our oyster."

"Do you think the book could assist in said running away?" She mused.

"Of course it can! We could go wherever we want. The wilds of Africa, London, perhaps *fair Verona*?" He raised a tantalizing brow. "I hear there are mermaids in Denmark and a queen with the magic of ice in Norway. Or the great sultans and palaces of the Arabia! Monkeys and panthers and tigers in the jungles of India?" Blue eyes sparkling with adventure.

She looked at him skeptically. "Mermaids?"

"I was a beast who was enchanted by a magical curse and yet you're having problems with mermaids?" He gawked.

"Well, if you put it *that* way."

Despite the fact that she was still not quite sold on the idea of mermaids, Ansell pressed on. "But, Belle, no matter where we go? We can see the world and escape terrible people and terrible sentiments."

"Escape small-minded people." She added, the idea sounding better and better.

"Tradition and obligation."

"Whispering and gossip."

Ansell unfurled his tongue out of his mouth in disgust. "Dowries."

A silent realization came over Belle, making her slow her pace. Furrowing her brows, nodding her
head thoughtfully, she drew in a breath before releasing the idea into the world. "Alright, realistically, where would we go?"

His boots slowed as it hit him what she was proposing. Their eyes met, and all of the market fell silent on their ears.

"Ansell, I'm serious." Belle stopped, turning to face him. "Instead of jumping around on holiday... If we run away-" her hand rested itself on his arm. So sincere and urgent. "If we escape? Where would we go?"

His mouth opened, then shut. Brows pressing down, jaw tightening, the toe of his boot kicking down into the dirt. "I suppose... that's... something we should really think of."

"But you would?" It was hard not to have a twinge of doubt in her chest. That perhaps it was too much to ask, to give it all up.

His breath shuddered as a smile broke out across his face. "Of course, Darling." Turning, taking her hand with his free one, Ansell's eyes were soft and brimming with hope and love. "If this is the best way for us, without an entire class system trying to keep us apart? Then so be it." He so desperately wanted to kiss her. To drop the basket and hold her tight in reassurance. "We'll figure something out, I know we can."

She beamed, her heart settling with his comforting declaration. "I believe we should use the month you're away to both think it over." She squinted thoughtfully up at him. Those gears he knew so well turning cleverly. "Come up with some ideas? Then meet back up and form a plan."

Looking down at the basket of goods he paused pensively, hesitating to ask. "I suppose I wouldn't be a prince in any of these scenarios?"

Her frown was concerned yet determined. "I don't think so."

"Hm." He grunted. Ruminating over the prospect, gently nudging her to keep walking forward. "Sounds like I need to learn a few things other than chopping wood, making coffee, and carrying a basket around the market."

Everything suddenly felt a bit brighter. A trickling beam of sunny hope after their ominous talk from the night before. Belle gazed up at him, the determination beginning to take over. "Well, you're already doing pretty well around the house. We can start with some more intermediate lessons when you come back home. Perhaps the staff can help with your education."

Ansell stopped, eyes widening slightly in realization.

Belle stopped with him, running a hand down his arm. "What is it?"

He smiled. "What are your doing tonight?"

"Whatever you're doing tonight? I thought there was something involving our virtues."

"Wouldn't mind staying at the castle for the night? Having a later dinner?"

Belle stared at her prince.

He shifted uncomfortably. "What?"

A brow drew suspiciously. "What are you planning?"
"What? Nothing." he took a step to the side to avoid a woman with half a dozen screaming children. She tilted her head, an amused smile pulling on her lips. "I love you so much but you're the worst liar."

"Can't I just surprise you?" He asked, playfully frustrated.

"Alright." Belle conceded, giving his coat sleeve a tug to get him to move along once more. Pausing she eyed a vendor. "Actually, I think you can learn something new right now."

Interested, he followed her trail as she took off to a seller. Talking to a man who had large burlap sacks surrounding his stall, he watched her drop some coins into his palm.

"New lesson-" Belle took the basket from him. "Carrying the things I can't."

"Here you go, son." The man tossed one of the sacks at Ansell, and upon catching it he nearly collapsed to the ground.

"What is this?" He grunted, struggling to get a grip on the bag.

"Feed for the horses." She explained. "I always have to bring Philippe and the cart. But he's with Papa."

"Why-" huffing, he managed to throw it over his shoulder. "Why don't we just... have Cogsworth send what you need over?" They began to walk back towards the house, the prince trying not to stagger. "You wouldn't have to spend money."

"Because if we're talking seriously about you no longer holding a title, shouldn't you practice having to actually buy and barter for things?"

He looked down at her. So practical, keen, sunkissed from summer. "You do make an excellent point." Conceding, he studied what they had bought in the basket. "I should probably start earning and saving some money that isn't a royal pension."

"I think that'll come with you finding something to do besides being royal." She reassured.

"Belle!"

Turning, they saw Gustave coming up the street, waving enthusiastically. Belle smiled.

Gustave looked over the handsome gentleman next to Belle and beamed. "Oh, Pr-"

Their eyes widened, the couple gesturing to him to not say it.

"Praaaaal." Gustave stalled awkwardly. "Heeeeeeey Paaaaaal." Gently punching Belle's shoulder, he gave the fakest smile she had seen. "How ya doin'... Pal." Glancing at the prince, then at Belle, he leaned in. Whispering. "Sorry, why are we hiding?"

"We just want a quiet morning?" Belle supplied.

"Sometimes being royal isn't as fun as it looks." The prince adjusted his hat, shifting the weight of the sack of feed.

"Okay." Gustave paused, in thought. "So what do I call you?"
"Ansell."

"Actually I can see that. You look like an Ansell." Gesturing to the prince's body, it was met with a smile.

"Well thank you." Ansell brightened.

"Your other name is so formal and sooo... long."

Belle glanced between the two men. "Actually, Ansell, you can call him by his real name, Gustave."

"Really?" he furrowed his brows, noble face twisting up. "Why on earth were we calling you Le Fou? That's a dreadfully mean name."

"It's a long story," Gustave replied. "But yes, I do prefer Gustave."

"And unless it's formal, I prefer Ansell."

"Good to know. So how are you two?" He asked, folding his arms. "Aren't you going away?"

"For awhile." The noble shoulders tensed. "We're just trying to spend some time together before I have to leave."

"I'm sorry to hear that." He said sincerely. "I'll let you guys enjoy your day. But Belle? If you ever just want someone to talk to and keep you company?"

"Thank you. I'll certainly take you up on that offer." She smiled warmly. "How's Stephane?"

"Good." He brightened. "He's busy at his father's candle shop."

"I'm glad you two are well. Say hi for me."

"Will do. And I hope you two have a nice day." Before he parted ways, their friend paused. Furrowing his brows thoughtfully. "You ever thought of growing a beard?" He stroked his chin to emphasize his words. "I think it would really suit you."

Ansell didn't even have to look at Belle to know she was staring up at him smugly. "It's been suggested."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I feel like this is a good place to take a bit of a break. Not everything's rainbows and sunshine for our intrepid couple, but not everything's completely, dreadfully terrible. Also, plots moving forward. Exciting times.

The break is less because I have no idea where this is going (there is most definitely an ending written), and more because we're getting perilously close to my buffer of pre-written, pre-edited chapters. There are 3, there needs to be more at the clip we're going here. But don't fret, there are notes and outlines and bits and pieces that just need to be connected by other bits and pieces. This shouldn't be too long of a break. I hope everyone sticks around for the rest of the ride. There will be drama! And adventures in the great wide somewhere! And magic! And romance! And other stuff I can't spoil but I
promise it's fun. Like, 70% fun. We need the other 30% to keep this thing moving.

Once more with feeling; thank you so much for reading, bookmarking, kudo-ing, and commenting. I truly enjoy seeing so many people interacting with the story, and I hope I can keep you entertained through the very end.
They rode up to the castle, giving the stable master the horses before slipping in through the kitchen door to avoid the brightly colored men and their muskets adorned with the Duke's crest out front.

Ansell stopped in the servant's corridor, looking at her fondly, reluctantly, in the dim light. Taking the much smaller hands and squeezing them.

"You have to go." She coaxed, watching the weariness creep back around the edges of his eyes.

"I do." He sighed. "But, remember, the most boring class you'll ever take is after lunch in my office and you're now a pupil."

It was hard to smile at his joke when his misery was slowly returning in front of her. "You have an bureau?"

"Apparent."

She chuckled. "That sounds very plausible."

He eased himself at the reassurance. Belle home again, where she needed to be.

She shooed him out the door. Watching him change, his presence, his posture, his eyes, as he re-entered a world he was fighting. It worried her, seeing him become so on edge. So worn after just nine days of being with his family.

Hearing Cogsworth chastising Ansell up the stairs about a fitting appointment that was supposed to be going on at that very minute, she heard him snap back. An angry response. It hurt. Maneuvering her way through the obstacle course that was the kitchen in full swing, she wove through the castle. It was remarkably chillier than she had last left it. Devoid of the Madame and Maestro working on a new piece of music, or the castle children shrieking down the halls in play or begging for a story.
The air felt stale, the drapes too stiff, it didn't feel like home. Clearly, the Duke needed to be kept at Versailles if it was what he had left in his wake.

She saw Leon, who paused, looked immensely nervous at her presence, and briskly walked the other way. Pursing her lips, she watched him disappear into a salon. His voice ordering a drink.

"Belle!" Madame took her by surprise with an embrace so quick and warm she didn't have time to prepare nor catch a breath. "Oh, our dear Belle." She sang. "Our home hasn't been the same."

"I've missed you all too." She hugged back, being released to go right into Cadenza's arms.

"It's like the light has gone with you, my dear." He told her fondly, cupping her cheek with a fatherly palm. "The music not as sweet nor as sincere."

"I miss your songs." The pang of her family being so far away seeped into her stomach. Her father was the only other person outside of this new kin who could make her feel like she was a perfect fit. "Maestro, did you get new teeth?"

"Thank you for noticing! The finest from Paris." He grinned proudly.

"You look fetching." Belle kissed his cheek. "I can't wait to hear what you've been working on."

"You must! Noel is just around the corner, you know."

"Belle!" If her presence had been a secret, it no longer was as Chip came barreling at her at full speed, Froufrou on his heels.

Moving away from the Maestro, she knelt and caught him. Squeezing him tightly, wanting another day with him. "Did you miss me?"

"Everyone misses you!" He lamented rather dramatically, grimacing when she kissed the top of his head. "Can you and me and the master go riding soon? That was so much fun."

Little Chip, sitting in front of her in the saddle, Ansell watching with his big smile. She snickered at the thought of the two ganging up on her and Ansell inevitably tossing her into the lake. "I'd love to. I still owe you some tickling." Jabbing her fingers into his sides, he yelped.

Squirming away, the boy laughed with her.

"Oh, our girl's home!" Mrs. Potts cried, gathering her up like a mother hen with a chick. "Oh, we've missed you, Love. You're our little light you are."

"Lumiere! Cogsworth!" She called out. "Those two will be pleased as punch to see you." Cupping the girl's cheek, the Englishwoman kissed her forehead and let go, holding her out at arm's length. "Let me give you a good look over. You're well?"

"Fine, Mrs. Potts." She responded in bemusement to the inspection. "Very well, just ready to be home."

"You look skinnier, we'll have to see to that."

Belle gave a tense smile, not arguing with her friend. "I think I'm the same, but I do miss chef's cooking."
"There she is!"

She turned, beaming. "Lumiere!"

"Beautiful as ever, Mademoiselle!" He caught her in an embrace. "Are you staying for awhile? Without you, the Master is sooo-

"Petulant." Cogsworth huffed as he slowly came over, adjusting his monocle. "Stubborn, fussy, immature, puerile, recalcitrant, pigheaded, take your pick."

"If he still had fur that would be called a normal Friday." She told the majordomo, going over to greet him, pulling him in her arms. He was so stuffy, never one to initiate any type of informal contact.

"He's been sooo grumpy." Chip piped, clinging to his mother's skirts.

"My dear, I'm so sorry I didn't say goodbye," Cogsworth told her sadly.

"Don't be, you've been busy with running the house in all this chaos." Patting his shoulder, she let go.

"ABSOLUTELY NOT." Ansell's voice boomed from upstairs.

Cogsworth groaned. "Fighting his fitting no doubt. I must go and see how he's treating Chapeau and the tailor." He headed up the stairs.

"Was he so angry when he came to you yesterday?" Everyone dispersed as Mrs. Potts gestured Belle to follow her.

"No, no he's been a little worn but he was eager, silly, sweet, slightly grouchy, very attentive, very Ansell." Entering a parlor, she watched Mrs. Potts correct a new maid with cleaning a fireplace. "He seemed a little… well like he was trying to hide how miserable he's been?"

"That he has." The head of the household shook her head, going over and adjusting a vase.

"Has he been acting more and more like his old self?" Belle asked cautiously.

"That poor boy has tried his hardest." Her voice was saddened at the thought. "He's been hiding when he can. But his father has tried his damnedest to get him back to his old ways and be a proper heir. And his brother's always been the instigator." Shaking her head, she picked a piece of lace from a sample a maid had brought out to place on a table. "His temper has flared. But we've been keeping an eye on him. Seems more remorseful when he slips."

Not caring to stand around while the others worked, Belle took off her jacket and grabbed a bucket of soap to begin washing a window.

"Oh Dearie, leave that-"

"I'm not going to just watch you work and not help." She told her friend. "Outside of wanting to make him miserable, his father and brother?"

"They've been nightmares." Mrs. Potts grumbled. "The Duke had been running poor Cogsworth into the ground and ordering us all to "whip into shape" as if we don't work hard enough." She directed a girl to bring in a fresh pitcher of wine. "What he wants is for us to be more formal, more servant-like. And that viscount is just a bloody drunk. I swear we've gone through more wine than we did at the
party, the lush."

Belle wrung out her sudsy cloth. "Ansell said something about their mother being his father's favorite mistress?"

"The Duke is an admirer of very young, very beautiful women." The Englishwoman explained, fussing over a table. "Their mother is a noblesse, she was with the Duke until he tired of her right before the curse. The Duchess, bless her, was well aware of the maîtresse-en-titre, and she tolerated it because it meant she didn't have to see him too often." Mrs. Potts sighed. "Their marriage was wholly political, and this castle was her sanctuary. She hired us all on personally not six months before she had the prince." Her voice was fond, bittersweet, dwelling on the golden days of the past. The memories turning cold, she drew a deep breath. "As those boys aged the Duke pulled strings to have Leon become a viscount but had to keep Francis as a bâtard. Last I heard Francis was set to marry some Austrian. Leon's been married for years but his wife and children are the last subjects he'd ever care to talk about." She explained. "And honestly there's probably at least a dozen more children by the Duke floating around. He was never faithful to the Noblesse or the Duchess. Not that that's frowned upon."

"Ansell's childhood sounds… complicated." Belle said tactfully. No wonder Mrs. Potts had said he had been twisted up. It sounded like he had been set up for failure from the start. Unless his mother had lived, he was always going to be a conceited, greedy, philandering ass.

"He was raised with his brothers. They're real prizes, always have been what with their father playing favorites." She looked up at Belle, signaling the others to leave and shut the doors.

Belle slowed her washing as the door clicked shut, turning to the older woman.

"I wanted to ask some things a bit more delicate. Possibly out of turn, and I apologize but I worry about you two, so new to each other." Mrs. Potts dropped into hushed tones. "Are you concerned about the Master pursuing other women while at court? Do you feel bad about that prospect?"

"Honestly, I don't know how I feel about that." She sighed, wiping a window dry. "I know it's encouraged, and I know before the curse he was quite the heartbreaker. But he professes I'm the only one for him now. At the same time, I'm not dense." Her face was strained as she wrung the cloth out of nerves. "I'm very aware there's not much variety between here and the village."

Mrs. Potts watched the young woman, ever practical. "Come on, let's take a break." She said, finding a chair.

Belle followed suit. "Mrs. Potts, I really, truly don't know. I wish he wouldn't, but I'm familiar with what the expectations and temptations are at court." She looked down at her hands, wet with small trails of soap bubbles clinging to her skin. "If he does, I'll find out whether he wants me to or not. He's the worst liar I've ever met."

The housemaid chuckled. "He's never had to lie. Bein' the prince, he's always been able to say what he wants and what's on his mind. When he was a loveless thing, it was terrible."

"It's rather endearing when he does try to." She smiled absently, drawn away from the heavy conversation for just a moment. "He's currently keeping a secret and it's absolutely torturous for him."

"He's such a big sweet thing with you." Mrs. Potts noted.

"But he needs to be that way even when I'm not around." she looked up towards the west wing.
"Since we're on this rather... delicate subject." She began carefully, noting the caution in the brown eyes staring back at her. "You and the master have been very passionate since... well... since not too longer after the curse broke. Very intimately passionate." She watched Belle began to look as if she had eaten a bad batch of seafood.

"Oh, Mrs. Potts' please-" Belle winced.

"Dearie, you two haven't been able to keep your-"

There was a knock at the door and the Madame peered in. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"No, no, not at all," Belle nearly leaped at the opportunity to escape the conversation. "We were just..." She shrugged her shoulders as she pushed herself out of the chair. "Talking about... things we're no longer talking about. I suspect you're looking for me?"

Mrs. Potts covered her eyes with a palm as Belle escaped.

Madame De Gardenrobe opened up the doors to Belle's old bedroom. It had been awhile since she had actually slept in the room but had been used as a storage of sorts. Dresses she didn't wear every day, jewelry from the Duchess's collection she used from the to time, and other parts of her life that didn't fit so neatly into the small space she preferred her things to occupy in the west wing.

Her eyes widened at the selection of dresses on the bed. All different colors, weights, and varieties suited for various formal occasions.

Plumette came over, smiling. "We ordered quite a few things for you when we thought you would be with us every day."

"For balls, for teas, riding, portraits, garden parties, formal, evening formal, semi-formal, casual, village casual, everything taken into consideration." The Madame recited breathlessly. "Your preferences of course." It had been so hard to find ball gowns without corsets, but it had been well established that their Belle could not stand anything so constricting. Nor shoes too high. The girl could be dancing one minute and horseback riding the next, it was something they as staff trained to take care of nobility were still getting used to. "We had your measurements on hand so it should all fit perfectly. And anything you wish to take home is yours of course."

"And I can assist with any fittings." The lady's maid nodded.

Belle approached the dresses, immediately gravitating to those that were of the same design as what she preferred to wear every day. Simple, practical, sturdy, a splash of color and patterns. Running her fingers over the fabric of a green one, she studied how the skirt didn't have pockets and immediately planned to alter it. Smiling in amusement that there were several types of bloomers and stockings for summer and winter as well as an assortment of matching ribbons for her hair and rough, sturdy boots and a slightly nicer pair for when she wasn't running around the woods. Her smile widened as her fingers ran across the cotton weave of a new apron.

"I might have made that special." Plumette winked.

"Thank you, mine is getting a bit tattered at the edges." worrying at an apron string, she smiled. "All of this is perfect, you two. Thank you so much, this took a lot of consideration. I know I'm not the easiest to dress."

"We just want you to be comfortable." the Madame smiled, pleased their Belle was happy with the wardrobe. "But the master told me you needed to choose something for tonight."
Belle arched a pensive brow. "Did he now?"

The Madame laughed at the girl's suspicions. She could see the clever mind working overtime, trying to piece together what was planned. "He said to wear something warm. Stockings and boots, nice enough for an outing but not too formal."

"That prince." She rolled her eyes, walking over to dresses of more heavier fabrics. "Alright, I suppose these then."

"COGSWORTH I WILL NOT-" He boomed from the other side of the castle.

Letting go of the dress, Belle scowled, looking to the Madame. "How long has he been screaming?" She asked curtly, not trying to be short with her unable to keep her frustrations in check.

"He lasted several days." Gardenrobe put delicately. "It was rather valiant."

She heard another petulant roar and pursed her lips, weighing her options before fearlessly storming out. "I'll be back, I promise."

"Master"

"Master-"

"Cogsworth I swear if you try to get me to wear those awful rings-"

"Fine, fine. No jewelry."

Belle cautiously walked through the door and into the royal chambers. She found him standing on a small platform, a garishly dressed tailor pushing and pinning him, constantly correcting a sullen slouch. Draped in bright silks and embroidery far more lurid than what he wore for the celebration, she watched him sympathetically. The royal suits she loved to see him in were downright tame compared to what was the desired, constricting fashion of Versailles. Nearby was a Parisian woman holding and gingerly brushing a tall, white wig cascading in curls, cooing over how much new makeup had arrived to powder his face with.

"This is awful." Ansell spat. Childish, scowling.

"Sir, this is what the French Court expects." Cogsworth huffed, fiddling anxiously with the handle of this cane. He hated having to deal with the prince when he was so testy, it rarely ended well.

"This feels too tight." He told the tailor as if he still had fangs.

"Prince Anselme, this is what's en vogue." Finding it harder and harder to work with the young man's temper, the tailor paused for a moment to let the young man breathe.

Shifting his weight Chapeau adjusted his cuffs. Wisely, he kept quiet, well aware Cogsworth was prone to riling the prince up, and if he allowed it to happen he could step in and work on calming him down.

Belle eyed the shoes resting nearby, glittering gold and with too high a heel for him to manage. She clung to the wall, watching Ansell carefully.

"Well, it feels too tight. I look like a parrot." Pawing at the cravat to loosen it, Ansell bared his teeth in a way that reminded her of his hairier days. "Like an exceptionally stupid parrot."
"My Prince, the fur cape will bring it all together." The woman with the wig sung cheerily. "You will look so grand for the portrait your father has commissioned."

"Ugh." He stretched his shoulders, looking like he would rather be at the business end of a musket.

"You're rather fearless, Ma Cherie." Lumiere whispered as he slid in and clung to the wall with her near some tapestries.

"His growling didn't scare me when he was seven feet tall and it certainly doesn't scare me now." She whispered back.

"There are days when I think he misses having a tail to lash back and forth like an angry cat."

Belle couldn't help but giggle.

Hearing the familiar sound, Ansell's head perked up and he scanned the room. As soon as the blue eyes stopping on a familiar dress everyone could see an immediate change in him. A relaxing of his muscles, a more slow breath, the lines of agitation beginning to slowly slacken from his face.

She had been found. "You know, I seem to recall you loving all of this." She mused, walking over, observing his transformation. "I heard you were quite the popular peacock."

"It's different now." He grumbled. "This is all- it's just not what I've grown accustomed to."

"Barefoot and shirtless in a cape?" She quirked a brow. Unamused at his brooding.

"I'm sorry it wasn't high fashion but it was practical, thank you very much."

"Mon dieu." The majordomo was at a loss. This bullheaded, ruffian of a prince. He didn't know what to do with him.

"And these shoes." Ansell sneered with a curling lip. "They're dreadful. I can't feel anything and I keep tripping."

"You did fine at the celebration" she folded her arms, watching him. "And you looked quite dashing."

"We practiced for a week to get me used to those damn things." He lamented. "Everyone takes shoes for granted! They're hard when you haven't worn them for ages." Letting out a huff, he swatted at a hand trying to adjust the fitting of a shoulder. "And I don't mind dressing up for you." Shooing the tailor away in frustration he hopped down and padded over to Belle. "LEAVE." The prince meanly ordered his father's staff. As soon as the door shut with a click he stepped down. Eyes softer, more patient. He tilted his chin down, suddenly looking much sweeter and boyishly unsure. The Ansell she had just spent the morning with had returned. "I like the way you look at me."

"You're handsome no matter what you wear." She ran a hand up his chest, toying with golden buttons. He moved in for a kiss, hands ready to take her. She stepped back, pushing his chest away, knocking the big hands away from her waist. "But you need to stop it right now."

Ansell's face dropped in shock. He furrowed his brows, opened his mouth, closed it, and looked utterly unsure of what he had done to get such a smack on the nose.

"Just because you're miserable doesn't mean you get to abuse your staff-"

"I'm not abusive." He recoiled ever so slightly to the accusation, wounded by her words.
"Screaming at Cogsworth or anyone else on staff is absolutely abusive," she said firmly. "Don't you dare get back into your bad habits."

"I'm trying!" Ansell barked.

"Try harder!" Belle matched his volume. "Control your temper and don't take it out on everyone!"

He tilted his chin down guiltily yet still looked righteously stubborn.

"This is not the man I love." She warned. "He gets frustrated but he doesn't hurt his family. And he's impatient but he tries to work through his issues."

"I don't have anyone to work them through with." He hedged.

"Ansell, that's a lie."

"NO IT'S NOT!" His chest heaved, fear in his eyes. "You're not here! You haven't been here!"

"I won't always be here! Or there! Or always a horse ride away!" She gestured to the door. Was this what they were sending away? This ball of nerves and insecurity, worn down after just over a week of seeing his family? "You have Lumiere, and Mrs. Potts and Cogsworth and so many people in this home who can help and want to help you just as well as I can if not better!"

Stewing, he turned away, snorting air out through his nose like an angry bull.

Lumiere, Chapeau, and Cogsworth exchanged tense glances.

"Ansell, it doesn't always have to be me. And I don't want you to slip away." Fear and anger twisted her stomach in knots. Belle loved him the world over, however, as he stood before her she couldn't see Ansell being gone for a month and returning to her intact. "But you can't just explode at every little turn because I'm not here and it suits your fraying nerves!"

"Belle, I don't want to do this!" He snapped.

"I don't want to do a lot of things but did you see me yelling because your awful family being here meant I had to leave?!"

"It's not the same! That was JUST a week!"

"Don't you dare-"

"A month! You all expect me to be away for a month! To play this part I'm not!" He roared desperately. "He put me through all these damned classes like he was taking me into a show ring! Like some, some STALLION he's looking to trot out to BREED to the highest dowry! Do you know how that FEELS?" Snarling, circling around a table he slammed his fist down. "EVERYONE KEEPS TRYING TO CONTROL AND CORRECT ME. WHAT TO DO, WHAT TO SAY, WHEN TO BOW, WHAT TO WEAR-"

"Yelling doesn't give you any control!"

"IT DOES WHEN YOU'RE THE PRINCE AND THEY'RE ALL BENEATH YOU!" Whirling around to face her he stopped, realizing what he had said.

Belle paused, tilting her head shrewdly. "Oh, so that's how you've gotten away with this for so long?!" She stepped toward him, her face severe. "Well, it certainly doesn't give you any control over me!"
Ansell's face slackened. "Belle-

"I don't care if you have some grand surprise for tonight and I don't care if you're expecting I warm your bed afterward just because you're my prince!" She threatened.

Cogsworth's face turned bright red as Chapeau came over and handed him a fresh handkerchief.

"Just because I was happy to see you last night and happy to wake up to you this morning doesn't mean I won't leave you right at this moment. Or any other time you decided your royal blood gives you carte blanche to be an impetuous terror." Face hot with anger, Belle stood unflinchingly right in front of him. "I wouldn't stand for it when you had claws and I certainly won't give you a pass now."

Turning his head, he shamefully didn't want to make eye contact with her. "I apologize, I misspoke."

"You spoke your truth, Ansell. And this is mine." She pressed firmly. "I'm sorry you're feeling like everyone's trying to control you, but I won't put up with you becoming abusive again."

He looked down at his stocking clad feet, his eyes flitted up guiltily.

"Dearest, I love you, and I don't expect you to be perfect." She came closer, reaching out and cupping his jaw with her palm. "I'm so sorry you feel like you're being controlled. But don't you dare hurt your family because you feel like you don't have a way of escape. Don't you ever hurt them."

Ansell leaned into her palm, his eyes pained as his hand reached up and covered her own. "I'm so sorry, Belle. I never meant to take so many steps back. Really I can't even begin."

She looked at him pointedly.

Turning, letting go of her he went to his staff. "Cogsworth, I apologize for being so angry with you these last few days." He said sincerely. "I know you only have what's in my best interests at heart, and I have fought you tooth and claw the entire way."

"Sir, you never have to apologize to me-"

"Of course I do." He insisted, swallowing thickly. Genuinely apologetic. "You are my family, and I've treated you all so terribly." Turning, he looked to Lumiere who opened his arms up. Grabbing the man, he hugged him tightly. "I'm so sorry."

"It's been a difficult week, Master." He reassured. "But I'm glad you're learning your mistakes."

"Chapeau," he went over to his tall beanpole of a sentinel. "I know how much it upsets you when you can't tend to your duties properly, and I've been terrible and keeping you from them." He gripped the man's shoulders, looking him in the eye. "I'm sorry for that. But when I'm at Versailles you'll be indispensable as my valet. I'll need you more than ever to keep me up to snuff."

"It will be my pleasure, Your Highness." He said curtly. Giving a slight smile, he gestured back over to Belle.

Turning around sheepishly, Ansell looked back to her. Arms folded, face neutral, eyebrow slightly up. No smile for him.

"Well, that's a start." She finally responded.

Padding over to her, he held a hand out. "I'm sorry I yelled at you too."

"I can yell right back," Belle reassured as he came closer. "I know it's not your strong suit but
exercise some patience, some restraint." Rubbing his jaw gently, she pulled him down for a kiss. "We can work on it before you leave. We can work on all of it."

"There's only two days left." Resting his hands on her waist, his voice was deep with doubt. "I think you of all people know that's asking for a miracle."

"We'll see what we can do." Her voice full of tenacious confidence. "There's a houseful of people to whip you into shape. And not the shape your father wants." Taking one of his hands, she kissed the knuckles.

"You're not going to tell me to be good?" Thumbs played with the fabric of her skirt, a bit of the sparkle returning in his eyes.

Cogsworth heaved, rolling his eyes.

"Now that's asking for a miracle." Belle teased, watching his face drop in reaction. "But I'm serious Ansell, you need to learn control. And that means even when I'm not around. Especially, when I'm not around."

"Yes, you're right."

"This won't work if I'm the only constant that calms you down and has to rush in to soothe you for every little agitation. I won't be that device for you." She warned. "Now I love you, but you clearly need a little more work, Ansell."

"You're right, it's not fair on you to have to constantly talk me off the ledge." He grumbled, finding it hard to admit such things.

"It's not healthy." She responded.

Nodding his head, brushing a stray lock of hair out of her face, a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I much rather prefer the only fighting we do be over the opinions of books and plays."

"Only because you have such terrible opinions." Her voice was firm, but ended in comfortable rhythm they were so good at slipping back into. Even after such a row, they could find their way back to it.

Ansell chuckled, glad she was looking so mischievous. "Whatever are you going to do while I'm gone?" He asked. "Who are you going to pester?"

"I don't have a clue." A sigh, slightly dramatic. Eyes twinkling playfully, oh how they loved to tease one another. "Who else am I going to get to argue with me over books?"

A bright chuckle cut through all of the dreariness. "Cogsworth, your new job is to argue with Belle over books." He ordered.

"Sir!" The majordomo blustered under his mustache. "Master of all the things I need to do-"

"You're terrible." Belle laughed, smoothing her hand over his silk waistcoat. "Don't listen to him, Cogsworth. He's being a brat."

"He won't argue with you but I suspect Chip would be a gamely reading partner." He suggested gently. "Although he's more interested in fairy tales. Romances are apparently "very gross"."

"Opinions on some genres aside he does have good taste." She mused. Pausing, allowing for a
thoughtful silence. "You know, Chapeau is your valet but perhaps Lumiere should come with you too. It might help having another familiar face. And someone for poor Chapeau to turn to when you start growling."

Chapeau shifted his stance, fixing his cravat.

"You're probably right." He breathed.

"He loves the finer things." She pointed out. Well aware Lumiere was behind her and on board with getting to tag along to Versailles.

"Quit making so much sense."

"Oh, that's never going to happen." She looked over at her friends. "Lumiere?"

"It would be my honor." He gave a short bow, glad there was someone in the house to yell back at the prince.

"I'm so sorry, Darling," Ansell whispered, nuzzling her ever so slightly before pressing the most sincere and apologetic kisses to her lips.

"Let's not do this again," Belle replied, her fingers petting his shoulder.

"Does this mean I get to give you your surprise still?" Ansell asked hopefully.

Belle narrowed her eyes thoughtfully at him. "We'll see how well you do at class."

He looked at her worriedly.

and you're now a pupil."

It was hard to smile at his joke when his misery was slowly returning in front of her. "You have an bureau?"

"Apparently." Ansell eyed the door hesitantly, as if it may swallow him up. "It's in the west wing, someone can show you up. But I'll be there as the worst schoolboy you've ever seen."

She chuckled. "That sounds very plausible." Belle squeezed his hands back. "And I'll be here, home."

He eased himself at the reassurance. Belle home again, where she needed to be.

She shooed him out the door. Watching him change, his presence, his posture, his eyes, as he re-entered a world he was fighting. It worried her, seeing him become so on edge. So worn after just nine days of being with his family.

Hearing Cogsworth chastising Ansell up the stairs about a fitting appointment that was supposed to be going on that very minute, she heard him snap back. An angry response. It hurt. Maneuvering her way through the obstacle course that was the kitchen in full swing, she wove through the castle. It was remarkably chillier than she had last left it. Devoid of the Madame and Maestro working on a new piece of music, or the castle children shrieking down the halls in play or begging for a story. The air felt stale, the drapes too stiff, it didn't feel like home. Clearly, the Duke needed to be kept at Versailles if it was what he had left in his wake.

She saw Leon, who paused, looked immensely nervous at her presence, and briskly walked the other way. Pursing her lips, she watched him disappear into a salon. His voice ordering a drink.
"Belle!" Madame took her by surprise with an embrace so quick and warm she didn't have time to prepare nor catch a breath. "Oh, our dear Belle." She sang. "Our home hasn't been the same."

"I've missed you all too." She hugged back, being released to go right into Cadenza's arms.

"It's like the light has gone with you, my dear." He told her fondly, cupping her cheek with a fatherly palm. "The music not as sweet nor as sincere."

"I miss your songs." The pang of her family being so far away seeped into her stomach. Her father was the only other person outside of this new kin who could make her feel like she was a perfect fit. "Maestro, did you get new teeth?"

"Thank you for noticing! The finest from Paris." He grinned proudly.

"You look fetching." Belle kissed his cheek. "I can't wait to hear what you've been working on."

"You must! Noel is just around the corner, you know."

"Belle!" If her presence had been a secret, it no longer was as Chip came barreling at her at full speed, Froufrou on his heels.

Moving away from the Maestro, she knelt and caught him. Squeezing him tightly, wanting another day with him. "Did you miss me?"

"Everyone misses you!" He lamented rather dramatically, grimacing when she kissed the top of his head. "Can you and me and the master go riding soon? That was so much fun."

Little Chip, sitting in front of her in the saddle, Ansell watching with his big smile. She snickered at the thought of the two ganging up on her and Ansell inevitably tossing her into the lake. "I'd love to. I still owe you some tickling." Jabbing her fingers into his sides, he yelped.

Squirming away, the boy laughed with her.

"Oh, our girl's home!" Mrs. Potts cried, gathering her up like a mother hen with a chick. "Oh, we've missed you, Love. You're our little light you are."

"I've missed you too." Belle hugged back.

"Lumiere! Cogsworth!" She called out. "Those two will be pleased as punch to see you." Cupping the girl's cheek, the Englishwoman kissed her forehead and let go, holding her out at arm's length. "Let me give you a good look over. You're well?"

"Fine, Mrs. Potts." She responded in bemusement to the inspection. "Very well, just ready to be home."

"You look skinnier, we'll have to see to that."

Belle gave a tense smile, not arguing with her friend. "I think I'm the same, but I do miss chef's cooking."

"There she is!"

She turned, beaming. "Lumiere!"

"Beautiful as ever, Mademoiselle!" He caught her in an embrace. "Are you staying for awhile? Without you, the Master is sooo-"
"Petulant." Cogsworth huffed as he slowly came over, adjusting his monocle. "Stubborn, fussy, immature, puerile, recalcitrant, pigheaded, take your pick."

"If he still had fur that would be called a normal Friday." She told the majordomo, going over to greet him, pulling him in her arms. He was so stuffy, never one to initiate any type of informal contact.

"He's been sooo grumpy." Chip piped, clinging to his mother's skirts.

"My dear, I'm so sorry I didn't say goodbye," Cogsworth told her sadly.

"Don't be, you've been busy with running the house in all this chaos." Patting his shoulder, she let go.

"ABSOLUTELY NOT." Ansell's voice boomed from upstairs.

Cogsworth groaned. " Fighting his fitting no doubt. I must go and see how he's treating Chapeau and the tailor. " He headed up the stairs.

"Was he so angry when he came to you yesterday?" Everyone dispersed as Mrs. Potts gestured Belle to follow her.

"No, no he's been a little worn but he was eager, silly, sweet, slightly grouchy, very attentive, very Ansell. " Entering a parlor, she watched Mrs. Potts correct a new maid with cleaning a fireplace. "He seemed a little… well like he was trying to hide how miserable he's been?"

"That he has." The head of the household shook her head, going over and adjusting a vase.

"Has he been acting more and more like his old self?" Belle asked cautiously.

"That poor boy has tried his hardest." Her voice was saddened at the thought. "He's been hiding when he can. But his father has tried his damnedest to get him back to his old ways and be a proper heir. And his brother's always been the instigator." Shaking her head, she picked a piece of lace from a sample a maid had brought out to place on a table. "His temper has flared. But we've been keeping an eye on him. Seems more remorseful when he slips."

Not caring to stand around while the others worked, Belle took off her jacket and grabbed a bucket of soap to begin washing a window.

"Oh Dearie, leave that-"

"I'm not going to just watch you work and not help." She told her friend. "Outside of wanting to make him miserable, his father and brother?"

"They've been nightmares." Mrs. Potts grumbled. " The Duke had been running poor Cogsworth into the ground and ordering us all to "whip into shape" as if we don't work hard enough." She directed a girl to bring in a fresh pitcher of wine. "What he wants is for us to be more formal, more servant-like. And that viscount is just a bloody drunk. I swear we've gone through more wine than we did at the party, the lush."

Belle wrung out her sudsy cloth. " Ansell said something about their mother being his father's favorite mistress?"

"The Duke is an admirer of very young, very beautiful women." The Englishwoman explained, fussing over a table. "Their mother is a noblesse, she was with the Duke until he tired of her right
before the curse. The Duchess, bless her, was well aware of the maîtresse-en-titre, and she tolerated it because it meant she didn't have to see him too often." Mrs. Potts sighed. "Their marriage was wholly political, and this castle was her sanctuary. She hired us all on personally not six months before she had the prince." Her voice was fond, bittersweet, dwelling on the golden days of the past. The memories turning cold, she drew a deep breath. "As those boys aged the Duke pulled strings to have Leon become a viscount but had to keep Francis as a bâtard. Last I heard Francis was set to marry some Austrian. Leon's been married for years but his wife and children are the last subjects he'd ever care to talk about." She explained. "And honestly there's probably at least a dozen more children by the Duke floating around. He was never faithful to the Noblesse or the Duchess. Not that that's frowned upon."

"Ansell's childhood sounds… complicated." Belle said tactfully. No wonder Mrs. Potts had said he had been twisted up. It sounded like he had been set up for failure from the start. Unless his mother had lived, he was always going to be a conceited, greedy, philandering ass.

"He was raised with his brothers. They're real prizes, always have been what with their father playing favorites." She looked up at Belle, signaling the others to leave and shut the doors.

Belle slowed her washing as the door clicked shut, turning to the older woman.

"I wanted to ask some things a bit more delicate. Possibly out of turn, and I apologize but I worry about you two, so new to each other." Mrs. Potts dropped into hushed tones. "Are you concerned about the Master pursuing other women while at court? Do you feel bad about that prospect?"

"Honestly, I don't know how I feel about that." She sighed, wiping a window dry. "I know it's encouraged, and I know before the curse he was quite the heartbreaker. But he professes I'm the only one for him now. At the same time, I'm not dense." Her face was strained as she wrung the cloth out of nerves. "I'm very aware there's not much variety between here and the village."

Mrs. Potts watched the young woman, ever practical. "Come on, let's take a break." She said, finding a chair.

Belle followed suit. "Mrs. Potts, I really, truly don't know. I wish he wouldn't, but I'm familiar with what the expectations and temptations are at court." She looked down at her hands, wet with small trails of soap bubbles clinging to her skin. "If he does, I'll find out whether he wants me to or not. He's the worst liar I've ever met."

The housemaid chuckled. "He's never had to lie. Bein' the prince, he's always been able to say what he wants and what's on his mind. When he was a loveless thing, it was terrible."

"It's rather endearing when he does try to." She smiled absenty, drawn away from the heavy conversation for just a moment. "He's currently keeping a secret and it's absolutely torturous for him."

"He's such a big sweet thing with you." Mrs. Potts noted.

"But he needs to be that way even when I'm not around." she looked up towards the west wing.

"Since we're on this rather... delicate subject." She began carefully, noting the caution in the brown eyes staring back at her. "You and the master have been very passionate since... well... since not too longer after the curse broke. Very intimately passionate." She watched Belle began to look as if she had eaten a bad batch of seafood.

"Oh, Mrs. Potts' please-" Belle winced.
"Dearie, you two haven't been able to keep your-"

There was a knock at the door and the Madame peered in. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"No, no, not at all," Belle nearly leaped at the opportunity to escape the conversation. "We were just..." She shrugged her shoulders as she pushed herself out of the chair. "Talking about... things we're no longer talking about. I suspect you're looking for me?"

Mrs. Potts covered her eyes with a palm as Belle escaped.

Madame De Gardenrobe opened up the doors to Belle's old bedroom. It had been awhile since she had actually slept in the room but had been used as a storage of sorts. Dresses she didn't wear every day, jewelry from the Duchess's collection she used from the to time, and other parts of her life that didn't fit so neatly into the small space she preferred her things to occupy in the west wing.

Her eyes widened at the selection of dresses on the bed. All different colors, weights, and varieties suited for various formal occasions.

Plumette came over, smiling. "We ordered quite a few things for you when we thought you would be with us every day."

"For balls, for teas, riding, portraits, garden parties, formal, evening formal, semi-formal, casual, village casual, everything taken into consideration." The Madame recited breathlessly. "Your preferences of course." It had been so hard to find ball gowns without corsets, but it had been well established that their Belle could not stand anything so constricting. Nor shoes too high. The girl could be dancing one minute and horseback riding the next, it was something they as staff trained to take care of nobility were still getting used to. "We had your measurements on hand so it should all fit perfectly. And anything you wish to take home is yours of course."

"And I can assist with any fittings." The lady's maid nodded.

Belle approached the dresses, immediately gravitating to those that were of the same design as what she preferred to wear every day. Simple, practical, sturdy, a splash of color and patterns. Running her fingers over the fabric of a green one, she studied how the skirt didn't have pockets and immediately planned to alter it. Smiling in amusement that there were several types of bloomers and stockings for summer and winter as well as an assortment of matching ribbons for her hair and rough, sturdy boots and a slightly nicer pair for when she wasn't running around the woods. Her smile widened as her fingers ran across the cotton weave of a new apron.

"I might have made that special." Plumette winked.

"Thank you, mine is getting a bit tattered at the edges." worrying at an apron string, she smiled. "All of this is perfect, you two. Thank you so much, this took a lot of consideration. I know I'm not the easiest to dress."

"We just want you to be comfortable," the Madame smiled, pleased their Belle was happy with the wardrobe. "But the master told me you needed to choose something for tonight."

Belle arched a pensive brow. "Did he now?"

The Madame laughed at the girl's suspicions. She could see the clever mind working overtime, trying to piece together what was planned. "He said to wear something warm. Stockings and boots, nice enough for an outing but not too formal."
"That prince." She rolled her eyes, walking over to dresses of more heavier fabrics. "Alright, I suppose these then."

"COGSWORTH I WILL NOT-" He boomed from the other side of the castle.

Letting go of the dress, Belle scowled, looking to the Madame. "How long has he been screaming?" She asked curtly, not trying to be short with her unable to keep her frustrations in check.

"He lasted several days." Gardenrobe put delicately. "It was rather valiant."

She heard another petulant roar and pursed her lips, weighing her options before fearlessly storming out. "I'll be back, I promise."

"Master"

"Master-"

"Cogsworth I swear if you try to get me to wear those awful rings-"

"Fine, fine. No jewelry."

Belle cautiously walked through the door and into the royal chambers. She found him standing on a small platform, a garishly dressed tailor pushing and pinning him, constantly correcting a sullen slouch. Draped in bright silks and embroidery far more lurid than what he wore for the celebration, she watched him sympathetically. The royal suits she loved to see him in were downright tame compared to what was the desired, constricting fashion of Versailles. Nearby was a Parisian woman holding and gingerly brushing a tall, white wig cascading in curls, cooing over how much new makeup had arrived to powder his face with.

"This is awful." Ansell spat. Childish, scowling.

"Sir, this is what the French Court expects." Cogsworth huffed, fiddling anxiously with the handle of this cane. He hated having to deal with the prince when he was so testy, it rarely ended well.

"This feels too tight." He told the tailor as if he still had fangs.

"Prince Anselme, this is what's en vogue." Finding it harder and harder to work with the young man's temper, the tailor paused for a moment to let the young man breathe.

Shifting his weight Chapeau adjusted his cuffs. Wisely, he kept quiet, well aware Cogsworth was prone to riling the prince up, and if he allowed it to happen he could step in and work on calming him down.

Belle eyed the shoes resting nearby, glittering gold and with too high a heel for him to manage. She clung to the wall, watching Ansell carefully.

"Well, it feels too tight. I look like a parrot." Pawing at the cravat to loosen it, Ansell bared his teeth in a way that reminded her of his hairier days. "Like an exceptionally stupid parrot."

"My Prince, the fur cape will bring it all together." The woman with the wig sung cheerily. "You will look so grand for the portrait your father has commissioned."

"Ugh." He stretched his shoulders, looking like he would rather be at the business end of a musket.

"You're rather fearless, Ma Cherie." Lumiere whispered as he slid in and clung to the wall with her
near some tapestries.

"His growling didn't scare me when he was seven feet tall and it certainly doesn't scare me now."
She whispered back.

"There are days when I think he misses having a tail to lash back and forth like an angry cat."
Belle couldn't help but giggle.

Hearing the familiar sound, Ansell's head perked up and he scanned the room. As soon as the blue
eyes stopping on a familiar dress everyone could see an immediate change in him. A relaxing of his
muscles, a more slow breath, the lines of agitation beginning to slowly slacken from his face.

She had been found. "You know, I seem to recall you loving all of this." She mused, walking over,
oberving his transformation. "I heard you were quite the popular peacock."

"It's different now." He grumbled. "This is all- it's just not what I've grown accustomed to."

"Barefoot and shirtless in a cape?" She quirked a brow. Unamused at his brooding.

"I'm sorry it wasn't high fashion but it was practical, thank you very much."

"Mon dieu." The majordomo was at a loss. This bullheaded, ruffian of a prince. He didn't know
what to do with him.

"And these shoes." Ansell sneered with a curling lip. "They're dreadful. I can't feel anything and I
keep tripping."

"You did fine at the celebration" she folded her arms, watching him. "And you looked quite
dashing."

"We practiced for a week to get me used to those damn things." He lamented. "Everyone takes shoes
for granted! They're hard when you haven't worn them for ages." Letting out a huff, he swatted at a
hand trying to adjust the fitting of a shoulder. "And I don't mind dressing up for you." Shooing the
tailor away in frustration he hopped down and padded over to Belle. "LEAVE." The prince meanly
ordered his father's staff. As soon as the door shut with a click he stepped down. Eyes softer, more
patient. He tilted his chin down, suddenly looking much sweeter and boyishly unsure. The Ansell
she had just spent the morning with had returned. "I like the way you look at me."

"You're handsome no matter what you wear." She ran a hand up his chest, toying with golden
buttons. He moved in for a kiss, hands ready to take her. She stepped back, pushing his chest away,
knocking the big hands away from her waist. "But you need to stop it right now."

Ansell's face dropped in shock. He furrowed his brows, opened his mouth, closed it, and looked
utterly unsure of what he had done to get such a smack on the nose.

"Just because you're miserable doesn't mean you get to abuse your staff-"

"I'm not abusive." He recoiled ever so slightly to the accusation, wounded by her words.

"Screaming at Cogsworth or anyone else on staff is absolutely abusive," she said firmly. "Don't you
dare get back into your bad habits."

"I'm trying!" Ansell barked.

"Try harder!" Belle matched his volume. "Control your temper and don't take it out on everyone!"
He tilted his chin down guiltily yet still looked righteously stubborn.

"This is not the man I love." She warned. "He gets frustrated but he doesn't hurt his family. And he's impatient but he tries to work through his issues."

"I don't have anyone to work them through with." He hedged.

"Ansell, that's a lie."

"NO IT'S NOT!" His chest heaved, fear in his eyes. "You're not here! You haven't been here!"

"I won't always be here! Or there! Or always a horse ride away!" She gestured to the door. Was this what they were sending away? This ball of nerves and insecurity, worn down after just over a week of seeing his family? "You have Lumiere, and Mrs. Potts and Cogsworth and so many people in this home who can help and want to help you just as well as I can if not better!"

Stewing, he turned away, snorting air out through his nose like an angry bull.

Lumiere, Chapeau, and Cogsworth exchanged tense glances.

"Ansell, it doesn't always have to be me. And I don't want you to slip away." Fear and anger twisted her stomach in knots. Belle loved him the world over, however, as he stood before her she couldn't see Ansell being gone for a month and returning to her intact. "But you can't just explode at every little turn because I'm not here and it suits your fraying nerves!"

"Belle, I don't want to do this!" He snapped.

"I don't want to do a lot of things but did you see me yelling because your awful family being here meant I had to leave?!"

"It's not the same! That was JUST a week!"

"Don't you dare-"

"A month! You all expect me to be away for a month! To play this part I'm not!" He roared desperately. "He put me through all these damned classes like he was taking me into a show ring! Like some, some STALLION he's looking to trot out to BREED to the highest dowry! Do you know how that FEELS?" Snarling, circling around a table he slammed his fist down. "EVERYONE KEEPS TRYING TO CONTROL AND CORRECT ME. WHAT TO DO, WHAT TO SAY, WHEN TO BOW, WHAT TO WEAR-"

"Yelling doesn't give you any control!"

"IT DOES WHEN YOU'RE THE PRINCE AND THEY'RE ALL BENEATH YOU!" Whirling around to face her he stopped, realizing what he had said.

Belle paused, tilting her head shrewdly. "Oh, so that's how you've gotten away with this for so long?!" She stepped toward him, her face severe. "Well, it certainly doesn't give you any control over me!"

Ansell's face slackened. "Belle-"

"I don't care if you have some grand surprise for tonight and I don't care if you're expecting I warm your bed afterward just because you're my prince!" She threatened.

Cogsworth's face turned bright red as Chapeau came over and handed him a fresh handkerchief.
"Just because I was happy to see you last night and happy to wake up to you this morning doesn't mean I won't leave you right at this moment. Or any other time you decided your royal blood gives you carte blanche to be an impetuous terror." Face hot with anger, Belle stood unflinchingly right in front of him. "I wouldn't stand for it when you had claws and I certainly won't give you a pass now."

Turning his head, he shamefully didn't want to make eye contact with her. "I apologize, I misspoke."

"You spoke your truth, Ansell. And this is mine." She pressed firmly. "I'm sorry you're feeling like everyone's trying to control you, but I won't put up with you becoming abusive again."

He looked down at his stocking clad feet, his eyes flitted up guiltily.

"Dearest, I love you, and I don't expect you to be perfect." She came closer, reaching out and cupping his jaw with her palm. "I'm so sorry you feel like you're being controlled. But don't you dare hurt your family because you feel like you don't have a way of escape. Don't you ever hurt them."

Ansell leaned into her palm, his eyes pained as his hand reached up and covered her own. "I'm so sorry, Belle. I never meant to take so many steps back. Really I can't even begin."

She looked at him pointedly.

Turning, letting go of her he went to his staff. "Cogsworth, I apologize for being so angry with you these last few days." He said sincerely. "I know you only have what's in my best interests at heart, and I have fought you tooth and claw the entire way."

"Sir, you never have to apologize to me-"

"Of course I do." He insisted, swallowing thickly. Genuinely apologetic. "You are my family, and I've treated you all so terribly." Turning, he looked to Lumiere who opened his arms up. Grabbing the man, he hugged him tightly. "I'm so sorry."

"It's been a difficult week, Master." He reassured. "But I'm glad you're learning your mistakes."

"Chapeau," he went over to his tall beanpole of a sentinel. "I know how much it upsets you when you can't tend to your duties properly, and I've been terrible and keeping you from them." He gripped the man's shoulders, looking him in the eye. "I'm sorry for that. But when I'm at Versailles you'll be indispensable as my valet. I'll need you more than ever to keep me up to snuff."

"It will be my pleasure, Your Highness." He said curtly. Giving a slight smile, he gestured back over to Belle.

Turning around sheepishly, Ansell looked back to her. Arms folded, face neutral, eyebrow slightly up. No smile for him.

"Well, that's a start." She finally responded.

Padding over to her, he held a hand out. "I'm sorry I yelled at you too."

"I can yell right back," Belle reassured as he came closer. "I know it's not your strong suit but exercise some patience, some restraint." Rubbing his jaw gently, she pulled him down for a kiss. "We can work on it before you leave. We can work on all of it."

"There's only two days left." Resting his hands on her waist, his voice was deep with doubt. "I think you of all people know that's asking for a miracle."
"We'll see what we can do." Her voice full of tenacious confidence. "There's a houseful of people to
whip you into shape. And not the shape your father wants." Taking one of his hands, she kissed the
knuckles.

"You're not going to tell me to be good?" Thumbs played with the fabric of her skirt, a bit of the
sparkle returning in his eyes.

Cogsworth heaved, rolling his eyes.

"Now that's asking for a miracle." Belle teased, watching his face drop in reaction. "But I'm serious
Ansell, you need to learn control. And that means even when I'm not around. Especially, when I'm
not around."

"Yes, you're right."

"This won't work if I'm the only constant that calms you down and has to rush in to soothe you for
every little agitation. I won't be that device for you." She warned. "Now I love you, but you clearly
need a little more work, Ansell."

"You're right, it's not fair on you to have to constantly talk me off the ledge." He grumbled, finding it
hard to admit such things.

"It's not healthy." She responded.

Nodding his head, brushing a stray lock of hair out of her face, a smile tugged at the corners of his
mouth."I much rather prefer the only fighting we do be over the opinions of books and plays."

"Only because you have such terrible opinions." Her voice was firm, but ended in comfortable
rhythm they were so good at slipping back into. Even after such a row, they could find their way
back to it.

Ansell chuckled, glad she was looking so mischievous. "Whatever are you going to do while I'm
gone?" He asked. "Who are you going to pester?"

"I don't have a clue." A sigh, slightly dramatic. Eyes twinkling playfully, oh how they loved to tease
one another. "Who else am I going to get to argue with me over books?"

A bright chuckle cut through all of the dreariness. "Cogsworth, your new job is to argue with Belle
over books." He ordered.

"Sir!" The majordomo blustered under his mustache. "Master of all the things I need to do."

"You're terrible." Belle laughed, smoothing her hand over his silk waistcoat. "Don't listen to him,
Cogsworth. He's being a brat."

"He won't argue with you but I suspect Chip would be a gamely reading partner." He suggested
gently. "Although he's more interested in fairy tales. Romances are apparently "very gross"."

"Opinions on some genres aside he does have good taste." She mused. Pausing, allowing for a
thoughtful silence. "You know, Chapeau is your valet but perhaps Lumiere should come with you
too. It might help having another familiar face. And someone for poor Chapeau to turn to when you
start growling."

Chapeau shifted his stance, fixing his cravat.
"You're probably right." He breathed.

"He loves the finer things." She pointed out. Well aware Lumiere was behind her and on board with getting to tag along to Versailles.

"Quit making so much sense."

"Oh, that's never going to happen." She looked over at her friends. "Lumiere?"

"It would be my honor." He gave a short bow, glad there was someone in the house to yell back at the prince.

"I'm so sorry, Darling," Ansell whispered, nuzzling her ever so slightly before pressing the most sincere and apologetic kisses to her lips.

"Let's not do this again," Belle replied, her fingers petting his shoulder.

"Does this mean I get to give you your surprise still?" Ansell asked hopefully.

Belle narrowed her eyes thoughtfully at him. "We'll see how well you do at class."

He looked at her worryingly.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Something to break up the long wait. We're not back up to full speed (three chapters a week) but we're getting there and I'm pleased to say I'm getting back in that comfortable number of pre-written chapters. Now, there's a bit more breathing room before we get to the intrigue, drama, opulence, and mopey scowlfest that is Versailles and then the far less mopey post-Versailles. And I can say that the breathing room is pretty sweet (and some of Versailles is actually pretty sweet too pinky promise) despite our two intrepid lovers sparring up there. Every couple fights though, it happens.

As always, thank you so much for reading, kudo-ing, bookmarking, and commenting. At nine chapters in, I'm incredibly grateful for everyone sticking around for so long as well as taking the time to interact with me and the story. I hope I can continue to entertain as we get deeper into our story. I don't always respond to the comments, but I do take them into consideration. Let me know how I'm doing, or if that's not your thing, just reading along is appreciated too. You do you.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

A/N: Guess what? The text box majorly messed up the bottom of Chapter Nine to the point where major edit errors cropped up and affected the story for about three hours. Being someone who takes pride in their work, this is horrifying. Some people read the last chapter and just got a mess at the end.

So, as an apology? A bribe? A way to make myself feel better? Here's a bonus chapter. It was supposed to go up next week but why not. The last one was garbage for a few hours.* I hope you all enjoy this extra slice.

*the issues were corrected.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Student of the day." Cogsworth beamed, his hands resting on Belle's shoulders as she sat at the table with a stack of books on one side and a stack of notes on the other.

Ansell stared at her from across the dark, heavy wood table top. A touch of soreness edging into his eyes as he drummed his quill tip on the desk.

She smiled broadly to the praise, still jotting down some notes with her quill. She had flourished in study; engaging in thoughtful conversation, asking clever questions, forming opinions. A joy to teach and a light that had absolutely outshone the person who was actually supposed to be learning for a purpose.

"Exemplary!" Patting her shoulders he went back to his blackboard. Pleased as punch he at least had one good pupil. "And so impressive, seeing as you've never been able to take a class yourself."

"I like to think I'm a very quick learner." She told the majordomo. Eyes smugly flitting to Ansell. Slouching and brooding like the recalcitrant schoolboy of his youth.

The prince idly ripped the corner of a piece of parchment, failing at appearing to be not affected by being surpassed.

"Well, hopefully, your studiousness will rub off on those less inclined to focus." He grumbled with all the severity of a disappointed walrus. "You two are dismissed."

Ansell rose up from the table, sharply straightening his jacket.

Belle chuckled. "Don't be so sore." Taking the books to another table she began to sort them out so she could begin the next lesson prepared. "You were daydreaming at one point."

"All that stuff about the church is soooo boring." The sharp blue eyes rolled, noticing how well written her notes were. A touch hasty with some ink spatterings, but perfectly bulleted with questions and additional musings in between the lines. Looking over to his, they were barely scratched in, sometimes just a word and a question mark, with bored doodles in the margins. He snorted like a peeved bull.
"Cogsworth?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle?" He sniffed, nose twitching threateningly as he wiped down the blackboard.

"How did the prince do today compared to his other lessons?" She asked wryly.

Ansell froze as if his life suddenly depended on the grade.

Cogsworth fussed over the blackboard, cleaning it in slow, precise circles. "Compared to the past nine days I'd say the Master was a regular Socrates."

Belle started laughing. At first, she covered her mouth, but as she shook her head she had to put a hand on a table.

"What?" Ansell huffed.

"Oh, you had to have been a miserable piece of work for the last week." She giggled.

"He was dreadful." Cogsworth supplied, which made her laugh even longer.

Finally catching her breath, she mustered out. "But you get to reveal your surprise, Prince Anselme."

He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Doesn't mean you're off the hook." She warned. "But you should probably go up and see long suffering Chapeau. I was told there's a dress code?"

With a wide, eager smile he headed out.

Belle waited until the door shut before turning keenly to Cogsworth. "I need you to get everyone in the library in ten minutes."

Cogsworth tilted his head.

"We need the full calvary." She told him, wiping the pen ink off her fingers and onto one of her towels.

He bowed with a smile. "As you wish, Mademoiselle."

With a knowing little smirk toying on the corners of her mouth, she headed out whilst rolling her eyes. "Socrates."

"I've been told I need to go be dressed so this will be shorter than I'd like," Belle told the group. The servants closest to Ansell, those who raised and saw to him as the beast. Everyone who could had gathered in the library, fanning attentively around the farm girl. "But Ansell can't go in two days, he'll never make it out alive."

"I don't think that's possible," Cogsworth said skeptically, leaning stiffly on his cane. "The Duke's men run a tight ship, heavens knows they've been making our lives difficult. Some days I wish I were still a clock! I didn't get as nearly as tired back then,"

"If he goes to Versailles now he'll fall to pieces," Belle told them all soberly. "Whether that was intentional or his father just doesn't know how or what to teach him, he won't make it a month. And I
mean that with all the love in the world for Ansell. We can get him in better shape in a few days, but it's going to take everyone correcting him." Circling the room she looked down at the floor. "I can't help but feel like having the summer all to ourselves spoiled him."

"Belle, you pushed the Master." Mrs. Potts reminded. "You corrected him during the two months, I saw it."

Shaking her head, the brown eyes flitted up. "I let some things slip. I mistook his childishness for playfulness far too many times."

"But Belle," Cogsworth lamented "There's not enough time in the days we have left."

"We can come up with a diversion." Mr. Potts piped in cleverly, rubbing his chin. "Buy a few days. Perhaps the horses are colicky, unfit for a long journey?" He suggested with a smirk as Mrs. Potts patted his arm. "Treatment might take awhile, a shame."

"He's still woefully undereducated on his current events." The majordomo huffed, his chest puffed out like a perturbed rooster.

"I think he needs someone to learn with him, or else he's distracted." She corrected sympathetically. "Between you and I, I think we can get him at least read enough to navigate a conversation."

"The master has no desire to get caught up on the arts." Cadenza hinted pointedly, becoming more and more agitated. "The dances and the music have all changed at Versailles, they change every season! He will walk in and not know what is en vogue and it will BE A DISASTER!" He threw his hands up.

"Maestro!" The Madame soothed. "My Darling, you mustn't get so worked up."

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to be passionate but it concerns me!" He lamented, riling himself up again. "All summer you and I, My Pet, we worked so hard to learn everything that came and went while we were locked away here. The arias! The compositions! The operas! Dancing! And instead of learning all this fantastic culture what does our prince do?! He'd rather go run off to a meadow to frolick! A MEA-"

Belle gave a guilty smile, her fingers worrying the hem of her apron.

The maestro's wife looked at him scornfully as he realized what exactly he was saying.

His shoulders slumped, his dentures flashed a tight smile. "No offense to those who took him to meadows."

"None taken." Belle rolled her lips into her mouth, clearing her throat to continue. "We were… very distracted these last few months," She ignored Lumiere and Plumette chuckling knowingly as Cadenza settled himself down. "We certainly should have made time for other things. And you're right. If he doesn't know what is popular at court, then you and the Madame will give him lessons." She told them. "Which will give me a break from watching his every move and slowly… sinking… into madness." Grimacing, she loved him, she truly did. But if she had to nitpick him for a week Belle would probably end up strangling him. Or leaving. Or both.

"He needs to relearn his fencing," Lumiere noted. "Seems he's forgotten all I've taught him. That fight with his brother? So sloppy, I should be ashamed."

Belle looked at her friend curiously.
"I wasn't born into a life of service, Ma Cherie." He winked mischievously.

"Needs to improve his horseback riding." Mr. Potts added. "He rides like a bloody farmer, not that there's anything wrong with that particular style-" He nodded to Belle "but he needs to ride like a prince. Noble."

"I'll see if I can get him to improve with his utensils," His wife sighed. "That lout dropped half a dozen forks at the celebration, don't think I didn't notice. And his cups, you'd think years of living with a talking one would keep him from being all thumbs."

"His handwriting," Plumette shook her head. "it's like he still has a paw. I'll take that. Chapeau will groom him, that is easy as the master still likes to look nice."

"Current events, the arts, fencing, riding… hand eye coordination-" Belle counted off. "Penmanship, grooming. I think this is a good list. Lumiere, I suggested you for Versailles so he has someone else to watch over him."

"I thought so." He nodded. "I shall be his eyes and ears and one of his pieces of home."

"Thank you," Belle said sincerely. "I know Chapeau's not here but if someone could fill him in-"

"I can." Mrs. Potts told her. "He'll take his dinner after he dresses the master."

"Perfect. I know this isn't everything, but I think this is a manageable list," Belle said, looking around the room. "I know he's upset at being told what to do, being bosses around, but I'll explain the plan to him tonight. Now, if his temper flairs, please correct him. If he throws around his title, call him out. And if he worsens I'll see to him myself."

Mrs. Pots chuckled, her brows raised in amusement at their ferocious general. "Oh, you don't worry about that one, Dearie. I certainly don't mind watching you straighten him out."

"Here here." Cogsworth rapped his cane in approval.

She smiled at the group surrounding her. "We do have our work cut out for us. But I know we can help him improve before he leaves."

"And you must get dressed, my Dear." The Madame said, going and ushering her out the door, Plumette trailing closely behind. "You have a date with a very handsome prince."

"I hope this works, Chapeau."

"Of course it will, Sire," Chapeau said, happily filing his nails. The prince had not readapted to formal dress since the curse had broken, and for Chapeau, the lack of polish had been driving him mad. He had delighted in the celebration and was more than happy there was another excuse to give his charge another once over.

"She was sooo, angry." Ansell grumbled but sounded more guilty than upset at Belle. "I mean, she has every right to be. I should really be… not… terrible. You know."

"I know."

"And I'll work on that, truly I will. But tonight? This is a good surprise." He said optimistically, damp hair plastered against his face.
"I wonder what this surprise is." Belle mused, pulling on her dressing gown as she stepped out of the tub. Madame and Plumette were there to pamper her into a vision, something she was still getting used to but appreciated when she needed to be out of her everyday wear. "Do either of you know?"

"If we did, how could we tell you?" Plumette batted her lashes coyly. "It wouldn't be a surprise then."

Belle narrowed her eyes, taking a seat down so Plumette could do her hair. "I thought you were on my side."

"A very good one, knowing the Mademoiselle."

"Can I not wear a wig this time around?" The prince fidgeted, watching his valet work his magic in the mirror.

"I hadn't even considered one seeing as it is not the Mademoiselle's preference," Chapeau reassured. "But you desperately need a trim, Your Grace, and I have an idea for your hair." Chapeau looked the prince over, frowning thoughtfully.

"What is it?"

"Oh, we are."

"Can I not wear a wig this time around?" The prince fidgeted, watching his valet work his magic in the mirror.

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"What is it?"

"Oh, we are." The Madame chuckled, carefully selecting the jewelry. Nothing too big or too heavy, Belle barely tolerated earrings much less a jewel encrusted broach the size of her fist. "But do you want the surprise to be ruined?"

"I just want to know what he's getting us into." Belle looked into the vanity, watching Plumette take a brush to her hair.

"Up?"

"I'm not sure?" The door creaked and Mrs. Potts came in with a tea service. "What do you suggest, Plumette?"

"Up, the collar on the dress is a little higher than what we normally work with."

"Than that, thank you." She saw the housemaid in the mirror. "Mrs. Potts-"

"Yes, Dearie?"

"You have three good suits that match the fashion that aren't from your father's tailor. Who, in my opinion, is a bit over the top." The valet explained with a hint of disdain. He had after all been dressing the prince ever since he needed a valet and was attune to his styles, even as drastically as they had recently changed. "May I suggest we get some more in Paris when we make our trip to Versailles?" He watched Ansell's skepticism. "Nothing too gaudy, I assure you. But when you need to dress your part when in the province, wouldn't you like something besides the few you have?"

"I suppose." He nodded hesitantly. "I should probably also get some more work clothes, seeing as I'm spending more and more time in the village with Belle. I only have the one set." Ansell didn't see Chapeau's look of pain from the thought of him running around Villeneuve like a commoner. "Wait." He paused. "Three? I thought I only had the navy and the light blue."
"You wouldn't happen to know where Ansell is taking me, would you?"

Shaking her head Mrs. Potts laughed as she fixed a cup the way the girl preferred. "Love, you're terrible." Ignoring how stunned Belle was, she came over and set the saucer down on the vanity. "Oh, come off it. You don't like not knowing things. Makes you a terrible person to surprise. And, an absolute pest." Reaching over, she patted Belle's shoulder. The girl was sulking. "Now, now. Just trust the master. You don't have to wait too much longer now do you?"

"I suppose you're right." She sighed, though not quite defeated.

"There's a girl. Drink up." Mrs. Potts went over to the Madame and looked at what dress had been laid out. "Oh, won't you look stunning in this. He's going to think he died and went to heaven."

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"I found one in storage, Your Grace. I took the liberty of having it altered and re-embroidered. It suits the current trend very well, but it's not as nearly as formal." He smiled to himself. "And you are going to debut it tonight for your Mademoiselle."

Belle entered the library looking around at the warm, dimmed light. The thick, heavy curtains drawn to keep out the sunlight, fire roaring, the leather of the books gleaming marvelously in the low light. Taking a deep breath she ventured further in, pulling at the shawl on her shoulders, raising a brow as she found Ansell by one of of the tables in a stunning hunters green suit. His golden hair half down, the sides plaited back out of his face, stately and handsome.

He took a deep, steadying breath. Rocking on his heels, he smiled at his lady in her veridian dress. Always bowled over by her radiance. "Is that one new?"

"There's quite a few new ones. It seems Madame and Plumette planned for every contingency." She took his outstretched hand, coming up and kissing Ansell. Her fingers wandering up and holding his face, pad of her thumb rubbing against the stubble of his jaw.

"I thought you would appreciate me keeping it." He said.

"It makes you look rakish." She smiled, noticing the flowers and beading curling up his coat. Creatures and blossoms of the forest wrapping around the stiff collar. "The braid is also handsome. Reminds me of our first dance."

His mouth twitched. Ansell had forgotten about his hair, rather fur, when they had danced so long ago. But oh, Chapeau, that clever man knew what to do. He would have to thank him. "Yes, well, Chapeau was very happy to get me out of the provincial and into the world. He was keen to add a little flair." He kissed her knuckles, eyes smiling at her. He loved the birds and cherry blossoms on her dress. Such Belle things; songs and summer. "You're the most stunning date a gentleman could ask for. Everyone's going to be jealous."

"Everyone?" She raised a brow curiously. "So there's people where this surprise is?"

"All kinds of people, and they get to see I'm with the most beautiful girl." Looking back over his shoulder, he gently guided her over. Unable to refrain from smiling in anticipation.

"So where are we going?" Belle asked suspiciously, enjoying his excitement. He always looked a little dopey when he was excited. "Obviously somewhere with a crowd."

"Don't ask for me to spoil it." He responded, hand gently resting on the small of her back. "There's no fun in that. But I promise you'll enjoy yourself."
His blue eyes were wide, sparkling, eager to take her away. She blushed as they stopped at the book. An arm wrapping around her, a hand pressing down into the page.

"Close your eyes, Darling." He whispered, pressing a kiss to her hair. "And trust me."

"Alright, you can open them."

Belle opened her eyes to find herself on cobblestones, people bustling around them. Headed towards a large, round, white building. People purchasing tickets, filing in, men taking tickets. Looking up, the skyline was foreign, the architecture not French. But that round building. And the people were speaking English.

Ansell waited, the corner of his mouth threatening to break into a smile and give it all away. When her head jerked up and the big, brown eyes looked at him as wide as saucers, he grinned brightly.

"Oh my god… Are we?" She gasped.

He nodded his head.

"And we're going to?!

Ansell laughed deeply, her excitement was so infectious. "Yes we are."

Belle covered her mouth, spinning around in the street, stifling a shriek of glee.

The silent exuberance carried on, and he watched her struggle so valiantly with keeping her expressions of pure unadulterated joy down to a polite minimum. It was obvious she so desperately wanted to kiss him in a way that was not suitable for public. "Sooo you like it?"

"Ansell, I'm going to cry." She laughed, wanting to yank him down to her height and throw her arms around him in the most passionate of kisses. "It's The Globe." Clutching her chest, Belle struggled to steady her breathing.

"It is." He beamed down at her.

"It's- It's- It's his theatre." Belle squeaked, barely able to talk. "And we're going to see a play?"

"For the first time in my life, I made sure I had money so I could buy our tickets." The prince explained, basking in her joy, reading the banner. "Titus Andronicus, not our favorite but, pretty good one to see, right?"

Pulling away, grinning so hard it was beginning to hurt, she shook her head in sheer disbelief. She had read about it, and dreamed about it. But never in a million years. "We're going to see a play at The Globe."

"I take it this was a good surprise then?" He wanted to cry at her happiness. The warmth, the pure joy on her face, it made his chest feel fit to burst and his face hot.

She ducked under his arm as he led her to the building, the two of them all grins. Belle still overwhelmed with it all. "Have I told you recently how much I love you?"

Ansell laughed, squeezing her palm. "I never mind hearing it again, Darling."

"Well I love you."
Chapter End Notes

A/N: For those not aware, The Globe is Shakespeare's theater, built by his playing company the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Technically, it wouldn't have been around at this time (Puritans!) but because we're being so vague and hand-wavy with our European settings and history, for the sake of the story and our very passionate bookworm, it totally exists in this alternate universe. Because if a prince can turn into a Beast, why not.
"Why do you have this terrible thing on?"

"Because I'm not the one under the covers and it's chilly," Belle told him, pushing the hand away that was pawing at the sash on the house robe. Laying against a small mountain of pillows, one foot was planted on the bed, knee bent up, the other laying flat. Silk robe covering her breasts but cascading down and to the sides.

Ansell covered up the rest. He was laying between her legs, head on her flat belly, hands traveling between her arms and her thighs. Soft sheets and blankets bunched at his lower back, a foot sticking out at the end of the bed, gleaming golden hair tumbling into his strong face. Sated and lazy. Occasionally kissing the skin he was resting on, sleepily pleased with all of the contact. Their chambers were dark, the silver light of the moon peeking through the clouds and the tall orange flames of the fireplace allowing them to see each other.

"Hrm." He rumbled happily, eyes shutting as her fingers worked their way through his hair and massaged his scalp.

"You look like the cat after he's eaten a mouse and found a sunbeam." she mused.

"Well, I was rather ravenous." He absently petted an arm, smiling as if he was drunk on too much wine. "After that wonderful play in London I had a large dinner, then a big serving of you, and this spot is so nice and warm and soft." Kissing her stomach the prince lifted his head to meet the soft brown eyes watching him so lovingly. "Are you uncomfortable?"

"I'm very comfortable," she said contentedly, still petting him. "I like you right there."

"Good, because you're such a lovely place to nap." He teased. Another kiss, fingers playing along her thigh, a sigh of words. "And I'm near so many of my favorite places."

"You know your way around them very well." she watched his wry grin of accomplishment. "Thank you, by the way, it's been perfect," Belle exclaimed tenderly. Still basking in the glow of Ansell's talents, he wasn't the only one tired. "I know today had its rough moments but I would never have thought of such an absolutely perfect outing."

"It's been my pleasure." smiling into her skin he purred the words out, thumb rolling soothing circles on her thigh. "I've been wanting to take you for weeks and was hoping to do it around Noel but..." His mouth pulled into a wistful frown. "With everything happening so quickly I wanted one great adventure with you before I left." There was a sad twinge in his voice as his trip felt too close. It was racing up on him, on them, and he couldn't fathom leaving her.

Reaching out, Belle ran a hand across Ansell's shoulders, working away the tension she knew was building up. "It's not as close as you think."

He lifted his head up, looking at her for an answer.

"I may have rallied the staff into working on teaching you for the next few days while Mr. Potts tells your father's men the horses are sick." She divulged, watching him go through a range of emotions. Relief for the delay, reluctance towards the idea of education, and befuddlement as to the exact
nature of the classes. "Dearest, you need more help before you're ready to leave."

"You're right." The prince heaved, slumping against her. "I'm lousy at so many things." Frowning against her skin, cheek smooshed against her torso, his brows furrowed in frustration. "Things I used to excel at, I'm just... terrible."

"It's been years. Things are bound to be rusty." Belle soothed, smiling down at him so possessively draped over her. She didn't know if it was the years spent in cursed solitude or just his personality, however, the prince thrived and sought out physical contact. It was never forceful or unwanted, he was quick to stop when she wasn't in the mood, and unless she initiated rough play it was always so very gentle. "Clearly not everything is rusty." She reminded suggestively, listening to him let out a low, husky chuckle. Cheered up, he nipped the spot above her hip. "But we'll work on everything else."

"We should probably leave for good after winter passes." Ansell mused, kissing her palm, running his teeth across the skin.

"Hmm." She closed her eyes as his hands wandered and his mouth was very attentively working on her fingers. "And why's that?"

"Even if we use the book, we'll have a better chance of settling somewhere if we're not battling the elements." He pondered, kissing her thumb. "Plus, I need some time to un-prince myself. Learn to be a proper commoner."

"You're well on your way." She reassured. "But having one last winter at home would be nice. We should celebrate Noel with the staff seeing it's the first one since the curse has a been broken."

Smiling at the thought she pondered. "Lumiere will want a lavish party, and then there are the children... They haven't had gifts in years..."

"Noel?"

"You weren't so jolly when we had eternal winter." Belle reminded him. "I don't even know if you kept track of the months."

"No, after awhile it all bled together." The prince sighed, shutting his eyes. "Did you know when it was last year?"

She nodded, not particularly wanting to dwell on the past. However, it was their past. "It just came and went."

"You never said anything." Setting his chin on her stomach he watched her shrug. "I thought it was your favorite holiday?"

"It is, but we weren't always on the best of terms." Belle reminded him, remembering the spats they had gotten into following their mutual rescuing in the forest. Even after he had been sweet enough to give her the library and they began to bond, it had been a rough adjustment. They both had tempers, Belle still felt like a captive, and as small as she was she hadn't been afraid to stand her ground against an enormous, stubborn, snarling beast. "Even after you saved me we were still working things out. And if I remember correctly December had us both particularly testy."

"Ah yes, your cabin fever was setting in." He sighed.

"You were also not the greatest help." Belle hinted.

"That's very true. At least we got to celebrate your birthday. Which, is coming up again." Ansell
hinted. "I should be back for it, anything I should know?"

"That I just want you back for it." She said quietly, earnestly.

"Hmn." Taking her hand, he kissed her knuckles. "As you wish, Darling. But no gifts?"

"I've been too busy thinking about us to bother with gifts." She wanted him for her birthday. She desperately wanted to disappear with him, to not be under the threat of some horrid Duke and French Court. They would have to be patient, they weren't ready by any means, but Belle wanted it.

"I'll see what I can come up with. I think you deserve a bit of spoiling." the prince purred. "Especially for putting up with and agreeing to run away with me." Pausing innocently, he lifted his head from its spot with a twinge of worry.

She furrowed her brows. "What's wrong?"

His eyes fell to the flat belly he had been giving so much attention. "What if we conceive?" a worried whisper, a sincere concern.

"Oh, we're having that talk." Belle took a deep breath.

"Belle, I love every inch of you." taking a hand, he stroked the spot. "I think it's obvious at this point. But, we could be increasing our chances of a complication with an escape."

"Ansell."

He looked up at her, brimming with fear. His heart pained thought of his father hurting her because of a potential heir.

She rested a hand on his head, stroking backward, pushing the hair out of the concerned eyes that were so shockingly blue in the moonlight, holding the back of his head. He was so sweet in his concern. "I read quite a few books on health and herbs when we started sharing a bed. I may have found a few ways to keep from adding on to our little family."

"Oh." He was suddenly much more relieved. Back to looking rosy. Ansell started chuckling to himself.

"What?"

"Just thinking about how you started doing your research a week after the curse was broken." He mused, watching her roll her eyes. Reaching under his arm, she pulled, and he obliged by scooting up to her shoulder.

"It takes two, Your Highness." she reminded him pointedly. "I seem to recall you being rather eager and willing."

"Surprised we lasted so long." The prince smiled mischievously as she kissed him deeply. Once she was done, she guided his head to her shoulder, and he contently buried his nose into her sweet smelling neck. Rosewater. "I lost a perfectly good pair of breeches in the process." he kissed, carefully keeping his weight on a knee and an elbow, but enjoying being draped over her.

"They were in the way." She reminded, biting her lip in memory. After the curse had ended, their first days in the castle had been torturous. Her beast; sweet, kind, and containing enough wits to match her, was suddenly incredibly handsome. The perfect combination of both looks and personality. And Ansell suddenly found himself in a body where he was comfortable with trying to
simply touch her without the fear of scaring her away. They never had a chance in hell when it came to remaining chaste. "And the same could be said about my poor dress."

"Too many stays up the back." He scoffed, head under her chin. He slowly began to untie the blasted robe. "But we're... Safe?"

"As we can be," she pulled the blankets up further to ward off the chill.

"Have ever told you I'm glad you're the smart one?"

"I can always stand to hear it again." She smiled "Trust me if I hadn't done anything I suspect it wouldn't have taken you very long to get us in that situation." There was a twinge of guilt as she felt him nuzzle. "I hope you don't mind I didn't ask. I just don't want children right now." The fire crackled and popped, making the dim light of the flames dance over her face. "But I do want you."

"I'm not ready either." He sighed. "I didn't have the best role models."

"You'll be a wonderful father. And I have all the faith in the world that when the time comes and we want to conceive, you'll perform that particular job admirably." she joked.

He chuckled but then paused. "Family?"

"You don't think we're a family?" She asked carefully, winding a finger through his hair.

"I never thought of it that way." He mused. "But we are, aren't we?"

"I like to think so. And I want a few more grand adventures with you before we expand this family." She admitted softly, idly playing with his hair.

"Me too." He caressed her thigh gently as he shifted his weight. "Well, that, and I just don't want to share you with anyone for a while." Smiling wolfishly, laughing hungrily he kissed her passionately before pushing himself onto his arms. Between Belle's knees, he grabbed her under a leg and pulled her closer to his hips. Belle laughed through his kiss, throwing her arms around his neck. Feeling hot and breathless. "I thought you were tired."

"What can I say? All of this talk about making babies has reinvigorated me." he kissed, pulling off her robe.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Who's ready for a solid two weeks worth of pure, 100% organic fluff? We're gettin' so dang cute, ladies and gents. I hope you enjoyed week one. And thank you for reading! Every bit of interaction with the story is appreciated. I can only wish that I'm able to entertain you through the very end (and the end was fun to write, let me tell you).

See you next week.
"Drop your elbow, Master. No, not so close to you."

Belle clung to the doorway of the fencing hall, finding Lumiere swiftly moving around the prince, soundly trouncing him with a foil. Ansell appeared slow and lumbering compared to the bright and agile older man.

Lumiere turned, giving her a half bow. "Mademoiselle, are you here to collect our pupil?"

"You still have time to fence circles around him." She reassured, folding her arms and leaning against the doorway.

"You know, Ma Cherie, you should take lessons with us sometime, I remember seeing you with a sword, you were quite fearless." He wagged his brows.

"I'd really love to try, actually." Belle watched Ansell suddenly become very hesitant, suspicious even. "What's wrong, my prince?"

"Lumiere, I think it should just be the two of us." He exclaimed pointedly.

"Are you afraid I'm going to do better than you?" She tilted her head playfully to the side.

"No." Ansell snorted unconvincingly.

Lumiere chuckled.

"Lumiere, we have a month to ourselves, I'd love some private lessons." Belle hinted, watching how Ansell wasn't quite sure about how he felt about it all. For all his playfulness and sweetness, his ego could bruise easily at the most particular things.

"But of course." He bowed once more with far more flourish than before, turning back to his student. "Now come, Master. En garde!"

She watched them for a minute, swearing that he was improving.

"I don't know if I like being watched so closely," Ansell grunted, clearly sore he was having a day of being bested.

"Come now Your Grace, you're hacking away with that poor thing, don't be distracted."

"If you can't stand me watching, however will you last in a palace of busybodies?" She called out teasingly.

"You're not making any of this easier, you know." He told her peevishly. Sounding more like her grumbling beast than her Ansell.

"I'm motivation for improvement."

"Not when you're mocking me like that." he frowned, looking ready to growl impatiently. "It's just teasing!"
"Do you need a prize?" She suggested playfully, telling herself she wasn't going to let him get away with stewing and brooding over his poor fencing form.

Dropping his hand, Lumiere stopped to watch the two. Ansell's mood lightening at the idea of some sort of reward. "Are you suggesting one?"

Belle squinted thoughtfully. Ansell had a lopsided smile starting on his face, the one that often appeared when he was musing over the prospect of something involving the two of them. It always made him look a little dopey, and she found it so very cute. "If you do well in fencing, and in class and keep from being angry about the day? Let's go back to the house after." She said the final words suggestively before walking off. Knowing that Ansell, despite his lamenting over the bed, found the privacy of the house to themselves a respite from the barrage of royal duties.

Ansell was still staring at the door when he felt a sharp jab in his stomach.

Lumiere waved his foil. "She said do well."

The prince huffed, taking his stance once more.

"En garde!"

"What are you reading?"

Ansell glanced up from his book, checking the cover. "A book on herbs and remedies." He explained, sitting on the floor next to the large metal washtub he had dragged next to the fire. Belle was in it, the milky white water with lazily clustered suds up to her collarbone, her knees small islands on the other side. She looked remarkably relaxed, yet still quirked a brow at his answer.

"That's a new one." Intrigued Belle turned, pulling herself away from her bath and studying his book. The house had been a well-needed break for both of them. As much as she loved the castle, she felt there was a lack of silence and slower pace. Beyond the safety of the library's quiet, there was always something that needed tending to, reading, cooking, scrubbing, folding. People constantly moving about to keep the castle in a state of royal perfection. And while Belle herself was rather active, curling up and relaxing into her book-induced introversion was always welcome. "What has you reading about botany? That's a little bit heavier than the Lady of the Lake."

"I kept thinking about what you said a few nights ago," He began thoughtfully "about the medicinal uses of certain plants to keep us out of the family way-"

"I thought we agreed-"

"We still do." He reassured. "I just thought about how readily all of this is available to the province. We're in the woods, a lot of it grows naturally." The prince explained astutely, skimming the page he had just read. "I find it fascinating things can be harvested in the wild so close to civilization and used to help heal the body or prevent... particular situations."

"It's not just the herbs, you know." She told him, watching the prince look up. "There are mushrooms and roots for cooking out in the woods too. I'm not familiar with any of them seeing as we don't cook. There's also patches of wild raspberries all throughout the forest. Papa was the first one who showed me where to pick them."

"Aren't those your favorite? We should go get some, make a day of it."

"They're all over picked for the summer." She explained with a bit of disappointment. "I went a few
days after the celebration. Nothing left."

"Hm." He murmured thoughtfully.

"But… herbs and remedies?" She asked, watching him keenly. Always curious about his interests.

Ansell dipped his head, a touch bashful. "I know it's considered a woman's trade. Herbalists and midwives and poisoners." he shrugged, trying to sound merely casually interested yet failing.

"Ansell, I built a wheelbarrow for the garden today." She announced. "And I got a stern talking to from the headmaster for not only building it but also "reading too much and neglecting my duties to the household."" Belle rolled her eyes, scoffing.

"You know, the more I hear about this headmaster, the more I actively dislike him." The prince grumbled.

"The point is, I'm the last person to judge anyone's interests based on whether or not they conform to whatever the rest of the world thinks is for men or women."

He looked up her and was met with kind, sweet brown eyes and an encouraging smile.

"Pursue what makes you happy, and don't listen to them. It's hard sometimes, however, fitting in isn't always a good thing." Her mouth quirked and she said dryly. "Listen to the funny girl in town, she has experience. She'll also support you."

"Well, first of all, you're not funny. Not in the way they mean." He soothed, reaching out to caress her cheek with a finger. "Second, I honestly don't remember the last person to support my interests until you came along. And I'm so grateful I have you."

Belle ached at his words. It was so sad no one else had cared to nurture his talents or curiosities, yet instead force him into a mold. Times like the one in front of her made her think of how different their fathers were. Both of them had lost their mothers, but both had been exposed to very different types of care and parenting afterward. Maurice had always encouraged her, no matter how silly the idea or fixation. "I'll always support your interests."

"I'll support yours too." He reassured, feeling warm at the prospect of having someone simply encourage him to be him. "It being inventing and building to get out of work to read as much as possible."

"Excusez-moi, it's for efficiency." She said, a touch defensive yet well aware he was just being bratty. "If you can make work easier and get it done faster-"

"To read books-"

"Why wouldn't you?"

"Because that's just time wasted when you could be reading books." He shrugged, playfully.

She gazed pointedly at his book.

"I'm studying." He retorted. "Shouldn't you be bathing? You'll be cold and pruny if you keep trying to defend yourself. Leave me to my plants." She shot him a playful scowl and Ansell returned back to his book. It scarcely lasted a few minutes as his eyes wandered up to the bath. To the beautiful, tempting nakedness right under the surface of the water. Cher dieu he wasn't going to have any of that to sample for an entire month.
Belle saw his glazed over expression and the corner of her mouth pulled into an amused, crooked smile. "So plants?"

The prince snapped out of it, setting the book down. "You know," Ansell cleared his throat. "You're incredibly distracting in there. You're giving me all sorts of impure thoughts and keeping me from my reading." He accused dryly, teasingly.

"I feel like your thoughts have been particularly impure lately." She pointed out, carefully washing an arm, knowing he was watching it all, enraptured with every second. "Also more frequent."

"I think it has something to do with stress? That, and not getting to see you for a month. Could be that." Ansell sighed, flopping down on the floor on his back, taking a deep, dramatic breath. "Maybe both."

"What is it now?"

"Just thinking about that large tub in our chambers. Fits the two of us." He muttered, throwing an arm over his eyes. "But there are so many people with sooo many questions at that castle. Not to mention my horrible brother."

Belle rolled her eyes at him. "Ansell, we never actually wash when we're in that tub."

"I know, it's wonderful."

"You're incorrigible."

"I could always change the subject and talk about plays…” He chuckled with her "which… is really not talking about plays as much as it is passionately arguing about plays until one of us concedes."

"It's not my fault you have terrible taste." She said a-matter-of-factly, smirking as she was well aware of what she was starting.

He grinned out from under his arm. "That's simply not true! We agree on so many and I'll have you know I've been making my way through the romances."

"Oh really?" Belle's voice said mirthfully from the tub.

"Yes, I've been trying to impress a young Mademoiselle from Villeneuve who is so very opinionated about plays." Ansell's deep voice exclaimed from the floor. "It's dreadful, I have no idea why I try so hard, yet here I am agonizing over them to gain her affections."

"It sounds like you're trying a bit too hard, Monsieur." She countered "Perhaps her affections will come more naturally when you just admit you have bad taste in plays and are wrong."

"Such sweeping generalizations regarding my character and taste." peering out from under his arm, he stealthily reached up.

"They are what they are." she felt something tug at her braid that was hanging over the back of the tub.

"Untrue?" feeling a swat, he retreated.

"You're such a fan of overly masculine works." she rolled her eyes. "Manly men and swords and war."

"Oh, I'm the stereotype? Mademoiselle I-Love-Romances-And-Cute-Endings." He said in a
mockingly higher voice, stealthily tugging her braid again and avoiding the sweeping hand.

She knew, without looking at him, that he was making some kind of stupid face at her. "Excuse me? There are tragic endings too, and you know it. It's not like Romeo and Juliet go riding off into the sunset." Her braid was tugged once more and she splashed some water over the side in retaliation. Hearing him sputter and shuffle she let out a soft, pleased laugh.

Ansell wiped the water from his mouth and allowed a silence to pass between them. He listened to the light sloshing of water in the tub, how Belle had started absently humming to herself. It was soft, gentle, barely there but oh so sweet. She didn't sing enough in his opinion, but he was never one to push her. "O, my dear Orlando, how it grieves me to see thee wear thy heart in a scarf." He began to recite Rosalind's lines from under his arm. "It is my arm." He replied as Orlando.

"I thought thy heart had been wounded with the claws of a lion." Belle picked up gently, washing a leg.

He grinned, glad to have her on board. "Wounded it is, but with the eyes of a lady."

"Did your brother tell you how I counterfeited to swoon when he showed me your handkerchief?"

"Aye, and greater wonders than that."

Belle smiled warmly, shaking her head at the prone prince on the floor. How much more perfect could the night be? "-no sooner met but they looked, no sooner looked but they loved, no sooner loved but they sighed, no sooner sighed but they asked one another the reason, no sooner knew the reason but they sought the remedy."

"They are in the very wrath of love, and will together. Clubs will not part them." He finished for her, softly, smiling.

Both of them basked in the quiet that laid itself out afterward. Calm and comforting. The fire crackling and the wind whispering against the windows as the only noise. A lasting moment where Versailles didn't exist.

"What are you thinking about?" Belle asked softly, sincerely.

"Just next year." He confessed, less playful, more honest. "Where we'll be, what I'll be doing. What I'll be. I don't know what interests me, what I'll be good at." He was dazed at his spot on the floor. "I've never had to be anything other than a foppish heir to a title. I've never had to think about a career, about providing for a family. Everything was just, there."

"Well, you'll be with me." She reassured, also reassuring herself as the unknown was frightening. "We'll be somewhere safe, hopefully, with my father. And you'll find what you're good at because you're not only smart, but also for someone who's never been anything other than a foppish heir you're a surprisingly hard worker." Belle encouraged "And honestly we'll probably both be working in some capacity. Can you see me staying home as your little wife? Raising some brood while you provide for us?"

"Oh, no. That would be awful... for both of us." He refrained from saying that she'd kill him, or that they'd both go crazy and in the end, she'd kill him. However, his darling was not one to be kept in the house. Certainly not in the traditional sense. And neither of them were terribly traditional. "Hm. We need to talk to your father."

"And the staff. I think they'll want to help."
"You know what I would like?" He finally grunted, pushing himself up off the floor. "A cup of wine."

"I'm almost done, could you pour me one too? Please?" She asked.

"Of course, my Darling Rosalind." Kissing the top of her head he headed off to the kitchen.

"What did you go get for dinner?" She asked, eyeing her robe, not really wanting to get out of warm the tub and into the brisker air. Beginning gauge if her hunger was worth the chill.

He paused, making a mildly pained sound as if she was not going to like his answer. "I may have… improvised."

Leaning back in the tub, she looked at him curiously. "How do you improvise dinner?"

"I may have gone to the patisserie instead of the cafe and gotten some pralines, some profiteroles, and a mille-feulle?" Turning, he smiled sheepishly at her.

Belle quirked a brow. "So you just brought back dessert?"

"Maybe?"

"A lot of dessert, from the sound of it."

"I'll have you know as the prince of the province, anything I say is fact." He announced, turning around and uncorking the bottle of wine. "And tonight, mille-feulle is a dinner food."

"Except for the fact that it isn't." She knew he was furrowing his brows as he took out two mugs.

"Excuse me, did you not hear the part where I'm the prince?" Ansell growled in mock frustration, turning with his brows furrowed and pouring wine into the mug.

"When has that ever moved me?" Belle reminded stubbornly, playfully.

"I don't think I'm sharing my pralines or my wine with you now." He threatened. "You can go get your ow-"

Maurice tiredly opened the door to his house.

He looked up, hand aloft to take off his hat, and didn't quite know what he was seeing. It wasn't registering. The other hand nearly let go of the bundle of supplies tucked under his arm.

Ansell looked up at him from the kitchen in breeches and a shirt, pouring wine, a selection of desserts temptingly displayed in an open pastry box.

Belle slid further under the water as if she could sink entirely under and disappear.

Maurice opened his mouth, then shut it.

The prince froze and nearly spilled the bottle. "Hellooooo siiiiir." His mind couldn't come up with a response. It was reeling as he fumbled to keep the Bordeaux from pouring onto the table.

"I'm home early." Maurice finally managed. Standard warmth in his voice not present. Stern, questioning, fatherly.

"That… you are." Ansell nervously watched the man go over and set his supplies down.
"Hello, Belle." He grunted, uncomfortable with the sight and the notion. Turning his back to her he shut his eyes to not even risk a glimpse. "I assume you kept yourself busy while I was away?" he placed his roll of paintbrushes at his workbench.

His tone made her feel much smaller. And Belle wasn't quite sure how to answer that. She held onto the wall of the tub, eyes darting between her father and lover. Curling her toes under the water, she opened her mouth.

Ansell mouthed the words "help", looking like he was about to be fed to a pack of dogs.

"Would you mind getting dressed and going upstairs? Ansell and I will be having a chat out in the garden." He announced quickly, still looking away from the scene.

Hastily, water sloshing on the floor, she got up and threw her robe on. Poor Ansell looked like a cornered, wounded deer. All panicked big, soft eyes, begging her to help him as she made a break for the stairs.

"Um." The prince began to nod his head dumbly to Maurice's announcement. "Yes?"

Belle mouthed a "sorry" and slunk back up to her room.

"I'll take that, thank you." Turning around and walking over, Maurice stole the cup of wine out of his hand and doubled back to the door. "Come along, boy."

Pausing for a moment, he took the other cup of wine and slipped into his coat, buttoning it up, stepping into his boots.

Maurice was down the stone steps, hanging off of the garden fence. Chin tilted up, eyes focused on the stars that winked up above. A cool, crisp summer night. The tavern's raucous thunderings across town but a murmur.

The prince met him there, taking a deep breath.

"You know, I haven't spoken to you-" Maurice began, taking a sip of his cup. "not man to man. As an artist, I like to think I have more liberal sensibilities. And frankly, I'm well aware that my daughter is so headstrong she's going to do whatever she wants with whoever she wants no matter what I say or even try to say." He admitted with a sigh. "That, and you seem to a be a nice fellow." His face twisted thought "Not when we first met, mind you. When you were all-" he gestured to the air, a hand like a claw as he emphasized a much larger height. "Furry. But it's clear you've come a long way."

"Sir, I never meant to disrespect you or your home in any way." He said quickly, voice full of nerves as he stood as rigid as one of the posts. Gulping down a mouthful of wine, the prince desperately wanted something stronger.

"Ansell, it's very clear you two love each other very much. However, I want you to think about the seriousness of you coming over and playing house with her." He explained somberly. "You two are going through the motions of really, truly integrating into each other's lives and creating stability for one another. But-" holding up a finger, turning to meet the young eyes glinting in the moonlight. "you're also going away to a place where excess is celebrated, for a month."

Standing up a bit straighter, he suddenly felt a touch defensive. "Sir, I would never be unfaithful-"

"Aristocrats have a reputation. I'm not unread." He responded firmly. "You were quite the lavish host before you were cursed, were you not?"
"I admit, I did indulge in.. women." Face felt flush, stumbling over words. Could he just die instead of have this conversation? "I indulged in everything. However, Sir, a lot of me has changed. And your daughter is my rock."

"Belle has never really shown interest in anyone before." He told Ansell carefully. "I don't think there's a man in this entire village she's ever given a second glance. But there's you, son." He shook his head, smiling in disbelief as he was reminded the handsome prince in front of him used to look so frightful. "She lights up with you. And I know she'll be the type to not... stray... as it were.” Maurice said awkwardly, doing his best. "She's focused, and passionate, and devoted. And I don't want to see her heart broken," the artist was uncharacteristically firm. "All because of what's encouraged when you're away. Everyone knows that men of your rank tend to become bored very quickly with monogamy."

"If we're being completely honest, I hate French Court." the talk was more painful than being shot by Gaston, he was sure of it.

"It doesn't mean it's not tempting." Maurice took another sip. "It's easy to fall back into bad habits.” Ansell nodded his head slowly. The crickets singing, leaves of the vegetables rustling from a breeze, a cat darted across the street. "I hope I can prove myself to you." Head dipping, he let out a deep breath. "I love your daughter more than anything."

"Love doesn't mean people are immune from hurting one another." the older man noted wisely. "But, I do sincerely hope you're as good of a man as I think you are."

He looked up and saw her father's eyes. Warm, supportive.

"Because she loves you the world over, and you two are so good together it brings my heart joy." Reaching out, he clasped his hand over the prince's shoulder. "Now, let's go inside." Walking up the stairs, he turned to the young man who had paused in confusion. "What, did you think I was going to throw you out? It's come to my attention that currently, your home life isn't the best situation."

Ansell drained his cup and jogged up the stairs. "Thank you for the talk. And sir?"

Maurice's hand stopped on the handle.

"I don't that get much wisdom from my own father- or any wisdom, really- so it's appreciated.” He said sincerely.

"You're very welcome. However, next time, you don't have to look at me like I'm going to threaten violence for hurting Belle." Opening the door they walked in. "She's capable of doing that herself."

Ansell held back a chuckle. Instead smiling in bemusement to the truth.

"I'm going to need a lot more of this very good wine." Maurice sighed heavily, walking back into his house. "Oh yes, Belle?"

Belle crept out of her room, in a nightgown and robe, looking down cautiously.

"Help Ansell clean up so you two can go to bed. It's mostly your mess." Ignoring how utterly confused she was, Maurice went for more wine as he heard his daughter move downstairs. Stopping and remembering, he pointed a finger up. "And you two? Not while I'm here. You have plenty of other places and opportunities."

The pair exchanged anxious looks as Maurice dug through the pastry box, telling himself he
deserved a profiterole for all the stress they put him through.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: We're headed into more serious territory next week. But fluff and Shakespeare and princes deciding dessert is dinner food for this week. Who doesn't love that? Also, expect more of Maurice. He's one of my favorite voices of reason, and I think his relationship with Ansell should be explored. He is after all very close to his daughter.

As always, your kudos, comments, and sweet bookmarks are always appreciated. Have questions? Concerns? Problems? Let me know below.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Gustave: Le Fou's real name
Stephane: Stanley's real name
Gaston was that asshole that gave dumb nicknames to all the people who hung around him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Belle was grateful the staff had taken so eagerly to educating Ansell as it meant she had time to work on the garden's late summer crop before the colder weather affected the plants.

The time in the dirt was spent musing over the prospect of running away with Ansell. Trying to think of when it would be best to leave, when they may be ready, what they may need, or where they could possibly go. Musing over how hard it would be to keep his father at bay, or if by some divine miracle the Duke would allow him to relinquish his title and give it to his brother who seemed keen to inherit. Perhaps Leon would help them if it meant him becoming the new heir to the province. As her mind wandered through the what-ifs Belle began to think about what Ansell may be good at. An artist, like her father? A merchant? Textiles? Fishing? She was sure he would find something to excel at, her prince was so eager to learn her way of life. A far cry from other princes she assumed. Those who wouldn't care to come into town and stay at her cottage. Those who would want to shower her with luxury and stay away from the realities of the world she came from.

"Mademoiselle, you never gave me that tour."

Looking up from the row of carrots, the sky darkening with lethargic gray rain clouds, Belle found Leon. Draped in the finest clothing a noble could wear while venturing outdoors, sitting astride a stunningly proud white horse. Feathered and grand like it's master, impatiently pawing the cobblestones as the Viscount slung himself down. "My Lord." She rose slowly, wiping her hands on her apron. Wishing she could just ignore him like she had Gaston and every other man who came drooling her way so many times.

"So this is your… Cottage." His eyes judged every inch. The little sliver of paradise his brother had escaped to. Worn and repaired, dirty, simple, the girl in the dirt watching him so very carefully. Was this what Anselme desired? Dreadful.

"It is." She tensed her jaw, trying to gauge his next move. "I would invite you in-"

"No need, but thank you." Taking off his riding gloves, Leon prowled up to the fence.

"And what has you in town, Sire?" Belle held her ground as her stomach twisted to the thought of his family knowing where the house was. Where their sanctuary was.

"I wanted to take in the countryside, see what has enraptured my brother so much." He ignored those gawking on the street at him in all his splendor.

"There's a lot of charm to the province." She offered, steadying herself as her pulse quickened.
"Ansell's been appreciating it's beauty for the first time since the curse has been broken."
"Yes, charm." He grunted in a way that meant he felt otherwise, drawing a curious brow, frowning at the flock of geese that loudly meandered past them. "Ansell. You do not address His Highness properly?"

Belle swallowed thickly, eyes darting to the side. "I apologize, we became very informal during my stay in the castle during the-

"The curse, yes. I suppose he didn't go by Prince Anselme then. Did he even go by Ansell?"

There was a small crowd lingering on the corner of the street. Watching, muttering, she wanted to shout at them to leave but it would only worsen things. She couldn't even begin to fathom the tall tales that would crop up in the morning. "No, My Lord. I addressed him as the Beast." The clouds were navy overhead, churning. A prayer for rain never left her lips but she wished it could. An excuse to leave him, to keep him from prying and sniffing around.

"Hm." Leon tied his horse to the fence, a smug smirk on his lips as he watched her mind at work. A smart one this was, gears turning tenaciously behind those keen brown eyes. Funny, Anselme used to favor the dimmer beauties. "I would love to see the town, could I trouble you for a walk?"

Offering a hand, he watched her hesitate. A silence passing between them, a look of defiance shot at him. A rebellious one, perhaps for his brother the sweetest prey was the one that was hardest to catch. "Your Lord requests your presence." It was a pointed, low-toned threat and he watched her stew before the girl opened the gate.

The door opening made them both look back. Maurice came out, adjusting his glasses, curious yet concerned.

"Your father I presume?" Leon straightened his back.

"Papa, this is Prince Anselme's brother." She explained her voice tense. "The Viscount."

"Your Grace," Maurice came down and bowed, looking the man over cautiously. His daughter had told him enough for him to feel on edge towards the visit. "And what do we owe the pleasure?"

"I wanted to tour my father's lands." Leon's voice was cool and in control, eyes flicking from the old man to the young woman. "I've heard so much about the village and when we first met your daughter offered me a tour of Villeneuve."

"Hm," Maurice could tell the last person his daughter wanted to be near was the man in front of them. Thought Belle had begun to venture rather far from the safety of the nest, it was still hard for him to not want to shelter her from any threats. Even if that included her beloved's family.

"So I'm here to steal her away for a short time."

The hair on the back of his next stood up. Something about the way it was said. "Sire, I think-"

"I don't mind, Papa." Belle told him, a protective hint in her tone. With a reassuring look that was far more steely than it should have been, she opened the gate. Well aware that if her father tried to stand up for her and dismiss the viscount it could be considered defiance against a nobleman. "After all, I did promise." Leon outstretched a gentlemanly hand, and the one she used to take his was stained with dark earth. Caked under her nails and damp from the fall rains, the rich soil brushed against him and pressed into his palm, giving him a light coating. She took a little pleasure in how he recoiled ever so slightly from her lack of propriety. "I'm sorry, My Lord. I had to harvest our carrots."

"No need for apology, I interrupted you." He winced just enough for it to be caught.
"I'll be back before supper." She reassured her father, leaving reluctantly yet not with fear.

Taking her down the street, the viscount began to search for what his brother enjoyed so much. Whatever had Anselme flocking to the village to play the part of some drab cottage dwelling commoner. It couldn't just be the girl, she didn't hold a candle to the wide selection a young prince had in Paris. That frock, tucked into her apron at the side, those bloomers and dirty boots. Hair falling out of its ponytail in wisps, book tucked into a homemade pocket. What a rough little thing.

"Prince Anselme has been dreadfully busy since you last dropped by." Leon offered. "Father wanted me to see him readied for court, but I keep being told that's taken care of. I suspect it's your doing?"

"I've known His Grace for over a year." Belle nodded slightly, a chill running up her spine. It felt so odd to call Ansell by his former titles. His Grace, His Highness, His Excellence, His Majesty, Prince Anselme. He was Ansell, her Dearest. Her big sweet love, no matter what size or shape. "I believe I have a good grasp of what he needs to improve so he can have a successful debut at court. I simply suggested the staff work together to help him excel."

"Hmm." The Viscount's chin tilted. "Well thank you for helping me work less. He never did like to listen to me or talked to me for that matter. I doubt I would have been any help."

She knew bait when she saw it. Belle's eyes wandered around as she chose her words with as much tact as she could. "He can be rather stubborn at times."

Leon scoffed. "At times? He must have improved greatly then." Pausing, he glanced over some textiles someone was carrying into a shop. Cheaply printed paisleys, an attempt at knocking off the latest Parisian fashion trends. "You were startlingly absent from the castle while my father was lodged there. May I ask why? We certainly don't bite, though His Highness may bark rather loud."

There was a low grumble of thunder as the wind picked up, rustling the bales of hay and flapping awnings. "You hadn't seen the prince in so long, I wanted to give you time as a family." Belle began to walk back home, ready to site the turn in the weather as her excuse to retreat. However, his hand grabbed her wrist. "Sire."

"Just a bit further." He said tightly, coldly. Squeezing her wrist to keep her from squirming away. "It isn't raining just yet."

Belle wanted to jerk her hand out of his grasp, yet all she could do is steady herself.

Stephane came out from the candle shop, watching the nobleman in elaborate clothing keeping Belle from moving away from him. His eyes narrowing, he reached for his rapier hanging in its frog near the door.

"That was very thoughtful of you, giving us space," Leon told her, observing people begin to close their windows to keep out the oncoming rain. Even if the pair was good gossip, it wasn't worth the water.

When Leon looked towards the other side of the street she shook her head slightly at Stephane. The candlemaker dropped his hand and lingered carefully. Gustave came up and stood behind him, placing a hand on his partner's shoulder, the two mindful of their friend and her suspiciously dangerous looking escort. "I also live with my father, he needs my help." She supplied with a growl edging into her words, ripping her wrist away.

"Mademoiselle-" he began in a low, threatening tone.
"You can escort me, Sire. But I don't wish to be touched." Belle snapped.

Leon dusted his hands together to remove the dirt that clung to his fingers. "Well, you shouldn't take our intrusion as a reason to stay away." He noticed the men in the candle shop and flashed a smile to them. Tipping his ridiculously plumed hat. "His Grace is clearly very fond of you, and I wouldn't want to disrupt your visitations." Leon's eyes slid to the side, and he chuckled to himself. "And I won't, as per the prince's very strict orders."

Belle looked up at him, her pace slowing.

"Oh, you might not know." Pausing, he reached for a rose a farmer was carrying away in a basket heaped with blossoms. Plucking it, he studied the lacy pink petals as the farmer was oblivious to the theft. "You see, Mademoiselle, I'm actually breaking the rules right now. His Grace was very clear a few days ago I was not to see you." Drawing it to his nose, he breathed the sweetness in deeply. "It was why I was a bit skittish at the castle. Eyes everywhere, you know." Running his finger up the thorny stem, he remembered what he had heard about the curse. Truly an enchanted rose. "I forgot how loud he can be when he starts ordering and threatening. Everyone's been acting like he's such a kitten now, but it's still in there. That temper." Leon caught a glimpse of her face, the sudden uncertainty creeping in. Lifting his head, he soldiered on. His hooks were in and he savored it. "Physically threatening to do harm himself. That's a new one though."

She turned her head away, worry sweeping across her face she didn't wish him to see. "So he threatened you with violence," Belle muttered.

"Well, it started as a threat. You know, he always used to just tell me the guards would throw me out. But he was much slighter in build back then. Lithe." Leon mused. "Not an outdoorsman in the least. Much more muscled now, one can assume from his exertions when he had his condition." Shrugging, he caught the sight of a priest watching them from a church window. The Pere's eyes judging him sternly. He nodded in respect, guiding her back around towards her house. "But still, throwing me up against a wall, hand at my throat. Didn't see that coming."

The farm girl dipped her head, her face feeling hot. Trying to tell herself it was what he wanted, her reaction, to sow so much doubt in Ansell. "Were you badly hurt, Sire?" Her words held a bitter edge from being toyed with.

"Just rattled, particularly after he threatened to throw me out the window if I so much as came near you." A mist swept through the darkened town, and they walked more briskly back to the house.

"I'm sorry you had that experience with the prince." Belle bit the inside of her cheek as the knots in her stomach lurched. The image of Ansell, wild-eyed and atop Leon in the fencing hall flashing across her mind. His snarling, roaring, terrifying face. Ready to beat the living daylights out of his brother. The beast in the woods; his snarling, roaring, terrifying face.

"He obviously cares about you a great deal. And how could he not? True love broke the curse." Spinning the flower between his fingers, he smiled to himself. "We all know what that means, my dear. By the laws of magic, you two are clearly soulmates."

"I'd never thought of it that way." The gate was so close she lengthened her strides.

"Well, I think he does." He grinned, gaze so wicked. "It's so Shakespearean if you think about it." The girl was so focused on the road she never caught it as the rain began to patter.

The brown eyes flickered up to him, her voice low, cold. "Which kind would it be, Sire?"
"You've been such a wonderful companion, Belle." He told her as she unlocked the gate and he stepped to the side to retrieve his horse. "I didn't get to see the whole of the village, but perhaps when the weather permits I'll venture out another day."

"I'm honored to have provided you with the company." She said unconvincingly, latching the gate, keeping him away.

"But perhaps this can be our little secret?" Leon chivalrously offered the rose as the raindrops grew heavy and fat. "For my health, of course. I'd rather not like to find myself sailing through the air towards the gardens."

The silence between them was thick and threatening. A quagmire Belle desperately wanted to be pulled out of. After a moment, her eyes narrowed and she took the flower. Ferocious, stubborn, staring intensely at the petals. "I dislike keeping secrets from the prince, Sire." The brown eyes shot up at him, burning. "Perhaps it would be wise to heed his warnings. I wish he wouldn't have acted the way he had, but those are his wishes and he is the prince."

Leon's mouth tightened. Bowing, he recovered. "You are all too wise, Mademoiselle."

"I'm sure eventually the opportunity will present itself for me to tell him about your visit." She threatened, watching his face quietly boil in defeat.

"Thank you for your time, and I must bid you adieu." Reaching over he took her hand and felt it resist as he brought it to his lips and kissed it. "Stay dry."

"You as well, Sire. The storm looks quite nasty." Taking a step back, the rain soaking her dress, she watched him ride off. Catching her breath Belle turned, chucked the rose into the muddying soil, and quickly walked up the steps. Leaning against the door and taking a deep breath to compose herself before seeing her father.

"Sorry I'm late." Ansell apologized, shucking off his coat and taking off his hat as he entered the house. The rain was pounding on the roof as he pulled off his soaking wet boots thick with red mud. "I went a roundabout route but I'd like to think it was worth it."

Both Maurice and Belle looked up from their respective projects. One working on his piece for the next fair, the other simply doing her best to distract her restless mind.

"You're sopping wet." She said, wondering what he had possibly gotten himself into as he ran his fingers through his hair.

"More damp than anything else. It's warm in here, it shouldn't last too long." He watched Belle get up and motioned her to stay where she was. "I was thinking, maybe I can handle dinner? One of those learning new things… things."

"Why don't I supervise?" She suggested, rising and watching him set a satchel on the kitchen counter and roll up his sleeves. Turning her head, she watched plump red berries tumble out of the unfastened opening. It was enough to pull her mind away from Leon. "What's this?"

"Oh," He turned, grinning triumphantly, motioning for her to take a look. "You were saying everything out in the forest has been over-picked and you couldn't find any more raspberries."

"And you did?" Belle asked with slight disbelief, taking out a cheesecloth stained with juice. A
bundle of her favorite fruits was wrapped inside, bright and glistening. Of all people to be an expert berry-hunter, her prince. She looked curiously up at him as her father came over and felt a twinge. His brother’s words kept echoing in her mind, as much as she wanted to forget them. The old Ansell, the one Leon wanted her to believe was just a few days at court away. Belle told herself that simply wasn’t true.

The prince showed her his thorn pricked hands, his brow furrowing to the look on her face. The brightness gone from her eyes, pensive, hesitant, perhaps pained? He wondered what was wrong. "I thought you might like them." Ansell supplied, hoping to cheer her up in some small way. "There’s also some early squash and I found some sage and thyme, and just a bit of rosehips. Oh! And some mushrooms, not poisonous, I promise."

Belle glanced from the bounty to Ansell, and back again. Forgetting for a moment about the day’s events. "You found this all wild?"

The golden head nodded, watching her inspect the raspberries. "I knew where the berries were, and everything else was more or less nearby. You just have to know where to look." He shrugged. "I know cooking isn’t a pastime of the house, but maybe you can barter some of it?"

Maurice inquisitively studied the contents that had been pulled out of the bag. Lips thoughtfully pursing as he picked up a small palmful of rosehips. "Ansell, how did you come to be such a keen botanist?"

"I’ve been curious lately." He replied as if his skills were more a casual hobby. "It was just recently that I started reading up on uses for plants. Belle inspired me from uh… a conversation we had." He nodded to her. "And I began to realize I knew where a lot of the flora in question grew-"

She looked up, piecing it all together. "You spent a lot of time in the forest." Belle realized. "Years."

"I was bored quite often, so I took to the woods to get out of my rotting castle." Ansell supplied, suddenly becoming anxious, a bit ashamed. Talking about his cursed years was often a difficult thing to push through. "That and… ahh… after a while, I may have given into more baser instincts." Twisting his hands together, he hoped that wasn’t a new development for Belle. He had after all littered his chambers with the bones of his prey when she had first broken into the west wing. It was all so unseemly though. "But because of all that I know all of the places people go, and the places they don’t. The places where just the animals go. The deer trails, the migration paths, where everything grows." Taking in their stunned silence, Ansel shifted as he wasn’t quite able to read them. The pair just kept looking at him, and then the herbs, and then each other. Thunder rumbled outside.

Maurice stared down at the herbs in his palm, finally clearing his throat and speaking up. "Do you know what they all do?"

"A little? I'm not very good at it but-" The Prince squinted in thought, trying to recollect his reading. "Headaches-" He pointed to the sage. "But also culinary seasoning. Apparently, it's very rare so far up north and does better near the coast? However, there's a large patch just west of the castle where there's a fox den. Rosehips for digestion, thyme for seasoning but also toothaches, gout, a few other things. The mushrooms are cepes and trompette de la mort for cooking." He paused thoughtfully, raising a brow. "Which I might give some to Chef, he probably would like it."

Belle’s face slackened.

"What?" He asked nervously, both Maurice and Belle gawking at him in disbelief. She still hadn’t said anything. Was she still stuck on the fact he used to hunt like an animal? Or whatever was wrong
"Ansell, you could be an herbalist." She finally managed a smile, a proud one he hoped, tugging on the corners of her mouth.

"Really?" The prince was taken aback by the announcement. Rubbing the back of his neck, he mused over the thought. "You think so? People would pay me for all this?" She grinned proudly and his knees began to melt.

Maurice chuckled. "Oh my boy, quite a bit of money. What you have right here is a very comfortable amount of money for a day's work."

"It wasn't even a day, I just took a longer route over here." He told them, surprised his detour was so well received.

"When you get back from Versailles, you should talk to Agatha," Belle told him, trying to contain her enormous excitement over the prospect of Ansell having already having found his skill. "She knows a lot about mixing herbs and their medicinal uses. You might be able to trade some of your bounty for lessons."

"Huh." He thought it all over, smiling.

"Good job." Maurice patted his back. "Let me get some twine, we'll dry these for later use."

Belle sidled up to him and rested a palm flat on his chest, tilting her head up and giving him a kiss.

"So I did good?" He asked softly, his smile warm and earnest.

"You did very good." She smiled wearily into his damp waistcoat. "You're full of surprises."

"Are you alright, Darling?" He asked, cupping her cheek.

"What do you mean?" She asked, not sounding as nearly as comfortable as she wanted.

"Just seems like something's off." he sighed. "You look a little tired."

"I could use some sleep." She admitted, feeling drained from the day's disturbance. Holding him by the waist, she dipped her head. "I love you."

He paused, as it wasn't her standard declaration of affection. It sounded strained, something masked behind the words. "I love you too." Nuzzling her slightly, he held her a little tighter. "I love you the world over."

Chapter End Notes

Two more chapters and then Part One wraps. Which means we'll be starting Part Two in Versailles. Excited? Nervous? Slightly Nauseous? Me too. But next week is a two-parter, so bonus reading for everyone.

As always, thank you for the reads, faves, kudos, comments, and bookmarks. I'm so glad this story entertains you all as much as I enjoy writing it. And there's been some question from a few people about this so I want to clear it up: despite the title being
rather negative, there IS a pleasant ending at the end of this enchanted rainbow. Pinky
promise and all that.

Want to ask questions? Have thoughts? Opinions? Like bits of the chapter? Want to tell
me like it is? Give me what for? I'll definitely read it (and most likely respond) in the
comments below.
Part One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ansell gently pressed his lips to Belle's forehead, hoping to not wake her. The early morning had her curled against him, dozing lightly, looking so serene. Carefully he pulled an arm out from under, wincing when she grimaced and let out a soft murmur of noise.

Before her eyes even opened, she clumsily nuzzled him, kissing his chest. Lazily snaking her arms up and around his neck.

He smiled, pulling her closer, kissing her gently. Moaning when she kissed him back harder in return.

"Good morning." She smiled half awake, waking up quickly.

"Mmn, good morning to you too." Feeling a hand drop and slip under his shirt, he rumbled and was the recipient of a much longer and more arousing lip lock. Ansell was always appreciative of the rare days where Belle decided she needed some early morning attention. Sated, she'd drift off afterward to wake up later and he'd get ready for the day far more relaxed and invigorated.

Belle smiled warmly, pressing her lips to his stubbled jaw, humming as she peeled his shirt off. Taking his shoulder she rolled onto her back, pulling him on top of her. Wanting to be reminded that despite the awful conversation the day before her prince wasn't a snarling brute, but rather attentive.

Ansell kissed her back deeply as he pushed up her gown and her fingers grasped his breeches, tugging them towards his knees so he could kick them off. Pressing his lips to her stomach, petting up and down her torso, listening to her breath hitch as he dropped the hand and began caressing her thigh. Ghosting his fingers inward. Grinning when she pulled him closer. Oh, he loved mornings like-

Everything stopped.

Belle frowned when the attention ceased. Taking his hand and pushing it to where she wanted. The fingers curled away and she let out a deep, vexed breath.

"What-"

"We promised not to." He groaned in frustration, opening his eyes to his darling who looked at him stunned and frankly a touch angry.

"Really?" She growled incredulously, hooking her legs around his to keep him from escaping. Feeling uncomfortable and desperate to satisfy her aching needs. "You're really going to stop now?"

"Belle-" he heaved as she began to coat his neck in slow, thick kisses. "I'm trying…" her hand reached southward and his breath hitched. "I'm trying to make…" He began to pant, she gently bit his lip to silence him. Bon dieu. "Good.. impress-"

"We're sooo close." She purred mischievously, winding fingers through his hair, grabbing his jaw and kissing him longingly. "Mon beau, s'il vous plaît?" She whispered against the skin of his neck with a grin.

"Vorte beau? Votre bête." Letting out a low, husky laugh, he conceded and resumed his caressing much to his partner's delight. "And they think I'm the troublemaker."
Maurice was so used to being the first one up.

His daughter had always been a night owl. It had been an ordeal when she was a baby; howling late into the night, snoozing late into the day, wrecking his poor internal clock. So he was used to having the mornings to himself. Stoke the fire, make a small breakfast, read a bit, work on a sketch, putter around until Belle came down and took charge. She was so good at taking charge. He never asked her to do it, as she had shown an inclination for fixing and inventing, it just naturally occurred as she wasn't allowed to go to school and needed to focus her energy on something.

It was an adjustment though to have Ansell leave his daughter's bedroom the same time he was leaving his own. They looked at one another, awkwardly.

"Good morning, Sir." The boy finally nodded, blushing for some reason, sheepishly making a go for the stairs.

"You're up early." He noted. Maurice would never not be amused that the prince, the ruler of their province, heir to everything around him, addressed him as "Sir". Said in a tone that was often more associated with gawkish young school boys asking permission to take girls to dances than handsome nobleman.

"With the sun." Ansell sputtered.

"Belle's usually-"

"I like to let her sleep in, makes for a more harmonious day." Heading for the fireplace and rolling up his sleeves, he swallowed thickly. Had he heard them? Had he said too much? What was too much? Lord, he and Maurice had talked so little since the curse broke. It had mostly been reassurances that he was a good person and very worthy of his daughter. They might have had an exchange about the weather? But what if he had heard them? Oh hell, what if he had heard them.

Maurice paused, watching the prince start the day off. The lad as white as a sheet, as if he was looking into the face of his maker. He hoped he wasn't that scary to the boy. "Ansell, if you get the fireplace started and bring in the wood I'll start the stove and the kettle."

He paused, thinking it over. "I can go feed the animals and get water if you sweep? I'm not very good at it." Maybe he hadn't heard them?

"Deal."

Stepping outside, Ansell pressed his back to the closed door and exhaled to the bottom of his nervous, quaking lungs.

"One two three, one two three, and one two three! There you go, Master!" Cadenza chanted as he played the beat on his harpsichord. "Chapeau, now please and thank you."

Chapeau began playing his violin, somehow managing to be skilled and yet just as stuffy.

"I'm so sorry I stepped on your toes, Madame." Ansell murmured self-consciously as he stepped in and out with Gardenrobe, his dance partner. The ballroom was bright with sunlight, shimmering from the jewels hanging on the chandeliers.

"You're learning, my prince." She smiled warmly. "And improving every day! You'll be a gem at Versailles, just you wait."
"Thank you, your reassurances really are appreciated." He responded sincerely, carefully following her steps and gestures. "You know, I find myself wondering why you and the Maestro have yet to go tour now that the curse is broken." He mused carefully. "Not that I'm trying to get you to leave, you'll always have a home and employment here. But you used to travel so much, and I had only brought you on for the summer."

"We've been here so long, Your Highness, we find ourselves reluctant to leave our family." She bowed her head, smiling warmly. "But the Maestro and I do yearn for the crowds. We simply find ourselves hesitating to take the step."

"Master! Keep that arm up! Don't you dare get sloppy!" Cadenza chided.

Ansell quickly fixed his form, circling the Madame gracefully. "Would you perhaps like to come to Versailles as my personal artists in residence? Test the waters and all that?"

The Madame's eyes widened.

"Would you?" He asked, smiling hopefully. "There's some selfish motive on my part, I would love more familiar faces on this trip. But you could perform for the court and reintroduce yourselves to socie-"

"MEASTROOO!" She sang, grinning. Clutching her chest and looking ready to swoon from joy. Ansell stepping in and hooking an arm around her waist to support the Madame. "My Darling we're going to VERSAILLES!"

Maurice looked up as the door opened and shut. The roosters were just beginning to crow, a gentle stirring of life coming from the village outside.

"Weather's turning," Ansell told him, peeling off his coat as he came in with his satchel stretched full of greenery protruding from the top. Blowing on his chilled hands, he grimaced at the cold before taking off his hat.

"Thank you for starting the fire and tending to the outside chores before you left." He said, taking a sip as he worked in slow, careful strokes. Sketching out his next project, he glanced up from the tops of his glasses as Ansell went to the kitchen.

"Not a problem, I'm beginning to see them as my duties." Setting his bag on the counter in the kitchen, he unfastened the buckles. "I like being a part of the house. Contributing, as it were."

"And where did you take off to before sunrise?"

"The woods." He explained. "I managed to harvest some more plants. Then I went to the market and did a bit of bartering. Tried my hand at it, at least. But I also brought back some things to dry in the shed."

The artist got up, curious about this Ansell fellow who was a little different from the rest. Which, aligned with his daughter. "And no one was bothered the prince was in the market with a satchel full of herbs?" Walking over to the stove, he took a cup from a shelf.

Ansell smirked. "You know, the last time everyone saw me I was rather princely; silk suit and stockings, heels, clean shaven, hair curled. It seems running around in huntsman's clothing with my
hair down, a two-week-old beard, and dirt under my nails is enough to fool some of them." He mused, taking out bundles of plants and carefully sorting them. "Not everyone, mind you. Pere Robert and I had a very nice conversation. I gave him a bundle of lavender and sage after he told me yesterday he was looking for some to dry because his garden was ruined this summer."

"That was kind of you."

Looking down, he saw a cup being held out to him. The coffee he had a hankering for, hot ropes of steam curling up from the dark liquid. "He's a good friend of Belle's, and we get along well. That and I like helping out if I can." Taking the cup, he smiled hopefully up at Maurice. "Thank you."

"And what did your trading net you?" Maurice asked. Craning his neck towards the bag, watching in amusement as the prince rather happily explained his morning haul. Bright, kind blue eyes. A good match to his daughter's soft, smart brown ones. He admired the effort and earnestness looking back at him.

Pressing down too hard, Ansell's quill exploded with ink onto the paper he had been diligently trying to turn into a page of neat, clean notes. Seeping all over the place, his fingers were covered and his words disappeared in a pool of black. Scowling, he lifted his hands up for a better examination, snorting to himself in frustration.

Belle chortled across the table.

Looking up at her, that mischievous, mocking smile, he narrowed his eyes. Taking a hand dripping in ink, he flicked a finger at her.

She recoiled as her face was smacked by the assaulting spatter.

Ansell laughed.

"MASTER." Cogsworth chided.

Rolling his eyes, he slumped in his chair.

As soon as their teacher's back was turned, she stuck her tongue out at him.

Ansell curled his lips and wagged his tongue as if he still had large fangs.

"BELLE. Of all people!" Cogsworth gasped as he caught her.

She sat up, immensely guilty.

Ansell smirked with pride.

Her gaze was full of daggers towards him as she pulled a towel from her belt and wiped the ink off, throwing it at his face when she was done so he could clean up.

Her prince snickered, tugging the cotton towel off the top of his head.

"Master Anselme, DO YOU MIND?"
Maurice limped down to the kitchen to see Ansell already up and in the kitchen.

"Good morning, Maurice."

"Good morning." Maurice, the boy was trying something new. "Oof." Wincing, he carefully shuffled towards the table.

Ansell turned, concerned. "Are you alright?"

"My back isn't as young as it used to be." He grimaced, sinking into a stiff chair. "Occasionally it likes to remind me."

"Hmn. You know, my father has a bad back." The prince's voice mused from the other room. "He's gone to every expensive doctor and charlatan he can throw money at. Then all that money disappears in a flash of smoke, and he's complaining about it again."

"You never speak of him." Rubbing his lower spine, he eyed his sketchbook and stick of graphite. Ever a man of morning rituals.

"Because he's a horrible, miserable man, who made me into a horrible, miserable prince." it was a rumble, anger welling up and gripping the young man's chest. Tilting his chin down, he wouldn't even make eye contact with Maurice as he stewed. "Never one for wisdom, or caring for others, or fostering any kind of affection. Just greed, self-indulgence, and duty to our long lineage of dreadful nobility." The voice said the last bit dryly. There was the clinking of pottery, the shuffle of dry herbs. "A true joy to behold."

"I'm sorry." The poor boy, no wonder he had been so angry.

"My mother? Now, she was a ray of light." The voice softened.

Maurice smiled wistfully, curious as to the sound of a mortar and pestle. "My wife was the same."

There was the rush of water pouring from a kettle and he returned with a heavy mug. "Belle doesn't talk about her much, but when she has it's always been in fondness." Setting the cup in front of Maurice, the aromatic brew sloshing and spilling a ring on the table, he met the confused old eyes with his own. "I've been doing some more reading. This little mixture helps with inflammation and pain. And it works, I had some this morning for my shoulder."

"Your shoulder?"

"I've had some pain ever since Gaston shot me." He reminded the artist as he slunk into his chair. "Everything healed when the curse was broken, however, occasionally I get this blasted ache. But that seems to do the trick-" Pointing a finger to the cup, he lifted his own and took a sip. "Mrs. Potts used to make it for me at the castle, but I managed to get the recipe out of her for those times she's not nearby to make it."

Maurice mused over the flavor before setting his cup down. Licking his lips, he sighed. "All that, you being shot and the curse breaking was only three months ago. Somehow it feels longer."

"It does, then some days it's just like it was yesterday." Ansell sighed, reaching around and rubbing his shoulder. "I go through the castle and see it completely repaired, yet I remember every little broken thing." Tilting his head to the side his lip twitched. "I destroyed an awful lot of artwork in my anger, I'm sure you don't like hearing that, but it's a relief they mended. Portraits are all I have of her-my mother."
"What was she like? If I may be so bold."

"Kind." Ansell gazed up at the rafters, pulling the bits and bobs of moments with her out of the recesses of his mind. "She wouldn't hurt a fly and wanted to give back to the people. She dreamed—"

He smiled fondly, fingers running around the rim of the mug. "She spoke of school and hospitals, community centers, churches, orphanages, housing. If it had been up to her, there would be no famine. No poverty. Villeneuve was her town to rule because it was so close to her castle. And I've heard that when she was here it thrived." Face hot with emotion, Ansell fixated on the fragments of leaves swirling in his brown brew. "She was incredibly well educated; the library was her favorite room in the entire castle. Read to me for hours, or had me read to her when I was big enough to. Everything was so safe when we were in there together..." the room suddenly felt like it was closing in, his chest tightened. "She was full of so much goodness and love." He finished, trailing off.

The young man's face glowed with affection and Maurice could see where the prince's gentleness came from. "She sounds wonderful."

"She would've been disgusted with the man I became." He couldn't look up, he simply shook his head in shame. "So much like my father, who she was with out of obligation, not love."

"You mean the old you."

The brooding blue eyes looked up, so trapped in their shame. Maurice could see the demons in him; the regret wanting to swallow him whole.

Maurice took another sip. Floral? Earthy, perhaps. "I think it's safe to say that despite all your sins, you've found the path she wanted you to take." He said gently. "I mean, look at you. Talking to some old artist in a dusty cottage in a poor little provincial town. Far cry from your galas, opulence I hear you used to enjoy. And very far away from when you threw me in a dungeon for picking a flower."

"Which I can't express how sorry I-"

"You've been forgiven, Ansell." Maurice reeled the anxious lad back in. "But look at how far you've come in just a year. The strides you've made. You're still making mistakes, but we all do because we're human. And despite being a man who could have anything his heart desired, you're here."

Pausing, he let the room breathe. Listening to a rooster across town crow, taking a slow sip of his herbal brew.

"Quit patronizing me!"

"Don't tell me you don't need help!" Mrs. Potts shouted back at her petulant pupil.

"I'm not a CHILD." Ansell barked, abruptly rising up from his seat at the dining table. "I know how to eat my food!" A full dinner setting was carefully laid out in front of him, along with small plates of food to practice on. A bowl of soup, a salad, a slice of steak, a bread roll with butter on the side, a small piece of cake. It was finished with the smallest teacup Mrs. Potts could find to challenge his dexterity.

The Englishwoman wagged a finger at him. "You may think you know, but you make a mess at EVERY MEAL."

"I DO NOT." He roared sourly at the accusation, the longest scowl on his face.

"YES YOU DO." She watched him grab the teacup angrily. Fumbling, hot liquid spilling
everywhere, he tried to catch it in the air and burnt himself on a splash of tea. The cup shattered into a hundred delicate pieces on the marble floor.

He gazed up, cradling his scalded hand, blue eyes stunned for just a moment until they burned in frustration. "That was an accident." The prince snapped.

"Land sakes! What if that was CHIP?" She gestured forcefully to the poor cup.

"Well… Chip would have jumped." He grumbled, reaching.

"You need practice!"

"I DO NOT." Ansell began to pace, bristling and curling his lip. "This is REDICU-"

The door opened and Belle came in.

Whirling around to snap, he saw her and the anger was immediately wiped off his face as it registered how much trouble he could be in.

"He's being difficult." Mrs. Potts told her, watching Belle, all business, walk to the table.

"I was playing with the children, could hear him all the way on the lawn." She explained humorlessly.

His stubborn streak returned. "Well I don't need this JUVENILE and frankly INSULTING lesson on holding utensils."

Belle scoffed. "Yes, you do."

Ansell wiped a hand down his mouth. "I most certainly DO NOT."

Folding her arms, Belle looked pointedly at the broken teacup.

He pointed a sharp finger to the mess. "THAT WAS AN ACCIDENT!"

"Any opportunity you can you EAT WITH YOUR HANDS." She raised her voice.

"THAT'S A-"

Mrs. Potts, bolstered by Belle's presence, stepped in. "You sip your soup out of the bowl, stab your salad like you need to kill it, have ruined at least two shirts from spilling coffee and tea, try to request finger foods as much as possible, and don't think I didn't catch you eating the FILET MIGNON with your bare hands."

"THAT WAS ONE TIME." He snorted. "I'm sorry, right after the curse was broken I'm not allowed to adjust my habits?!"

"Last night at the house you used three pieces of bread to sop up the stew and shovel it in your mouth." Belle keep an even, firm tone with him. Half expecting him to start baring fangs. "You didn't even touch your spoon."

Looking at her he blustered. "SOME PEOPLE JUST EAT STEW THAT WAY."

"NOT PRINCES." She stormed over and got in his face. "What are you going to do, eat with your hands in front of the KING?!!"
A loss for words, he let out a frustrated growl, searching for the right response. "WELL… MAYBE I WILL." Turning away, he pulled at his hair, mane tumbling out of its tie.

"Are you really going to fight me over table manners?" She gawked.

"This is STUPID AND CHILDISH."

"And you're acting childish!"

"I. AM. NOT."

"You're throwing a fit because you don't like something?"

His jaw clenched.

"I'm sorry relearning all of this wounds your fragile ego, Ansell, but you have terrible hand-eye coordination when you handle small objects. You miss buttons, you drop cups, you break quills, somehow you bent a spoon-"

"All minor mistakes! You're all acting like I've never held a FORK in my life!" Ansell huffed. Pausing, narrowing his eyes "and my ego is NOT fragile."

Remembering she had been playing with the children, Belle fished a small ball out of a pocket. "Ansell, catch." She said, under-handedly lobbing it slowly, gently, over to him.

The ball arced lazily, and Ansell lunged with all the skill of a far-sighted cat going for a bird. However, instead of catching it in his hand, he batted by accident. It landed in the bowl of soup, splattering minestrone everywhere.

Mrs. Potts slowly made the sign of the cross.

Staring at the mess, the noble shoulders dropped. Screwing up his face, narrowing his eyes he huffed. "I wasn't ready."

Belle's brow raised and her hands went to her hips. "Do you want me to throw it again?"

He looked away, a silence passing. "No."

Belle heard boots coming out to the colonnade. She refused to look up, turning the page of her book as she read amongst the roses.

Ansell sat down next to her, but not touching. Leaning forward he laced his fingers together, bowing his head.

She still didn't look up.

"I apologized to Mrs. Potts." He sighed. "And I owe you one too."

Tucking a ribbon between the pages, closing her book, she turned to him.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: So how does this sound; Part One on Tuesday, Part Two on Wednesday? Just so we can spread all this out a little. And if you were wondering, my guide for T for Teen is always things implied and steaminess are kosher, but eschew more specific terms and fade to black when things actually get sexy. Does that work? They're young and drunk on love (particularly our prince, ten years celibate is a long time) so these two crazy kids aren't going to be chaste. They'll start cooling their jets soon enough but expect a healthy amount of amorousness. The French are after all known for their passion.

Also, I posted a companion one-shot to this story called "Two Very Small Storms". Pure fluff, big time jump, let's you see what the future holds for them! Might be worth a read if you want some cuteness in your life. It's linked to this story via "Series" up top for easy access.

Also Also: Kudos, bookmarks, all that jazz is wonderful and appreciated and fuels my very stupid writer's ego. Want to ask questions? Tell me this is too sexy for a T rating? Having something you liked in particular? Want to talk about Ansell's hissy fit (or how it would play out in the live action, which is really where the material for this is based on)? Anything and everything can go in the comments. I'm pretty fair game.

See you tomorrow.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He felt jab to his ribs.

Belle's breathing was staggered and quick. Opening his eyes reluctantly Ansell found her facing him, pallid and sweating in her sleep. He knew the look, the fix in her brow, the way her eyes darted under their lids. The whine and the pained frown. The dream.

Awaking with a start, Belle gasped in a lungful of air. Spent and slumping as soon as she was able to realize she had just been sleeping.

"Oh, Darling." He soothed softly, knowing she was disoriented. "It's okay, it's me."

She whimpered, drowsily and reached up, cupping his jaw with her palm. Thumb rubbing against his stubbled beard, finding and gazing into the sharp blue eyes by the light of the stars.

"See? Right here." Pressing his lips to Belle's forehead the prince deftly brushed the messy hair chestnut stuck to her face out of the worried brown eyes. Hoping to quickly make her feel safe in the little cottage in Villeneuve.

"Here." She mumbled, eyes shutting, clumsily grabbing at him and settling closer. Kissing his chest, she sighed heavily. Not peaceful yet burdened.

"He's gone." Carefully, groggily, Ansell peeled her fingers off of his shoulder, using the wrist attached to guide her as he rolled over onto his back and scooted up to an incline.

"He took you." She whispered, sadly. "He took you from me."

There was a shudder in her breath as Belle pulled herself onto his bare chest, resting her head in the center. Listening to his breathing, his heartbeat. Reassurances he was flesh and blood. "I came back." He whispered, enjoying the weight of her, the arm possessively draped across him. Knowing the nightmare all too well. High up on the battlements, the crumbling of the castle, his face in the moonlight, his guns gleaming. You will marry me, that beast's head on our wall. "I'm right here." Large fingers gently massaging her back before pulling up the thick quilts, Ansell pressed his lips into her hair. "We're safe, Darling."

"I wanted you to stay."

"I came back." He tiredly realized why she was dreaming what she was. "I'll come back."

"Sorry." Sinking into his warm, safe skin, Belle yawned. "Mmn."

"Don't apologize, mine's the same one." Wrapping an arm around her, Ansell exhaled and felt a kiss to his pectoral, right atop his heart. "Do you want some tea?"

Belle's head shook, which became a slow, tired nuzzle. "Love you." Fingers curling and relaxing, his darling dozed off.

"Love you too."
"What are you drawing?"

Maurice glanced up to see Ansell coming down the stairs. The young man a bit ragged, still tying back his hair.

"If you're comfortable answering of course." stifling back a yawn he went to fetch his coffee. "I don't mean to intrude, I'm just curious."

"You look tired. Everything alright?"

"Bit of a rough night." It was always difficult to fall back asleep when that particular nightmare reared its ugly head. It brought with it so many terrifying memories and thoughts. Horrid what-ifs clinging in the air, stealing the summer night away from him. Grunting tiredly, he took a long pull from his mug.

"Sorry to hear that. And I'm drawing Belle, from memory," he explained, wrist making quick, loose strokes. "Sometimes it's something from memory, sometimes it's just anything nearby. It doesn't have to be important or perfect. It's just to ready for the day. Sweep away the cobwebs so to speak."

"Sketching, painting, metal work; you're a man of many talents." Wandering over he grabbed a book on an end table and headed towards Maurice, hoping to clear his mind with some Shakespeare. "Which one did you learn first?"

"My music boxes have always been my main passion." Musing as the lad sunk into a chair, his head titled absently in thought. "My father was a watchmaker, but I could never truly appreciate the artistry. There are similarities, skills that transfer over." Maurice used long strokes to create her locks. Pressing down at different moments to shade some areas darker than others, making sure the light source made it glossy in all the right places.

"So how does painting and drawing lend to building such brilliant pieces?"

"Drawing allows you to lay out your plans. You need to know how it fits together before the pieces are even laid out." Squinting, he began working on her eyes. So sharp and smart. He had been doodling them since she was days old. "And the painting, well, it's something I've always fancied, and it can put food on the table." Not even aware he had just become comfortable with sharing, Maurice kept going. "When we were in Paris, before Belle arrived, I made my money painting portraits." Carefully, he moved from the shape of her eyes to the iris. Not too dark, nor to light. "It was good work. And her mother was a performer, a dancer for the opera. We made our way best we could. Enjoying what the city had to offer for those of us more creative individuals. I could tinker, make whatever I fancied, sell my little moving, singing pieces of art between more well-paying projects. These music boxes sell terribly; so expensive only a few want to buy, and so labor intensive they're barely worth the effort. But I've always loved them. The challenge of one."

Ansell watched Maurice's mind at work. Focused on the sketch, yet drifting into moments he cherished. Suddenly, the artist deflated in sadness.

"Now, when I took Belle and we moved to the country, portraiture work wasn't abundant." He noted, a slightly sorrowful look edging into his gentle blue eyes. "And I certainly couldn't bring an infant with colic to an estate and set her aside for hours on end. So my father's watch repairing skills came in handy. It was easy to do at home while I took care of Belle and it allowed me to find materials to practice making music boxes." Shaping her brows he purposefully made one raised, curious, mischievous. "All of the skills have come in handy, one way or another."

"When did you start taking up portraiture work again?" He asked softly. Wanting to yawn.
"When Belle was around twelve or so. She was old enough to bring and quiet enough if there was a stack of books nearby." A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "A lot of noble houses have expansive libraries, and more often than naught she was able to borrow some while I was at work. It was around that time we moved here. Close enough to Paris for work but small, safe. Not enough literature for her here though."

Ansell chuckled. "Sounds about right."

"She's so much like her mother." Maurice shook his head fondly. "Ginette used to devour novels while I'd work too."

"Was she headstrong?" The prince watched the old man's eyes light up.

"Oh, yes." A chuckle bubbled up from the artist's chest. "Stubborn and graceful and bright. Very avant-garde for her time, but it was an advantage in her career. She was the lead dancer before we had Belle." Realizing how much he was talking about his wife, Maurice glimpsed down, feeling flush.

"She sounds marvelous." Ansell encouraged soothingly. Having not even touched his book as he took in the story of where his beloved had come from.

"She was. The world is less rich without her in it." Eyes hot and stinging, he sniffled to keep the tears he refused to cry for so many years at bay. Smiling weakly as he worked on the details of the sketch. "But Belle-"

"Belle makes the world richer." The young man finished gently.

They both looked up, agreeing, smiling ever so slightly at one another.

"Cavall." Ansell greeted his steed, patting the black neck of the Andalusian. "How are you doing? Hm? Happy you have hooves again?" His old friend was adorned with an ornate, royal saddle. Leather and silver, stags and bears engraved in the rich materials. Petting the bright-eyed horse he swung himself up on the horse. Back straight, chest out, high in the stirrups. Noble, commanding. Cavall shook his long, wavy mane of jet, ever the royal horse.

"They're going to want you to hunt, lad." Mr. Potts noted. The prince's form was better; appearing far more stately up on Cavall in the past week than he had since the horse had stopped living life as a whinnying set of tack. "It's one of the great activities of the court."

"Well, I'll refuse." Brows set as a tight, low line above his eyes he exhaled stubbornly. "There is nothing more dreadful than one of those hunts. Dogs and muskets… terrifying the living daylights out of everything in the forest."

The stable master nodded his head slowly, climbing onto a mare saddled for their daily ride. "I take it you've had a few years of experience?"

He paused, thoughtfully, gauging what he wanted to share. "I know this forest like the back of my p-"

"He caught himself. "Hand." Looking over to the gardens, Ansell saw a very familiar blue dress walking with Lumiere.

"What did they mistake you for?" He asked carefully, watching the disdain in the prince's eyes as they started the horses towards the trail.

"A bear." He growled. "There was this one particular hunter," Taking a deep breath, feeling his heart
beat a little faster, Ansell tore his eyes away from the gardens and to the mountains that had provided so much solace to his much larger form. "His hounds were terrible. They'd bay and chase you relentlessly until they had their teeth in you. And he was no better. He'd kill mothers with cubs, then sell the bear cubs or kill them if they were too small." Shaking his head, strands of golden hair fell out of their bow. Seething, lip twitching to the cruelty, he reeled in his temper. "He shot me once. I got too close to a den and he thought-" Ansell trailed off as it began to click into place. "always wore this red coat" The prince remembered. "Thick black hair, violent eyes-" Stopping, realizing, he stared down at his hands. That face. That horrible, sneering face.

"Master Ansell?" Mr. Potts roused him from his memories.

"It's nothing." Ansell hedged, trying to shrug it all off. "I just hate hunts. If you're going to kill something, don't make a joyful event out of it, and don't be disrespectful." The prince slowed the proud horse. "I must confess though, hunting for food, gathering to sustain…a family-"

John Potts eyed him curiously.

"-that's a skill I'd like to learn."

John mused, the gears turning in his head at the request. The missus would most certainly want to hear about it. "You do know that's more of a commoner's trade, not a noble pastime."

"I don't have to be noble all the time, John." He hinted. "In fact, I prefer it less and less."

Belle came down the stairs, slowing her gate, mildly confused.

Her father and Ansell were both laughing over breakfast. The pair were chattering amongst themselves, Ansell sipping coffee, Maurice buttering a delectable looking pastry.

Maurice discovered Belle who was watching them silently from the bottom step. "Well good morning."

Ansell turned around in his chair, smiling mischievously with a bowl of half-eaten oatmeal sitting in front of him. There was a spoon tucked into the hot breakfast and the was meal shockingly devoid of any mess in the surrounding area. "Were your ears burning?"

Gaze narrowing at them suspiciously, it was clear Belle unsure whether or not she liked the duo being so familiar with one another.

"He's only kidding." Her father reassured, though it visibly did little. "I'm simply telling tales of my ill-gotten youth and we're arguing over Voltaire." Maurice watched her with some amusement. Belle had been keeping the castle and his house separate ever since the curse had been lifted. It had been a shrewed move; allowing her to retreat to the familiarity of the cottage and village life when she needed a break from the castle and, ultimately, the non-stop time spent with the prince. Nevertheless, with Ansell slipping into home life quite easily her specifically separate worlds were colliding. She clearly was finding some elements of the shift difficult to adjust to. And Maurice was well aware that for the courtship she was racing into to work, Belle was going to have to accept it and let both of her lives meld together.

That said, he also knew his daughter. And he knew that slightly squinting, tight-lipped look that was going between himself and His Royal Highness.
"More of a discussion." The prince corrected. "You're far too pleasant to argue with."

"He still hasn't read Candide ou l'Optimisme." Maurice exclaimed.

"I mean, I happened to be cursed for the last few years. It was a bit of a nuisance more than anything else but it did keep me from reading new books." Ansell reminded him jokingly. "That said, I will pick up a copy when I leave the province. Bring it back to add it to Belle's library?"

It was clear she still wasn't sure if she liked them being so friendly.

Rising up Ansel grinned knowingly, eyes so puckish and blue. "We haven't swapped stories yet if that's what you're worried about." Pulling out a chair for her, he guided her over. "Though there is a looming threat of that eventually happening."

"Don't listen to him, Papa." Her lips twitched. "He's wicked, and I can tell you anything I did it was because of his horrible influence."

Ansell tried not to laugh as he stole a kiss. "Well good morning to you too. Can your wicked prince get you anything?"

Plumette was half tempted to call Belle.

Growing more frustrated by the minute, the prince was scowling as he was unable to make clean, smooth lines on the paper. The quill marks were thick, jagged, half scratched. Huffing, frowning, slouching, and muttering to himself he snorted. Lips curling as his quill suddenly broke to the unrelenting pressure of his fingers.

Plumette tensed as she could see the flash in his eyes.

"This- this IS SO-" Ansell appeared ready to hurl the quill and inkpot to the wall. However, he caught himself. Pausing, brows still furrowed, the prince took a deep breath and set the quill down. Taking a moment to calm down, Ansell untensed his jaw. Rubbing the back of his neck as he looked his work over and compared it to Plumette's elegant ABC's written at the top. Gaze flickering up at her, sheepish yet still sore about it all, he thrummed his fingers on the lacquered desk. Taking another breath and working on relaxing himself. "Sorry."

"Why don't you come?" Ansell supplied as he poured two cups of coffee. "We have to leave early, I've been told I'm being run ragged today-"

Belle rolled her eyes at her prince's dramatics as she took a bite of her bowl of summer fruit and continued to read her book.

"I saw that." He called out, walking over and handing a cup to Maurice before sitting back down. "But, we're coming back tonight. I can prepare the cart and we can take your easel and paints. Meet up at the end of the day and have dinner in the dining room?"

"You do keep saying how much you'd like to get outside for some inspiration, Papa." Belle reminded her father. "And the grounds are so beautiful right now, it's the perfect time to go out and
get some fresh air." It had been an adjustment; Ansell and her father. Yet they were getting along well during their breakfasts and dinners together and she was becoming more comfortable with the two most important men in her life finding common ground.

Maurice studied the two who were looking at him expectantly, clearly wanting him to come along for the day to spend time with him. He loved having time with Belle, however, he was beginning to feel the same way about the prince. A generous and thoughtful young man, a great conversationalist when it came to books, music and art, a touch awkward, stubborn enough to match Belle (god help him), and deeply, sillily in love with his daughter. Quite the pair staring back at him. "It sounds very nice. I could use the fresh air." He agreed, noting how pleased they both were.

He really hoped this Ansell fellow could last the month away.

Belle was walking through the grand halls of the castle, book loosely held at her side as she enjoyed wandering in silence. After three months she still felt like she was finding details and nooks in Ansell's magically repaired home. Lunch had been out in the gardens with her father painting in watercolors and then Ansell had been shepherded away afterward for another battery of lessons.

Hearing the sharp, bright notes of Cadenza's harpsichord, she followed the sound.

"One two three, one two three, one two three, now turn, master. Bow the head, yes, yes." She overheard the Madame as she got closer to the room.

"Bravissimo!"

Seeing someone else coming down the hall, her eyes quickly narrowed.

Leon walked past her, sizing her up. "Mademoiselle." He said briskly.

"Sire." She glowered threateningly, not even stopping for him.

The viscount quickly left, palpable tension flooding the hall. Having kept away from her ever since their little walk in the village that ended with her threat, he headed towards a parlor and far away from the girl who had a card or two up her sleeve.

Belle lifted her chin up and soldiered on to the ballroom, the Maestro's playing and instructing calming her.

"Good master, good." He encouraged as she strolled into the enormous doorway. Ansell was dancing, in the heels his father insisted no less, effortlessly with the Madame. He was a bit more formal than usual. Not quite the grand blue suits, but a gold waistcoat and brown velvet jacket and breeches. A season or ten out of style, his hair pulled back with a ribbon, looking so stately. As much as she liked him dressed down in the village, this other look always made her heart skip. Especially with his stubble growing in nicely.

Glancing towards the balcony, she found her father outside painting the gardens.

"Mademoiselle." Cadenza greeted her cheerily, adding a bit of a flourish to the keys. "Have you seen our prince? He glides on the dance floor now to the latest music and dances from Versailles."

Hands still on the Madame's waist as they kept going in a circle, Ansell looked over at her.

"Our prince charming is making quite the transformation." She noted, slowly making her way in. "And this transformation involves much less fur." Relishing Ansell's scowl as he kept dancing, she
smiled in amusement and came over to Cadenza. "I just wanted you to know I'm so glad you're going to Versailles with him."

"We are honored." He told her brightly. "And we don't mind keeping an eye on His Highness. We just wish you could come, you would outshine them all." He beamed as she smiled back. "Would you like to learn with him?"

"I wouldn't want to steal him from his lovely dance partner." The brown eyes roamed over to the balcony once more and her lips twitched with an idea. "Actually, I'll be right back." Walking quickly across the room, she went through the open doors that were letting the cool air in.

Maurice turned away from his landscape, smiling at his happy daughter. "And what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Would you like to learn a new dance?" She asked.

Looking past her, and then at her, he slowly got up. "And why aren't you dancing with that handsome prince of yours?" Her father asked, Belle taking his hand and playfully leading him in to join the others.

"Because I don't want him to dance with me."

It was a sight that was beginning to feel natural as she came down the stairs, tucking the side of her skirts up along the way. Her father, one hand sipping coffee, the other with a piece of graphite, working on his morning sketch. Ansell across from him, eating toast and reading a letter rather intensely, the royal red wax seal dangling at the bottom of the thick parchment.

"Good morning, you two." She announced. Leaning behind her father, noticing he was sketching Ansell she smiled and rubbed his shoulder. "Looks like him. Especially the eyes."

"Thank you, and good morning." he greeted her.

"Looks like whom?" Ansell absently lifted his head from his letter as Belle took a seat.

"Nothing, what are you reading?" Reaching into the breakfast spread laid out, she took a chipped bowl covered in French blue flowers.

"Letter. It was delivered yesterday but I didn't have the time since I was working hard at not having atrocious penmanship." He explained, eyes still skimming the words carefully. "It's from my father."

"Oh." her face slackened.

"That was my initial feeling too," the prince admitted, the paper still in his hand. "But it's fairly harmless. Upset about the horses being ill, ready for my grand debut, excetera, excetera. There's one part though."

Pausing as her stomach began to sink in concern, a reflex developed ever since the Duke came crashing into their lives, Belle looked up from her oatmeal she had been pouring a little milk into.

"My aunt Marie-Lucette is coming to court from England. Apparently she hasn't stepped foot in France for years." He told the table, explaining the situation further. "When she came of age she was
married off to a Marquis, very rarely visited. And then the war happened and... well, you know.

"Oh?"

"She's my father's sister, youngest of the family." He explained keenly. "And she absolutely hates him."

"So you're saying I'd like her." Belle joked.

He chuckled. "She's coming to get a good look at me, no doubt; the prodigal son. Should make for an interesting family reunion."

"Well you'll have to charm her." She told him, pushing her oatmeal around with a spoon. "Speaking of charming people, are you ready for today?"

Ansell's mouth slackened in unsurety as he folded the letter. "I suppose. Cogsworth and Mrs. Potts are treating the whole thing like a final exam. I half expect to get a grade." Looking over to Maurice, he caught the man's eye. "Wait, are you drawing me?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Got my editing done early so why not post early? A lot going on in this one. But it pushes us towards the Part One finish line as our prince has one last day left.

Questions, comments, thoughts, concerns, things annoying you? Let me know down below. Kudos and bookmarks are also cherished.
"They're coming up the path." One of the footmen hollered into the servant's quarters. Everyone began to rise from the main table, jostling to their places and straightening their liveries as they readied for the day.

"I'll fetch the Madame." Plumette said, getting up.

"Our moment of truth, everyone!" Cogsworth bellowed, his cane held more like a sword and he gave his orders. "Come, come! Chapeau! Mr. Potts! This is it, the rehearsal!"

"Lumiere, I'll need your help!" Chapeau hurried to the front as the trio arrived on horseback.

"Of course! Places, everyone!" Stealing a kiss from Plumette, he followed Chapeau out the door of the servants quarters and to the front.

"Hello." Ansell smiled, walking with Belle as the stable boys took the horses and Maurice came up with his small bundle of art supplies. "Is everyone r-"

"Come now, Sire." Chapeau pulled him away from Belle, the Madame and Plumette doing the same with their Mademoiselle. "We must dress you!"

"But-"

"Come, come, Mademoiselle!" Madame ushered an equally confused Belle away from the prince. "You must ready for the day!"

Maurice stood at the top of the steps, abandoned. "Hm."

"Oh Maurice, you poor soul." Mrs. Potts waved him in. "Come on, I have the kettle on. You don't want to follow either of them, they're being primped within an inch of their lives."

"En garde!"

Belle came into the hall to see the Prince and Lumiere in their fencing habits. Their footwork quick, Lumiere effortless while Ansell worked harder to keep up. The clattering of foils, the grunts and barks of a man fighting with all he had against a man who was only using half of his own effort. There was a long row of chairs to the side as the staff that wasn't preparing for the next event played the part of the crowd.

Mrs. Potts waved her over to sit in the front. The glitter of the hall in the late morning sun filling the room. Making it a bit hotter with all of the onlookers. "Well aren't you the vision." She told the girl in the silky French blue dress.

"We're going riding next." She said, adjusting her skirt to sit comfortably. "Apparently I needed to be just shy of a ball gown."

"The ball gown will be tonight." She reassured. "But we wanted everyone to be a bit more formal since this is the dry run for his trip."
"I'm looking forward to dinner tonight," she admitted, clapping as everyone did for a point scored. "Having everyone in the castle at the table and then out in the ballroom is always such a treat. You're our family."

"You're too sweet, Dearie." The Englishwoman patted her knee.

Ansell, dripping with sweat, turned and saw his darling. Smiling brightly he bowed to her before turning back to his match for another round.

"He's doing a lot better." Someone whispered.

"I mean, he'll never best Lumiere, but he's really improved over the week." Said a scullery maid.

"He was such a bother the other day I threatened to have everyone gather around the desk and watch him write his ABCs." Mrs. Potts reported to Belle in a hushed tone.

Belle leaned forward, cautious about the news. "So you're saying his utensils… ?"

"Oh no, he's leagues better." She reassured. "But he dropped a knife and he gave me some attitude. Other than that though, his temper has drastically improved."

"Good." Belle sighed with relief. "That seems to be the case across the board."

"You know," Mrs. Potts began carefully. "Mr. Potts was telling me he had a very interesting conversation with the Prince. He was saying they were talking about him learning some commoner trades that could support a family."

Belle turned her head slowly to meet the housemaid's intrigued expression.

"We both thought that was little interesting, especially since he's been favoring the village lately." She watched the girl's face. That touch of nervousness edging into her eyes as she swallowed thickly. The little furrow in her brow, mind carefully choosing her next words.

The brown eyes cast down for a second. "Can we talk about this after he leaves? I want to focus on his review and sending him off." She said quietly, rolling her lips into her mouth.

"Of course, Dearie."

"Your Highness." Belle bowed slightly as she took the arm presented to her.

"Mademoiselle, you are a vision," Ansell said in his riding attire. Stately, tall, proud, blue eyes so smitten with her. A bit out of breath as he had just returned from a ride with John, he guided her.

"Chef's packed a luncheon. I thought we might ride out to one of our favorite locations? The meadow out near the lake seeing as it's nice and warm out."

"I think that sounds like a wonderful idea." She smiled as they headed down the steps to the waiting horses. "Did you know gold is a good color on you?"

"I'll have to remember." a little smile pulled at the corners of his lips as he let go and went to Cavall.

"Let me know how he does." Mr. Potts told Belle as he held her palomino for her. "He's leagues better, but I want your opinion."

"Of course." She agreed.
"Have fun." Patting the horse's neck, he let go. "But no racing, don't think I don't know who instigates that."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." She responded cheekily. "But yes, I'll be good." They trotted out down the path, the sky as blue as his eyes, the sun warm and bright, birds trilling. The colors, he had forgotten how lovely the colors of summer were. Years of winter had steeped him in grays and blues, making him marvel from time to time at the vibrancy of the unenchanted seasons.

"They're really going all out today," Ansell noted.

"Well, you leave tomorrow. Everyone wants to make sure you're ready." She mentioned, not wanting to remind herself he was leaving in the morning. It hurt too much, it drained her energy. Ansell sighed but kept the form of a nobleman, gaze wandering as the trees dappled the sunlight. Pausing in the saddle, he caught the look Belle had.

She smirked, adjusting her grip on the reins, glancing over her shoulder to check and see if they could be watched.

"Belle-

Her eyes met his, so breathtaking in her mischievousness as she leaned forward.

"Belle, no." He grinned, wanting to laugh at her. "What happened to not racing?"

"Oh come on, don't be a spoilsport." Belle spurred the horse. "Or slow!" Skirts billowing back behind her, the handsome prince left in the dust.

Furrowing his brow, he smiled and shook his head. "Oh, you-" He let Cavall loose, and they were off. Hooves churning the damp earth, manes whipping behind them, doing their damnedest to clear wet logs and splash through shimmering creeks. The forest a blur of evergreens and ferns. Finally, they broke through the brush to the meadow and Belle was at the center. Smugly triumphant was his love. Sun on her cheeks, back straight and proud, breeze toying with her brown locks, late wildflowers dipping and dancing around her horse. "You can't win if you have a head start!"

"Who said this was a race?" Belle watched him bring his steed up to the spot and dismount before her. "I was just faster."

"You're a dirty cheat!" taking a blanket out of his saddlebag, he shook it out, draping it across the verdant grass. "Why do I associate with rule breakers?"

"His Highness is such a sore loser." Setting the picnic basket down, she carefully took a seat and patted the spot next to her. He reluctantly, unceremoniously, plopped onto the ground. Laughter erupted from her, and she stole a kiss. Tugging on the double breasted lapels to bring him closer, to kiss him more deeply. Wishing to kiss him every day for the next month.

"I guess I can get over it." He grinned at her lovely mouth, sliding an arm around her waist. "How am I going to live without your feisty smile and playful ways?" The Prince pressed his lips to her forehead. "I'm going to be positively ravenous for attention when I return."

"You won't be the only one." She sighed. A silence coming over them in the meadow. They held hands, looking out over the flowers and mountains until they took out the food. Laying out the modest spread and beginning to eat.

"I think we should see a concert when we go to Verona for your birthday," Ansell finally
announced, pouring some wine from a bladder into a cup.

Belle looked up from the small, delicate sandwiches she had on a plate.

"I mean, whatever your heart desires of course, but I'd love to take you to a concert. I keep hearing about them." He mused, passing the cup over. "Maybe after that, the next one could be an opera in Paris? Florence of course, we need to see the artwork. That, and I'd want to take you to dinner. The food is so good in Italy." Rambling, smiling, he loved watching her reaction to all of the possibilities. She was grinning from ear to ear. It made his heart skip.

"And we could always go back and see another play in London." She suggested cheerily.

"And I don't know about you but I'll need some chocolates so we'll have to go to Belgium."

"Then there's Rome… And Spain, I've always wanted to go to Madrid… Oo! What about Austria?" Belle was animated, alive at the thought of their adventures. So thankful she finally had someone who wanted to enjoy culture and traveling as much as she did. "An opera or a concert in Vienna? That would be so amazing."

"Oh, most definitely. Of course, we'll be touristy and see the sights, but plays and operas and concerts and dances in each city? Plus the food? That just sounds like so much fun." He exclaimed, blue eyes bright as he was doing his damnedest to not think about the next day. "We're going to exhaust ourselves with travel."

Belle blushed, giggling at his enthusiasm. "That sounds incredibly fun and the perfect way to exhaust ourselves." Reaching out she clinked her glass to his. She watched him, tall and handsome, so eager to whisk her away to adventure in the great wide somewhere. "Especially with you. I think I've dreamed about going to all of those places. And going to all of those shows… That play at the Globe? That was the first time I've ever dressed up and gone to one."

"Really?" He was shocked, but then again, he felt he didn't need to be. Her life had been so different before they had met.

"I've snuck into a few when we've gone to Paris for work, but I've had to hide." She shrugged, not terribly sad about it, but wanting for more than just sneaking around. "Small plays though, I've never been to an opera. A friend once smuggled me into the eaves of a theater for a concert."

"Well, we won't be smuggled in." He reassured. "We'll have tickets for good seats. And there'll be dinners and dancing until we need to go home."

"Verona." Belle took a deep breath, excited at the idea of her birthday in such a lovely city.

"Verona, and so much more." He smiled at the thought.

Belle had insisted between riding and dinner that they have one last lazy afternoon in the library before Ansell was sent off. After a long lunch and ride, they changed into loungewear and took to their favorite room. Originally the pair began in the library by walking around. Discussing books they were interested in, talking opinions, teasing. Eventually, it moved to quiet reading on the couch. Then Ansell put his feet up and stretched out on the long, wide couch covered in fleur-de-lis and Belle found herself between his legs, laying back against his chest. It was chaste enough to allow them to actually make progress on their respective books. However, every once in a while he would rub a hand across her chest or belly and kiss the back of her head. It slowly increased in frequency,
his hands wandering elsewhere, lips roaming as well. Finally, she turned and kissed an arm, rotating her head as he dipped forward to meet her mouth. Tired and warm, she set her book down and angled herself on her side to nuzzle his chest. Unable to fathom about not having him there to keep her warm and loved.

"Hmn." Setting his book on the table, he threw an arm around Belle as she nuzzled under his chin. Feeling her lips press against his neck slowly, gingerly. "And what are we thinking?"

Splaying her fingers out across the strong chest she sighed wistfully. "How much I want you here." The security of their library providing a bit of comfort. "Your warmth, your voice, your touch, your exasperating brattiness."

Ansell laughed.

"How much you tease me into annoyance." She grinned impishly. "How you curl your lip and snarl a little when we fight."

"And, I'm going to have to shave." He reminded her. "I saw Chapeau sharpening the blade, the beloved beard is not long for this world."

"Ugggh." Shaking her head, she closed her eyes. "You'll have to grow it back immediately."

"And you're such a prize of perfection." Goading her, the prince rubbed soothing circles onto the petite back. "Never exhaustingly stubborn or a tease. Never having to be so right about a book. Never shoving your icy cold feet onto my legs at night."

"Oh really, Prince Charming?"

"I promise I'll be turning my charming down when I'm away."

She chuckled. "You know, speaking of charming, if I were to string together all of the comments I've heard from the last couple of months, I'd think the former you was quite the Lothario."

Blue eyes going wide with suspicion, he stopped rubbing her back.

"And quite the exhibitionist at that."

Clearing his throat, his arms became limp as she gently pushed them away. Belle turned, sitting on his leg, staring at him thoughtfully. He looked at her sheepishly. "Well... yes?"

Not enjoying the conversation herself but clearly needing to get it out of her mind, she gazed down at her hands. "I'm beginning believe you were an awful lot like your brother, just... meaner."

Ansell's face was turning pale. "I uh-"

"Had quite the reputation?"

Taking a deep breath, he shut his eyes tight. Wondering how they had gone from sleepy, possibly a prelude to lovemaking cuddling, to a serious conversation about his former love life. "Alright, you would have hated me," Ansell confessed. "I was mean, greedy, vain, and entitled. All cruel wit and pursuer of the seven sins. I was... this monster in really expensive clothes." Finally looking at her the Prince furrowed his brows. "Belle, why is this coming up now?"

Her fingers idly played with her hair. "Because it's been brought up so often. You don't think I hear every joke about finding you in a compromising position, or wooing girls, or the expectations at
court?" Frowning, shaking her head she pressed on. "I've just been trying to piece together who you were before and what your father wants."

"I don't want that." His voice was sorrowful, head sinking. "It's a loveless life."

"I don't want it for you either." Belle agreed. "I certainly wouldn't tolerate any of it. I'm just asking because I want to know what we're up against. And I'm not here to shame you for your love life. It just gets hinted at quite a bit and I'm trying to parse out where we are before you leave."

"I've never loved anyone. That wasn't love, it was lust. "For he had no love in his heart." He recited, reaching out and touching her cheek. "Until you. That's where we are, Belle."

Reaching up, she cupped the fingers caressing her, kissing his wrist. "I've never loved either."

Leaning forward he took her arms and gently pulled her forward as he sat up and closed the gap between them. "And I have never relished someone like this." Assisting her so her legs fell to his side and she was straddling him. "I'm so hopelessly in love with every inch of you." He kissed. "And I don't care what everyone else expects, I just want you and you alone. Title or not. I'd give up all the jewels in the world."

Lacing her fingers around his neck, she shut her eyes as he rolled his thumb in circles over her waist. She had so much doubt that she couldn't show him. It was hard to not worry about his anxiety and temper, which his family knew how to play like a fiddle. It was hard not to think about this past as a Lothario and her own confusing feelings on that whole mess. But even past all of that, who was she going to talk to? About serious things, about silly things, about simple things, about nothing at all? And there was no other body she even remotely desired to feel nor one that excited her.

He hated all of the turmoil he could see her taking on. "I promise, you're the only one I want and the only one I'll have." The prince whispered. "Where we are? It's where I'm deeply, madly in love with you, Darling." Turning his head, he kissed passionately her as her hands wandered to the sides of his face. "God I love you so much." He breathed, coming up for air as she grasped the hem of his shirt and helped him out of it. The two frantically stripping to feel one another and soften the encroaching loneliness.

Maurice smoothed his waistcoat as Belle and Ansell approached the dining room. Most of the staff were in their finest and the kitchen had prepared a succulent three-course meal. The entire room standing, waiting, looking at them expectantly.

It was hard not so beam at the two coming into the room, Cogsworth announcing Ansell to get him accustomed to such formalities. They were both stunning and Belle, his rather practical daughter, was a glowing princess next to a charming prince. A far cry from the two of them dressed casually in the cottage, at ease in the roles they were growing into as a family. It was hard to imagine either of them leaving that for Ansell's royal birthright. The Duke and Duchess, members of the Royal Court, bound to formalities and expectations. After spending so much time with the two, his two as he was beginning to accept with Ansell, and how they acted together he couldn't see that future for his whip-smart daughter and her dear tender-hearted herbalist.

Lips quirking, Maurice watched as Ansell went to the head of the table by himself and Belle walked to the opposite end to sit on the side. Taking a seat, Maurice turned to his dining companion to the left. "Is that your doing?"

Mrs. Potts chuckled as the footmen came around with the first course. "Of course. He needs to be able to converse and eat without lookin' at Belle for direction. Half the time he's in a room full of
people he's just making eyes at her."

"Also keeps them from distracting one another." Her husband said knowingly on the other side of her.

"Yes, they're rather..." Maurice mulled it over "fond of touching."

"I suppose that's one way of putting it." The Englishwoman quipped.

A serving spoon clattered.

Everyone froze.

Belle leaned out to get a better look.

"It was just me!" Lumiere reassured, brandishing the silverware.

Belle pulled at her gloves at the top of the staircase. After being found by her lady's maid sleepily sprawled across Ansell's chest in the library, naked and guarded only by a blanket as they quietly talked about their hopes and fears whilst necking after sex, Belle had been scrubbed down, redressed, sent to dinner, then redressed again before being deposited at the top of the stairs. It was hard not to feel like a child's doll, constantly being brushed and primped and dressed. The idea of being at court and changing wardrobes several times throughout the day sounded dreadful.

The thought, however, disappeared as Ansell emerged and straightened his cravat, a sign of his nervousness, and took his place at the opposite side of the grand staircase. A dusty rose suit with silver and pastel green embroidery and beading and a pale blue waistcoat fit him magnificently. The beard had been replaced by makeup, his hair tucked under a cascading wig. Strong, straight-backed and noble, but when his eyes found hers, he broke into the slightest smile.

She came down in a shimmering pale blue ball gown with embroidery to match his. Chestnut hair braided up, a touch of jewelry, just bit of rouge on her lips to make them all the more desirable. And those big, smart brown eyes sparkling up at him, aglow in the candlelight that flooded the castle with a golden hue.

He felt so weak.

Maestro began playing as they descended. The staff and her father wore their best, awaiting their arrival.

"Mademoiselle." He bowed.

"Your Grace." She curtsied.

"Shall we dance, My Love?" Ansell offered a palm, taking her hand, guiding her towards the room.

Belle carefully gathered her skirt. "I'd be delighted, My Prince."

"Belle?"

Belle turned from watching Ansell dance with Plumette to find the Maestro and the Madame next to her. They were taking a break, the small orchestra playing on and carefully following a piece Cadenza had chosen.
"We just wanted to see you." The Madame folded the girl in her arms, drawing Belle to her bosom, ignoring how Belle took it all with a touch of awkwardness to being drawn to said bosoms and their plunging neckline. "We know we must leave early in the morning for Versailles and I told the Maestro you'll be preoccupied with the prince once we finish dancing. We remember such nights ourselves."

"You say that as if it were in the past tense." Cadenza raised a brow to his wife, Belle still being hugged by her and missing his innuendo. "But, we wanted to see you in case we didn't get a proper goodbye."

"I'm going to miss you two so very much," Belle said, hugging the Madame back. "You fill this house with so much music and joy. And Madame I don't know if I would ever look as stylish as I have without your help."

"We'll return, we'll return," Gardenrobe reassured, planting an affectionate kiss on Belle's cheek. "But we love you and we'll miss you. We'll watch over the prince, we promise."

"I'm glad some of his family is coming along." Finally extracting herself from Madame's warm, bead encrusted bodice, she turned to Maestro. Squeezing him tightly, shutting her eyes. "I hope this leads to bigger things for both of you, but I am rather selfish and hope you can at least return for Noel."

Eyes flying open, Cadenza pulled away to get a good look at her. "Noel?" He asked excitedly.

"The first one since the curse broke." She hinted.

"Did someone say, Noel?" Lumiere had suddenly appeared as if the word was all that was needed to summon him.

"Oh yes." She told the castle's consummate performers, eyes sparkling with plans. "I think it needs to be big."

The Madame clutched her chest. "Grand."

"With the finest music!" The Maestro cupped Belle's face in adoration to the thought.

"The grandest!" Lumiere grinned at Belle, sweeping her away from Cadenza.

"Grander than the celebration banquet. And the whole village invited again." She smiled. "Do you think you can manage?"

"Oh, Ma Cherie, you do like giving me a challenge!" He beamed, spinning Belle and making her giggle. "Have I ever told you that you're the finest conspirator?"

"Well, there's only one person I know who can help me pull it off, Monsieur." Giving him a mischievous eyebrow. "It hasn't been celebrated in ten years. We have to make up for that."

"I'll be scheming while I'm away with the Master." He wagged his own brows, pulling her close as if to dance in the hall. "And I'll return with plans for the most opulent, most joyous Noel ball France has ever seen! Even Versailles will be jealous."

"I knew I could count on you." She kissed his cheek.

"And count us in!" Cadenza announced as he scooped up Froufrou. "Wherever we are, we'll make time to return."
"We must!" Gardenrobe sang.

"When you have a moment alone with Ansell, talk to him," Belle told her partner in crime.

"He knows? Oh, we can buy supplies in Paris!"

"That's what I was thinking-"

"What on earth?"

They all turned to Cogsworth's suspicious eyes gleaming from behind his monocle.

"It's nothing, Cogsworth," Lumiere reassured unconvincingly with Belle's arm hooked about his waist. Sliding a hand behind his back, he crossed his fingers.

"You better not be conspiring." He grumbled. "I barely got over the last gala!"

Belle bit her lip, trying not to break into laughter. "No of course not."

Belle sighed, her feet aching as they had danced the night away. They were in bed, exhausted, oddly neither in the mood. That particular fact frustrating for them both as they had been ravenously so ever since they had gotten back together. The joy of the ballroom had dissipated quickly, and the long stretch of his trip was suddenly laid in front of them like a black storm cloud slowly rolling in. It would rob them of the happy memories of that day until the night they married in winter. A period of time that would be a small respite where they could look back on some of the fonder moments of what had been trying months. As she laid on her side, staring into his half awake eyes, she saw the melancholy. Pressing a kiss to his nose, Belle settled in closer.

"I don't want to go tomorrow." He muttered forlornly under his rattling breath. Reaching out, he tiredly brushed a stray lock of hair out of her face.

"I don't want you to leave either." His eyes were so sad, so heartbreakingly lonely already. The lids pink with threatening tears that pooled in the corners. She felt frighteningly protective of him. Wanting to go with him to Versailles and help him navigate the dangerous halls of the palace. "But I've got you for now," Belle reassured with a kiss.

"I can't sleep." He told her heavily. "Would it bother you if I read?"

"Of course not. Do you want to read to me?" She asked, hopeful for a yes. "I'd really like to hear your voice."

Smiling sadly, he nodded his head and got up to light candles and grab the copy of their favorite sonnets. "Let's take turns." As soon as he was back in bed, she snuggled up to him and he loved it so much it hurt. Thumbing through the pages, he enjoyed the weight on his shoulder, an arm around his waist, the other palm on his stomach, rubbing his belly slowly. The brown eyes closing to his dulcet tones as he began. "Let those who are in favor with their stars-"

Ansell looked at himself in the mirror.

Exhausted from a fitful night of more poetry than sleep, he was in full princely regalia. Heels, stockings, silks, sash, makeup, and wig. The nobleman frowned at the look, blue eyes already listless.
Belle came over, gazing into the mirror with him.

"I look utterly idiotic." He muttered, stomach sick with knots. How was he supposed to not only leave her but pretend he was something he wasn't?

Stepping to the side, she stood behind him and wrapped her arms about his waist. "You look like a prince at Versailles." pressing her lips to the silk shoulder, she breathed him in. Wishing she could bottle the scent of him and keep it for the month. Just the smell alone was soothing and safe, she would miss it so much.

"That's the last thing I want to be now." He replied forlornly. Placing his hands on the small ones that held him so protectively. "Princes and farm girls don't go together in their eyes."

"A month." She reassured, stepping around to the front, reaching up and gathering his face gently in her hands, kissing him lovingly. "It's just a month, Dearest." She whispered, shutting her eyes as his forehead rested against her own. "And I'll be here waiting for you to return."

"You shouldn't have to wait in the first place." Kissing the tip of her nose, he reached up and stroked a curl of hair out of her face.

"We're going to get through this, just like everything else." she hooked her hands around his waist, running her palms up and down the length of his sides.

"I don't deserve you." He sighed, staring into her eyes. Mon Dieu, he would miss them so much.

"Don't say that." Pressing her face against his chest, she once more breathed deeply to remember his smell. Not wanting to let him go, he needed to be in her arms. He needed to be safe in her arms.

"Anyone else would have just kept running." Pulling away, he went to an armoire and opened a drawer. Producing a large box secured with a ribbon.

Belle looked what was being brought to her. "And what's this?"

"Why don't you open it and find out." he smiled, handing it over. Trying to be excited instead of sad.

Pulling the ribbon off, setting it on a table, she opened the box and stared down curiously. A wide leather belt with pouches, hooks, and loops under it. She furrowed her brows. Talking it out, looking at how she could slide all of the accessories on and adjust it to her needs, she gazed up at him excitedly.

"The Craftsman gave me the funniest look when I said I wanted a tool belt fashioned for a woman and it needed little flowers on it." He explained. "However, I couldn't get over our talk about supporting each other's interests."

Running her fingers over the brown leather, studying how fine the work was, she beamed. "It's perfect. Thank you so much."

Going over Ansell slipped a hand around her waist and pressed a kiss into her hair. Sighing, burying his nose in so he couldn't forget her scent while he was away. He didn't know how he was going to sleep without the smell of her all over the sheets.

"Wait," She told him softly, taking a small parcel out of one of her pockets. Pressing it into his hands she watched intently as he let go and opened it.

A notebook. Running his fingers over the leather, he thumbed through the pages, turning back to the
A small rose blossom pressed to it, Belle's neat handwriting having written down the scientific name, where it grew, what uses it had.

"We support each other's interests," Belle told him lovingly as she enjoyed the happy grin that broke out over his face. She had missed that grin so much, she hadn't seen it all morning.

They kissed, hugging and holding each other tightly. Breaths shuddering, feeling sorrowful and scared.

"Master," Cogsworth called out "it's time."

Taking his hand, Belle walked Ansell down the stairs. Silently they looked at the row of staff waiting at the base of them. Ansell hugged them all, melancholy hanging thick in the air. Through the heavy front doors, he gazed out to see the carriage, Leon already in it and waiting. Lumiere, Chapeau, Cadenza and the Madame in the one behind.

Turning back he was standing in front of Maurice. Smiling tentatively, extending a hand out for a firm shake. The artist grabbed his hand and pulled him into a strong hug, stunning Ansell. He hugged back until Maurice let go and was stunned once more when the artist put a hand on his shoulder and patted his cheek lightly as if he was sending off his own son. "We'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too." Nodding his head slowly, smiling, he turned to Belle, taking a moment to grasp her hands and gaze into her eyes. "I love you." He breathed.

-End Part One-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I know, there are PARTS. Multiple, pieces. All planned out, by the way, so we’re not flying blind here. This was probably the longest one because there was so much dang setup because… I am a glutton for narrative punishment. Also, we needed to see some important things

Now, Part One Bonus Material for those who want a deep dive.

-Anselme/Ansell: God it took so long to find a name that sounded like Adam but was French that also could also sound noble yet be used more casually.
-The Duke: Late 90’s/Early 00’s Jeremy Irons. Because there’s villain and then there’s full Shakespearian Lion Villain.
-I have no idea for casting Leon. He’s an impeccably dressed dandy and a world class asshole, which often makes me think of The Chevalier from the show Versailles. But, like, not amazingly catty and gay.
-Honest to god, Part One took so long because I wanted to establish the relationship and show you why we’re rooting for them. Not just because they’re the Prince and the Beast from the movie so we automatically are on their side, but because fleshing them out shows they’re good for each other and their romance is believable.
-The foundation of Ansell’s personality is actually based on Belle’s first verse in “Something There”.
-There was a massive amount of S1/S2 Downton Abby (on top of both BatB movies) that happened while writing dialog. Because Matthew Crawley is well spoken but also kind of an endearingly awkward, overdramatic, yet well-intentioned dork.
France was incredibly classist during this time. There were three estates: Nobles, Clergy, Commoners. Nobility and Clergy paid very few taxes and Commoners were heavily taxed. Nobles and Commoners didn’t mix, and even a maîtresse-en-titre (chief mistress) was supposed to be a noble woman. A relationship with a common woman outside of her being a prostitute you were using was not kosher. Hence, our drama.

Belle understood all of Titus Andronicus when she saw the play in London. It was, obviously, performed in English.

The Duke vs. Belle’s lesson plans were an important contrast in showing how both had incredibly different outcomes due to teaching styles.

The Vaguely Mentioned War We Kind Of Dance Around: is the Seven Years War. TLDR: England and France were the main players and the two world superpowers at the time, and England crushed France. It’s a good read.

Gaston was a Captain in the Seven Years War. At least here.

In Chapter Twelve during the bath, Ansell recites to Belle a part of the play As You Like It.

Herbalists were typically women or monks. Which, was why Ansell was reluctant to show his interests. However, Belle accepting gender norms isn’t really a thing.

The entire foundation for Belle and Ansell’s relationship is in Chapter Twelve. “I’ll always support your interests” and “neither of them were terribly traditional”.

Belle’s walk through town with Leon was important because it shows how threatening he is by forcing her into the situation, but Belle isn’t rescued by anyone despite multiple men ready to do so. She takes back her own agency.

Maurice doesn’t get a lot of scene time but I’ve always considered him a package deal with Belle. Being protective as he is, he’s want to get to know the guy who he kinda had to accept quickly while being locked in a wagon and then adjust to actually being a human his daughter was in love with.


Ansell and Maurice bonding and finding common ground was/is one of my favorite things because it starts out as Ansell trying to make a good impression. Yet as Ansell lacks a father figure and while he and Belle both lost their mothers, Maurice is the complete opposite of The Duke. And Ansell wants that kind of love and validation, even if he doesn’t know it.

Ansell’s horse is named Cavall after King Arthur’s favorite hunting hound and is an Andalusian as back in the day Spanish horses were all the rage for nobility.

My god, I finally got to tease AUNT LUCETTE. But, I can’t tell you anything. 😞

There is -a b s o l u t e l y- a wedding in winter. I wasn’t yanking your chain there. I wrote it already. It’s cuuuuute AF :D

I wrote a lot of cute shit already and half of it isn’t going to make it in here. But, maybe oneshots/asides ala Two Very Small Storms?

The Sonnet Ansell begins to read to Belle towards the end of Chapter Sixteen is Sonnet 25.

Massive Props to Madam_O for recommending A Little Chaos. Belle’s toolbelt is a spin on the leather belt Sabine wore while working on the fountain.

We're going to take a week off for Fourth of July so I can eat a lot of barbeque and recover from writing. But after that, Part Two.

THANK YOU for sticking around this long. I hope I can continue to entertain everyone. Any questions, comments, dislikes, likes, let me know below.

See you in two weeks.
"ANSELME."

Ansell sighed, standing in place as Chapeau brushed the back of his jacket. His apartment at Versailles put his royal chambers back home to shame. Everything was dripping with gold and jewels, shimmering with mirrors, saturated in luxury that had been brought in from all over the world. It was so blisteringly decadent, so hideously lonely. "Do you think he could be more infuriating?" He muttered to the valet as Lumiere opened the door and his father walked in.

"Boy, why are you taking so long? The party is in your honor." The Duke pressed, looking his son over in the black and gold affair he had on. "That's what you chose? Fine. As long as you're acceptable for court I suppose."

Leon stuck his head in, aglow he was back in court after weeks in that dreadful province and nearly two whole days in a carriage with his most insufferable brother. "Anselme, there's a fountain of wine in your honor. A fountain." Pausing, he smiled in amusement towards the prince's pain. "There's a dinner going on in which you're the center of attention. Why on god's earth do you look like someone shot your cat?"

"Well… I mean-" Ansell muttered under his breath.

"You were ten and it was an honest mistake." The Viscount dismissed "Didn't I apologize profusely and buy you a new one? I was upset myself."

Ansell rolled his eyes as Chapeau fitted him with a wig, carefully tucking the golden hair under. Versailles was built on a bloody swamp, and with the late summer humidity, he could already feel the heat building under the damned thing. Turning, he gave Lumiere the most plaintive look. As if his friend could somehow put him out of his misery. "I still haven't seen Francis."

"He just arrived by carriage." The eldest son explained. "Aunt Marie-Lucette also just arrived, and Uncle Hugon, Aunt Marie-Therese and cousin Julien are already in the room."

"Oh good, more people to gawk at me."

"Come, boy, come." The Duke huffed, looking him over disapprovingly as he leaned on his cane.

"You know, Father, maybe you should just put me in the menagerie. It'd make it easier for everyone to stare and I'm willing to bet good money I'd get on well with the tigers."

His father was not amused, yet felt the quip wasn't worth the energy to cuff him upside the head. Ushering his sons out, the Duke made his way through the maze of the palace in long, purposeful strides. Cane clicking against the marble floors with each step. "Thank god you're not being presented tonight. You look absolutely despondent."

"He looks heartbroken to me." Leon chimed as they walked abreast, Lumiere and Chapeau shadowing as Ansell's chosen help.

Ansell shot his brother the most scathing of looks. Adjusting his cravat, straightening his jacket, he took a deep breath to steady himself. Imagining how much easier it would be with Belle on his
elbow. Her wits making her an easy conversationalist in a room of rich people who had nothing more to do than absorb art, culture, and other people's opinions. "The King's not going to be there?"

"The King has had a bout of melancholy ever since the maîtresse-en-titre passed away," Leon explained shrewdly. "His Grace rarely shows his face outside of the royal chambers these days."

"Lord knows why His Highness can't get over it." Their father grumbled peevishly. "We all know he still visits Parc-aux-Cerfs. He's not going without his needs met."

"I heard the Dauphin passed away too," Ansell noted grimly. "Two people you love in short succession; I can't even fathom the heartache."

"Yes, it's all very sad, but His Majesty has been blessed with a line of proper heirs." Smiling at the company coming down the hall, the Duke gestured to a young woman who appeared near Belle's age. Primped and powdered, she shuffled over in her ridiculous lavender dress. She was a vision, an over-coiffed angel. "Mon petit chou."

"Mon Duc!" She chirped, taking his hand before purring far more coquettishly at the Duke. "Mon loup," turning to Ansell, effortless and full of grace she beamed. "Is this your son? What a strapping one he is."

"Anselme, this is Madame Laflèche." The Duke preened. "Madame, Prince Anselme."

"Charmed, Madame." Ansell took her hand and kissed it, noticing how loose the maîtresse-en-titre's corset was. "It is nice to meet the beauty who keeps my father's company."

"It is an honor to meet his heir." Laflèche curtseyed. "Mon Duc has told me so much about you."

"I'm sure all good things." He quipped dryly, glancing over her shoulder and to the gentleman walking quickly towards them. "Francis?"

"There you are!" He was older than Ansell remembered, but, then again they were all older. He hadn't matured like the rest of the world and now little Francis appeared to be his senior. "Mon Dieu, Anselme!"

Ansell was crushed into a hug and reluctantly gave one in return.

"You've... well, how odd you have aged. But not like the rest of us." Francis pulled back and clapped a hand over the prince's cheek. "But you're certainly not thirty-one. Nor twenty-one. Aren't you a strange one."

"Somewhere in the middle, I suppose." He swallowed, not wanting to really dwell on the eccentric side effects of being cursed not as unaging houseware but rather an animal of flesh and blood not immune entirely to time nor the elements. Suddenly, Ansell wanted that fountain of wine.

Chapeau and Lumiere both tensely watched from afar as one watches a nervous dog getting its ears yanked by a child.

"Lord, you're thicker now." Patting his brother's shoulders, he let him go and they all resumed walking towards the room. "After ten years, you must be dying to get into a little trouble? Prendre quelqu'un?" He wagged his brows.

"Not... really." The heir said awkwardly, watching his brothers' faces fall. "May we carry on? The party is for me after all." Suddenly feeling anxious, wanting to disappear Ansell squeezed a hand into a fist. Wanting so badly to be far away from his gilded cage. Yearning for a little cottage in a little
provincial town, where he was himself. Where he was home.

They entered the room for the party; the Maestro directing a small orchestra, the Madame crooning, nobles in their finest milling about, pecking at the over the top spread of savory meats and decadent pastries. The whole affair magnificently gaudy and worthy of the prince Ansell had been ten years before. Bravely, he slipped into the space, escaping his father's side and hunting for some wine.

"My dear nephew."

Ansell turned to see the barrel-chested man with the over-waxed mustache pulled upwards at attention as he grinned unnervingly. "Uncle Hugon?"

"Well now, some of us have aged." He chuckled, medals for combat jangling on his chest. "You look good, Your Grace-"

"Please, Ansell will suffice."

"Prince Anselme!" He watched a rather large woman and a stuffy young man come over. Bowing, making him feel so awkward and yet as if he were prey at the same time.

Marveling at the two, he beamed. "Aunt Marie-Therese? Julien?"

"You do remember us!" The woman smiled, her neckline so low it frightened her nephew.

"Julien was three last time I saw him." He looked the young man up and down, sharp dark blue eyes, a resting frown, dressed like a peacock. "How are you all? It's been years."

"Well, well. The outcome of the war was dreadful but I did see some of the action." His uncle huffed, pleased with himself. "Dare say our lives have been boring compared to yours."

The Prince's stomach churned as he began to feel like a curiosity. "Well, actually it was pretty boring. I just kind of… moped a lot, I suppose." Reaching for the words, but not wanting to give away his more animalistic ventures, Ansell became a touch pallid even under all the makeup. "But I'm looking forward to catching up-"

"Did you hunt and eat things like a lion?" Julien asked shortly.

Furrowing his brows, he tensed. Blue eyes blazing at his relative. "Excuse me?"

"They said you spent ten years naked in the forest, killing men, howling at the moon, living like an animal." The young man, prone to getting his way and having everyone answer to him, looked the cousin he didn't remember over shrewdly.

"Julien!" Hugon cuffed him upside the head.

"It's a legitimate question!" The boy barked impetuously. Unafraid of his parents.

Taking a deep breath, wanting to hide, Ansell took a goblet of wine from a server's tray.

"I heard you killed an Army Captaine and you ate him alive." Julien exclaimed, his eyes wicked with morbid curiosity.

The golden head tilted to the side, jaw twitching.

"Son."
"I want to know! It's all anyone talks about." Huffing, he held his chin up stubbornly. Foolishly oblivious to his cousin's rather restrained yet still aggressive body language.

"I wasn't an animal." The corner of his lip curled ever so slightly. Suddenly looking much bigger to his aunt and uncle. "I was cursed of the body, not of the mind. There. Is. A. Difference."

Julien, unamused and ignoring the growl the last word had been said with, scowled and complained as his mother shepherded him away.

"You'll have to excuse the lad." Hugon said stiffly, quickly, nervously. "He's just fascinated is all."

"It seems everyone is," Ansell grumbled, looking over to his shoulder that was getting an overly-friendly pat from the relative.

"We'll talk later, I don't wish to take up all your time."

Taking a deep breath to relax, he nodded his head. Speaking tightly and failing to lie. "It was a pleasure talking to you, Uncle. I look forward to seeing you at court."

Stepping away, Hugon went to his family in the corner, whispering harshly. "You stupid little boy!"

"Well everyone's saying it!" Julien hissed under his breath. "I want to know if it's all true. Do you really think he ate that Captaine? Captaine Gaston?"

"If you don't shut up, we'll never get you on the throne!" Marie-Therese chastised. "Isn't that what you want, my boy? To be Duke?"

The Duke sidled up to Leon, casually sipping his brandy. "I know you needed to rest from your travels, however, I think a few days chest deep in Parisian girls is enough time." He spoke softly. "I want my full report, Leon."

"And you'll have it, Father." He narrowed his eyes at the prince talking cordially to a count. "You'll have every little detail. I promise. After the party, let's catch up."

"Let's catch up now." Gesturing for his valet to come over, he whispered his orders and signaled for his eldest to follow.

Ansell had made his rounds, talking pleasantly with everyone at the party. Flashing a smile, laughing at so many idiotic jokes, barely wincing through several rather handsy countesses. Sinking away from the throngs of nobility the heir apparent watched the court converge on the food and wine like fat bright chickens at a loaf of bread. Listening and enjoying the Madame and Maestro filled the hall with breathtaking songs as he observed the others so privileged and oblivious. Mulling over how this particular class of people lived and acted compared to the others. Stealthily, Prince Anselme moved to a corner and imagined a warm fire, his newest book, and a farm girl reading in the chair across from him.

"And what are you thinking, my Prince?"

Turning, he saw his aunt. Dressed magnificently, her dark hair piled atop her head in a heap of
ringlets. The makeup of an Englishwoman, the fashion of a Frenchwoman. Dark brown eyes sharp and quick as she curtseyed to him. "Prince Anselme, it's an honor to see you after all these years."

"Aunt Marie-Lucette, please. The pleasure is all mine." He held his hand up, stepping in and giving her a hug.

Marie-Lucette, Marquise, pursed her lips and hugged her nephew until he let go. He hadn't hugged her since his mother had died. Once his damned father got his hooks in him, Anselme had always bowed, keeping formal even with people he used to hold affection for. "Well, if we're dropping formalities, just call me Aunt Lucette." She told him, looking him over. "God knows why every other woman in this country has to have "Marie" tacked onto their first name."

He furrowed his brow thoughtfully. "Very well, Aunt Lucette."

"You're looking well, Prince Anselme." She said as she let go. "Better than before, I've heard."

"Thank you, and just Ansell will suffice." He told her, shifting his weight nervously. Hoping, praying, she wasn't thinking the same as the others. The Beast Prince, the peculiar thing to whisper about.

"I haven't heard you being called that since your mother was chasing you around." She plucked two flutes of champagne from a tray, handing one to her nephew. "So how long have you been back to your old self?"

"I wouldn't necessarily call it my old self." He mused thoughtfully. "Even my body is… a bit different now. However, it's been four months since the curse was broken."

"And it took my brother all that time to see you?" Aunt Lucette rolled her eyes. "I see he's still a fine piece of work."

Ansell snickered at the remark, leaning in to keep his reply to only her ears. "A Rembrandt."

Lucette's rouged lips tugged at the corners of her face, highly amused by the remark. "Well now, you have changed."

"I had to for all this to work." He noted, taking a sip. "If I didn't, everyone would be gasping and pointing at me. And I wouldn't blame them, between being seven feet tall and having horns it's so hard to fit in. Even when you have a good tailor."

She chuckled at Ansell, eyes raking up and down him thoroughly. Her nephew used to have such a cruel and lewd sense of humor. Whatever was in front of her was so much better. "So where is the girl? Obviously, there's one, there was so much emphasis on "earning her love in return by the time the last petal fell" and all that."

Ansell rolled his shoulders, pondering what to say. "She's not here" he hedged.

"Alright, then who is she?" Taking a sip of her champagne, she watched the blue eyes ache. "Clearly someone your father doesn't approve of or else he'd be parading you two around, unable to shut up about it."

The Prince hesitated, feeling protective of his relationship. Those who knew about Belle's station had not been supportive. "Belle." He finally mustered. "Her name is Belle."

"As pretty as her name implies?"
"And then some." He smiled ruefully, drawing a hand up to his mouth as a wave of loneliness swept over him. She would have eased into socializing and helped steady him. "She's really quite something."

Aunt Lucette tilted her head ever so slightly. "So then why isn't she here, being celebrated?"

"For... reasons." Ansell bristled, his back stiffening.

"Hmn." Knowing better than to press a prince, the Marquise held out her champagne flute. "Well then, to Belle."

"To Belle." He nodded, clinking his crystal with her own.

Lucette's eyes took in her nephew, shrewdly watching. The last time she had seen Prince Anselme, years ago, before her had been a slippery, fiendish, vile prince. Greedy and prone to bouts of rage if he felt slighted or insecure in any way. Yet here he was, amongst opulence, next to some of the most beautiful and richest women in the world, quietly sipping champagne in a corner. A wallflower, Ansell, pining for some girl. No wonder his father didn't approve.

Ansell saw his older brother flirting with some young princess and slunk more against the drapes. "How is England, Aunt Lucette?" He asked, curious but also wishing to distract himself. "Are William and Victoria well? Last time I saw them we were just children."

"They look around whatever this age your appear to be. Both married respectful people young and made me a grandmother already. So now I get to feel old with all their little ones running about. And England is very pretty. Green and damp." tilting her head, she observed how the blue eyes ached at the crowds. Her poor nephew looked as if he needed a tooth extracted.

"And your husband didn't come?"

"Solomon? Lord no, not after this last war. Any red-blooded Frenchman would take one look at that sweet English fool and string him up in the name of the King. He's much safer in our castle." Running a finger over the rim of her glass, she smiled. "He sends his regards as well as some gifts."

"Generous man." He watched a gaggle of women bustle by, making eyes at him, whispering and giggling. One of them slipping a note into his palm. Reluctantly, dreadfully, he opened it to find a rather lewd and direct invitation scrawled on the paper. The heir grimaced at it.

"You look like you want to curl up in the drapes and die." Sipping her champagne, she leaned in. Pursing her lips and skimming the note, Lucette let out a soft, amused cackle. "Well. That's certainly straightforward."

"I have never been less aroused in my entire life." He huffed, pausing and blushing as to what he had just said to family. Letting out a weary sigh, he shut his eyes. "Aunt Lucette, it's been a pleasure but I really must retire. I hope the rest of your evening's pleasant."

Bowing and stepping away, he signaled to Lumiere and Chapeau as they stood near the door to follow him out.

"Your Highness?" Lumiere asked as they made a quick exit. "Master this party is in y-"

"They're not going to miss me." He told them in a tired grunt. "Half the room's getting ready to bed one another. I need to rest. And I need at least one person to help me out of this horrid suit."

"Your Grace?"
Turning, he came face to face with a gorgeous woman in a pale yellow dress and a mountain of a wig. Mustering up what little energy he had, the prince managed a smile. "Mademoiselle?"

"Elke von Tessmer of Saxony, Your Highness." She curtsied.

"Mademoiselle Tessmer. What do I owe the honor?" Gently taking her hand he pressed a kiss to the knuckles. "Surely you didn't travel all the way from Saxony to welcome me."

The Saxon's pale neck and ears began to flush with color at the clear blue eyes. "But of course. My family heard of your joyous return to the world and had to come. Saxony is an ally, we wished to welcome back a son of France."

Cocking his head ever so slightly and keenly, the Prince tried to appear flattered. Von Tessmer seemed a bit flushed from drinking, so he hoped it would pass. "Well, I thank you. And I apologize for missing you at the party. I sincerely hope we meet again at court."

"As do I." Batting the lashes hooding large eyes, she tilted her head demurely. "And I shall not take up any more of your time, Prince Anselme. I wish you a restful night."

"You as well, Mademoiselle." Bowing, he turned to retreated to Lumiere and Chapeau, whatever charm he had melting into tired impatience.

"The Mademoiselle seemed nice," Lumiere told him, keeping up Ansell's quick stride.

"Sniffing around an unmarried prince." He grumbled as they ascended the stairs. "Not the only one, mind you."

"A prince who's still a bachelor, that is a very tempting possibility to many families," Lumiere reminded him. "And women in general."

"Yes but I never remember them being this… handsy…" Shaking his head, he began to unbutton his waistcoat as the apartment's door drew closer. "I think it's safe to say I was groped in a few places even Belle hasn't gotten to."

"Well, my Prince, you are quite handsome. Even if they're not the one who's hands you'd prefer, you could always take it as a compliment." As Lumiere chuckled, Chapeau gave his companion a glance of top notch side eye.

"When do you think it would be safest to marry?" Ansell asked as soon as the door to his apartment clicked shut. "Could you two please help me out of this awful contraption?"

"What do you mean by safest, Your Grace?" Chapeau asked keenly. Fingers expertly peeling off the wig as Lumiere assisted Ansell out of the jacket.

"Well I certainly want to propose, but I suspect once my father gets wind of it either one of us or both will mysteriously disappear." Sighing heavily, Ansell took off all of the jewelry and placed it into a crystal bowl, kicking off his shoes as his gentleman's gentlemen helped him get down to his linen breeches for the night. "Honestly I don't know why this is coming up right now. I have other things at the present to focus on. However, I keep suspecting it's best to make it official after-" catching himself, he realized that he had yet to tell either men about the plan to run away.

"Yes, Master?" The Valet asked, carrying over a basin of water dashed with a touch of aromatic oils.

"Nothing, I'm just thinking out loud." Washing his face and wiping the makeup off, he gazed up at his friends tiredly as he patted his face with a towel. "Thank you for assisting me."
"You're welcome, Your Highness." Lumiere bowed as Chapeau fussed over the suit in his hands. "Do you need anything more?"

Stifling back a yawn, he shook his head slowly. "No thank you. I hope you have a good night."

"I'll be laying out your wardrobe for tomorrow before I take to bed." Somehow Chapeau always made the dullest job sound exciting to him. As he exited, Lumiere rolled his eyes to get a chuckle from their Prince before he blew out some of the candles in the room and shut the door.

Ansell fell onto his mattress. Placing a hand behind his head he looked up to the canopy of his bed, staring into the middle distance somewhere between the fabric and the hidden night sky. Wanting to be home. Not the castle, the cottage. Belle's warm body curled against him, the sound of the crickets outside, the rustling of the wind through the shutters. Those quiet little moments. Allowing the minutes to slip away, he dozed and thought of learning more about the life they would be building. About how much is wanted to wake next to her and go about his morning routine. Mind drifting to how much he even missed Maurice's early morning chats with him.

"Your Grace?"

Raising his head up, Ansell saw the familiar silhouette at the door once more. "Yes, Lumiere?" Sitting upright, he took a candle by the bedside and lit several more.

"I was assisting Chapeau and I found this in a coat pocket." Lumiere handed him a carefully folded piece of parchment.

Furrowing his brows, he took the paper and read the small note on one of the corners.

_I thought you might want this._

_- Maurice._

Ansell unfolded the thick drawing paper, the inside revealing the sketch of Belle Maurice had drawn during one of their chats. A smile slowly pulling up the corners of his lips, he studied her face. That mischievous gleam in her eye, that lovely mouth. He could see her looking at him just so. About to tease him or pull him along into some playful scheme or time in the library. Oh god, he missed that gleam.

Ansell averted his eyes to the rug so Lumiere couldn't see how red they were.

"Thank you very much." Clearing his throat, he rubbed the bridge of his nose to keep the stinging at his eyelids from becoming something more. "It feels so odd not being home with her." He confessed sadly.

"It certainly feels… odd, not having Ansell home." Maurice mused out loud as he carefully cut a thin piece of metal for his next project. "Gotten so used to having our prince around in the mornings and evenings I keep waiting for him to open the door and ask for a cup of tea while he takes off his coat."

Belle's lips twitched while she turned the page of her book by the fireplace. Several stacks of reading
material were scattered across the house to keep her occupied. The aftermath of a restless mind being
left to its own devices. "He'd have supper from the castle."

"And a bag full of greenery and a book in his pocket." He watched his daughter cautiously over the
tops of his glasses, noting the brief flicker of happiness in her eyes from musing over the lad. Like
embers meeting a strong wind it quickly fizzled out.

"He's a good fit around here." Tucking a ribbon between the pages to keep her place, she sighed.
The days since he had left had felt so disjointed.

"I know you're missing him, but I can't help but think something else is on your mind." Maurice
hinted. Putting his tool down he watched as she got up and pensively went over to him, wringing her
hands. "Belle, is everything alright?"

"We need to talk." Staring down at the floor, she pulled a chair up and took a seat. Lacing her hands
together, leaning forward on her elbows, unable to look her father in the eye.

"Talk." Letting out a deep breath, he turned to her. "Why does this not sound like a pleasant
conversation?"

"You know how difficult it's been for Ansell and I." She began, feeling sick to her shoes at what she
had to say. "Royal customs don't condone our relationship. At least not marriage."

"He's nobility, and you're a village girl." Maurice reached out and touched her arm reassuringly. "It's
a hurdle, I'm aware."

"We have to leave." Looking up at him, frightened, she searched his eyes. "Papa... we have to leave
France." Belle forced out, hating every last word leaving her lips "and Ansell has to give up his title
for us to have a chance."

Maurice let go of her arm, sitting back in his chair, taking it all in. No wonder she had looked like
she was being eaten from the inside out since the boy left.

"We want you to come with us." She tried to smile, to give him hope.

"No." Maurice began to shake his head slowly. "No. Belle, I'm too old to run away." He said sadly,
his eyes feeling hot.

"We're using the book-"

"I'm too old to learn a new language, a new way of life-"

Fighting tears Belle soldiered on. "Papa, no you're not."

"This is all I've ever known." He refuted, firm and beginning to sound upset.

"This is all I've ever known too." She pressed. "And it's all he's ever known. But we want to have a
life together, and we both want you in that life." Reaching forward, she squeezed his hand. "We both
love you so much Papa, and we want you to be there for everything."

Maurice sighed, his eyes stinging, his shoulders heavy with the weight of her words.

Her face was still pained, beginning to look desperate. She needed him with them. If not, who would
take care of him? "Will you at least think about it, please?"

"Belle, I'm not getting any younger. How could I possibly-"
"Quit saying that." Belle's eyes narrowed in earnest, becoming frustrated at his excuse. "Don't you want to give me away at my wedding? I would like you to be there. Just like I'd like you to be there for every holiday, every milestone. There's so much to look forward to as soon as we're free from his title, from his father, from France."

Running his fingers through his hair, fingers grasping the ribbon as it slid out of place, Maurice shut his eyes as the weariness crept into his bones. "I do want what's best for you." shaking his head slowly, studying his own wrinkled hands, he swallowed thickly. "I'm going to need time to process all this, you know."

"Of course." She agreed softly. "But, I don't want to leave you." Getting up, she stood behind his chair. Wrapping her arms around him, squeezing his shoulders tenderly, putting her face against the side of his own. "I love you, Papa."

"I love you too." Wetting his lips he squeezed a hand holding him from above.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Ohhhhh man. Here we go. Part Two.

Ansell's age/aging has been such a weird thing I've been going back and forth on. I've been debating it so much, it's changed several times, including just this morning. Technically after 10 years, he's 31. Technically. That said, he certainly didn't mature emotionally during his 10 years of extensive professional level moping. Post-curse, he's rather youthful. Also, he was cursed, but not inanimate object cursed. The beast was an animal, and so here the beast felt the effects of time, but at a much more slower rate than a human. So he's somewhere in the middle there, like ambiguous early/mid 20s.

Make sure to head on over to Two Very Small Storms! I added two more one-shots to that one, which is going to be the place where all the super fluffy stuff that doesn't make it into NAHE proper will live. Very cute, possible squeeing if you're into that sort of thing.

As always, THANK YOU for your kudos, bookmarks, and comments. They are all fuel to us writer-types, our egos desperate for stoking. As always, if you love it, hate it, don't know how to feel about it, or want to tell me how I should feel about it, drop a line down below. I also answer questions if you've got any.

Anywho, let me know what's what. I'll see you next week.
Taking a sip of his coffee, Ansell shifted his position in his chair with annoyance towards the rather form fitting breeches that were in fashion. Picking up the sketchbook Belle had given him, he carefully inspected her rose; running a thumb over the edges of the pages to get them to flutter, musing over what he may find nearby on the grounds. There was an herb garden, but also the wild woods further out he could venture to.

Tucked carefully in the middle of the book, a blue ribbon fell out, twisting down into his lap.

Furrowing his brows he held it up, inspecting it carefully. Eyes lighting up to the particular shade of blue. Knowing it was all too familiar. Keeping her hair braided, back, or up. Wistfully rubbing it between his fingers, Ansell brought it up to his nose. There was a hint of her scent. He smiled into it wistfully.

"Master," Lumiere called out from the door. "Your Brother."

"Of course." Carefully tucking the ribbon away in a jacket pocket and slipping the book into his breast pocket, he waved Francis in, a maid following with a large silver platter of breakfast. "Francis-"

"Brother, so nice of you to invite me." He said politely with a slight bow. Not as done up as Leon, but still foppish and bedecked in beads and jewels. He took a seat across from the prince as the maid set up the service and another brought in a fresh tray of coffee and removed the other.

"I haven't seen you in ten years and the party was rather crowded." Taking over he took a new cup that was poured for him. "Thank you, Madame."

"You were the beau of the ball." he mused, carefully taking a bunch of grapes, glistening wet like dark rubies.

"I certainly felt like something else." He confessed. Marveling at Francis' age, older than him, he took a sip.

"Nonsense," his brother was so different. Well dressed, but in more muted colors compared to the bright suits of the other men. The designs on his silk jacket not glitter florals, but great roaring cats. Golden hair down instead of a wig like a mane, face clear of makeup. Ansell was sitting back, his chin tilted, eyes keen. Relaxed, yet ready to pounce at a moment's notice. Powerful. "I watched you, you were dashingly handsome and charmingly conversational." popping a grape between the back of his teeth he smiled.

"It takes a lot more to put on that act nowadays." He confessed. "It's not necessarily natural."

"No makeup? No wig?"

"They haven't forced me out of my room yet." He reasoned. "But enough about me. What have you been up to?"

"Well, I got married." Francis crossed one leg over the other and settled back in the chair. "Italian woman. She's very nice, very sweet, doesn't put up with lazily drinking all day-"
"But that was the sport you were best at."

Francis chortled at the quip. "We made a passel of six children. One more soon; winter."

"Six?" Ansell raised his brows.

"They're all extremely bright, so they take after her." His brother smiled, wistfully, proudly. "I summer at Versailles and spend the rest of the year in Italy with the family. Her father is a Cavaliere and has no sons so we're set to inherit the estate. It's in the mountains, very pretty. We get a white Christmas every year."

He watched his little brother, one side of his mouth pulling into a lopsided smile. "You sound happy, Francis."

Gazing down into his cup Francis nodded slowly as the ropes of steam hit his nose. "I'm certainly no prince, but I do have something nice."

"Being a Prince isn't as fulfilling as some think." Ansell scoffed under his breath. "Why do you summer in France?"

"Father, mostly. But admittedly there are certain perks of being at court... without your wife." He hinted. "I also go to Paris before I leave for home and pick up a wagon's worth of supplies and gifts. The fabric and lace alone make Marcella the beauty of any event we attend."

"Ah."

Francis wet his lips. "So, if I may be so bold... the mademoiselle?"

The piercing blue eyes locked onto his sibling.

The unwavering stare gave Francis a shiver as he soldiered on. "We all know the words you were bound to by heart, brother. The curse lifting was the work of not just you."

"He hasn't told you anything?" The prince asked quietly.

"He hasn't wanted to tell me anything. Which has led me to suspect that your better half doesn't live up to his standards."

Ansell chuckled dryly. "When does anyone ever." Opening his mouth, he chose his words tactfully. "She certainly is my better half."

"So?"

"She's not nobility, but that's all I'd rather say." Reaching over, he took a strawberry and dipped it in crème chantilly. "How many nieces and how many nephews?"

Francis smiled warmly. "Four girls, two boys, hopefully, three. You know Leon has four-"

"Leon's an ass." He interjected before taking a bite.

"Some things never change." He reminded.

"And what has he told you?"

"That you're an ass."
Ansell rolled his eyes as he chewed, flicking the stem onto the tray.

Gazing out the window to the stunningly perfect gardens as green as emeralds, Francis exhaled. "That was always you two though. Fighting. I admit I was mean to you too, but you and Leon were always particularly -"

"Hateful" Ansell sipped. "We're like fire and gunpowder."

"He has his reasons you know." Francis's voice hinted his defensiveness towards his full-blooded sibling.

"And he can blame Father, Francis," Ansell grumbled. "He was the one who played favorites. If it was up to me the first born would inherit the title, legitimate or not." Gesturing forcefully to the door he snorted as his brother was stunned at the declaration. "By all means, that's a conversation I'd love to be able to have. But we all know who's in charge of this family, and who stirs the pot between the three of us."

"So you're serious about that?"

"I wouldn't joke about the inheritance."

"But he said you threatened him," Francis announced firmly.

His shoulders tensed. "Because he's crass and over dramatic -"

"Well, that's the pot calling the kettle -"

"You don't make comments about the woman I love. Not like he did." The prince began to snarl at the memory. "He came into my house with an ax to grind, kept goading me into a fight. And I reminded him of his place."

Carefully filing away the information the heir had unwittingly given him, Francis took a sip. "Careful, Ansell. At least here."

"I'm surprised he never told you any more." He caught his brother's eyes shifting, trying to tuck thoughts away before they could be found.

"You know how he and father are." A frown pulled at the sides of Francis' mouth "Always colluding -"

"Always being his eyes and ears and tongue in return for affection." Ansell grunted. Realizing he was gripping the arm of his chair more tightly than he wanted, he forced himself to relax. "There has to be something more pleasant for us to talk about."

"Well, you won't talk about this woman you love." Francis reminded him.

"Anything else."

"Then we're going to run out of subjects fairly quickly." He lamented. "When there's no drama or gossip, it's terribly boring."

Ansell's lips twitched. "What are your thoughts on Uncle Hugon?"

A face of disinterest, a hint of disgust proceeded the question. "Please, that bumbling oaf, dense wife, and his mean little creature of a son?"
"Something tells me they're sniffing around for a Dukedom." The prince chuckled. "Loud sniffing at that, like a basset."

"Something tells me father will have them out on their ear within the next day or so." Reaching over, he took a piece of bread slathered with goat cheese. Finishing is part of the conversation before popping the piece into his mouth. "They're so tastelessly obvious."

"When has Uncle and Auntie ever been anything but? And Julien is worse than all of us-"

"That's because he's not terrified of his father." Using a finger Francis delicately lifted the crumbs from his lips "The little roach walks all over them. Or scuttles I suppose."

"When did you become so pleasant?" Ansell asked boldly, much to Francis' shock.

"When I grew up." He scoffed. "Don't worry, I still have my vices, I still love the excess of it all. But I found out I could do it nicely."

"I suppose that was my fault." Reaching around he took Belle's ribbon and used it to secure his hair back. "I never did learn how to play nice."

"Well with a father like ours, how could you?"

Nodding his head slowly he gazed into his cup, the little dark ripples. The ebb and flow. "How did you avoid falling into that particular trap?"

"After you were cursed I left court." He replied with a shrug. "I traveled for some time with some companions. Learned manners. Was married off to a woman who doesn't put up with cruelty. Fathered a child nearly every year like clockwork." Thrumming his fingers on the arm chair he gazed into his brother's eyes firmly, honestly. "It took me awhile, Ansell. I made a lot of mistakes, discovered a lot of regrets, faced a well of anger. But I came out better in the end I suppose." Sliding his finger around the rim of his cup he confessed. "I must admit, I did it all so I would never befall the same fate. I look terrible in furs." The joke didn't land and he frowned sheepishly.

"Perhaps I'm the cautionary tale." Missing the joke the prince's chest heaved and he couldn't look Francis in the eye. The thought of it all, his curse a failure to warn the others, was too awful. A knot twisting in his stomach and settling in the pit of it. Drawing his fist up, he forced a deep breath to curb the sadness and creeping anxiety that wanted to follow.

"Though you did find love through it all."

"Yes." He smiled wistfully. The chestnut hair, chocolate eyes, and radiant smile sweeping away all the darkness. He didn't deserve her, she was far too sweet and he was far too... himself. "And Belle-" Catching himself, his face fell.

Francis grinned at the slip-up. "So Belle."

"I strongly dislike that girl."

Belle turned to the voice, peeved as she caught the headmaster and Clothilde grumbling to themselves at a corner in the village square. Turning on a heel back and away to ignore them, her spirits brightened to the two men and the cart of goods.
"Belle!" Gustave beamed as Stephane jumped down.

"What a lovely surprise." Giving Gustave a hug, book in hand touching his back, she turned to his partner. "Stephane."

"It's wonderful to see you too." Taking her hand, ever the gentleman, he kissed her knuckles.

"You can hug her, y'know." Gustave quipped.

"He doesn't have to if he doesn't want to." Smiling at the pair, she glanced to the cart. "How is delivery for the palace?"

"Going really well. Mrs. Potts seems to think I'll starve?"

Belle chuckled. "Sounds about right."

"We're headed over, would you like to come?" He offered, "We were promised lunch and tea, and Stephane is getting a tour of the fencing room."

"Oh, I'm headed up there myself." She watched her friends perk up to the prospect of the trip together. "But I have an awful lot of equipment to bring and a horse to drop off at the stables. I was going to load up my own cart."

"There should be enough room in Gustave's," Stephane looked over the contents of their cart, hand absently resting on his rapier. "Why don't we go see if it'll fit? If not, we'll help you load up yours. You can follow us in."

"That sounds lovely." With a boost from Stephane, Belle climbed up. Sitting on the side of the bench, Stephane settled between herself and Gustave as the pony plodded off.

Stephane and Belle both saw the gossipers, the group having expanded to include the triplets. The pair scowled and Stephane began to rise off of his seat.

Gustave took him by the wrist, pulling him back down. "Come on, we talked about this. Deep breaths. Deeeeep breaths."

"I'm getting sick of them." He grumbled. "One day this'll all come to a head."

"And I'll be there with you," Belle said in a low, angry tone.

"You two! Whatever happened to turning the other cheek? To ignoring the bullies? To cowardly hiding?"

"Well, I certainly don't hide." She told him.

"Me neither." Stephane agreed.

The two both relaxed, the cart jostling on the cobblestones. Belle glanced over at Stephane's leather frog sitting against the footboard. The hilt of his rapier shimmering silver. "Stephane?"

"Hm?"

"Would you mind teaching me how to fence?"
"He's not feeling well. Can you take a look at him?" Belle asked Mr. Potts as she handed the reins of the big gray horse over. Petting Roman's large velvet nose, she held his halter as the stable master began to give her ride a look over. "He's had a cough, and he's not eating like he should."

"Hmm." Mr. Potts ran his palm over the gentle giant's shoulder, catching the worry in the girl's brown eyes. "We'll give him a good look over but he'll have to stay with me, I know you're sweet on him."

"We've just always gotten along so well, even when he was a wagon." Reaching over, she took a palmful of oats from a feed bag and offered them up to her friend. "And he's so good for work, Phillipe's not always big enough when we need heavy lifting."

"Well, let's give the old boy a bit of a break." Mr. Potts told her. "Nothing you've done wrong, Belle. Just all of our stock that was caught up in the curse has been prone to a bit of a cold ever since. Even Cavall was a touch under the weather before the Master took him to Versailles." Patting the big neck, he gave a reassuring nod as he walked the Percheron over to a stall. "It seems to clear quickly. We'll fix him up but in the meantime, you'll need to just use Phillipe."

"That should be fine." She shrugged lightly.

"Well, I'll let you know if we get anything new to try. Usually, with a trip to Versailles and Paris, there are at least one or two purchases. For the time being though everything else is taken or not well enough to be lent."

"I'm sure I'll manage." Belle watched a stable boy tend to Roman, who was more interested in getting snacks than having someone take off his saddle. "And how are you doing, Monsieur?"

"Very well." He smiled. "Teaching Chip the trade, he's got a bit of the touch."

"Mrs. Potts?"

"Sad you're not here, but a merciful ruler." They both enjoyed a short laugh, and he nodded off towards the castle. "Go head on up, we'll take care of Roman. She'll be wanting to see you and fill you full of tea and biscuits."

"I have a project to work on first but I'll sneak you some of those biscuits on my way back." She promised.

"You're going to get us both in trouble."

"I really should have installed this sooner," Belle said with a knock of her mallet, wiping the sweat from her forehead as she looked over the washing machine that was placed into the laverie. The maids studied the contraption with a good deal of hesitation. Belle had been building all morning and into the afternoon, measuring and cutting and nailing, her tools swaying from her new belt. Smiling in accomplishment, she unhooked the donkey from the post. "Alright, let me show you how it works."

Mrs. Potts came out with a tray of drinks, watching the girl set up her washing machine at the large reservoir they used to wash the linens. Explaining each step, what needed to be placed where, how much soap was needed per load. Tossing some sheets into the barrel, she got the donkey started, and the whole thing started moving, churning, and foaming.
"It's half the time, I promise." Looking up, brushing some strands of hair out of her face, she brightened at the sight of Mrs. Potts.

"I brought refreshments for everyone, come on. This heat wave isn't kind." Coaxing her maids over, she watched Belle straighten her skirt and refasten her ribbon before coming over. "Well now, you look as if your clothes could use a washing in your invention."

"I am a bit dirty." Taking one of the cool drinks, she sipped, watching the laundry lazily tumbling in the soap. "How has the castle been? I feel like I don't come over enough."

"Quiet without you two. How are you fairing?"

Belle sighed, putting her hand on her hip. "We had a routine, and I feel so out of sorts with it gone." Glancing up at the Englishwoman she added. "I do try to keep myself busy, but I'm starting to realize how much time was spent on Ansell."

"Well, aren't you reading?" They walked back inside through the servant's entrance.

Belle was amused at the question. "You should see the stack I brought back because I went through it. It's barely been a week."

"It'll fly by." She reassured.

Glancing down at her cool cup, she pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I could use a change of clothes, but would you like to have tea after? We never get to actually sit down and talk and I'd love to if you have the time."

Mrs. Potts looked over the young woman dearly. How long had it been since she had been invited to sit down and have a cuppa? Besides the Mister, that sweet man. "I'll send Plumette up to tidy you up and put you in a fresh frock. I need to check on the parlor, but after that, I'll meet you in the library for proper tea time. How's that sound, Love?"

"Perfect."

"I mean, don't you ever miss England?"

Mrs. Potts mused over the idea, taking a long draw of her tea. "I do, and John does too. But we moved so long ago."

"Do you miss your family?" Belle smoothed her daffodil hued skirt out, the fabric embroidered with blue flowers and greenery around the hem.

"Of course I do." Looking past the mountains of books, she sighed heavily. One of the tables, the one clear of novels, maps, and other sundries, had a proper English tea serving set up. Sturdy silver and delicate ceramic; cream and sugar and little sandwiches. It was familiar and soothing to the older woman. "I have a large family all across London, but, when we married and left we were so young." The light was filtering in through the windows, grazing over a bronze bust of Aristotle. Setting her cup down and lacing her fingers together she continued. Mind delving into years ago. "We moved around so much; he was just a stable boy and I was just a scullery maid. But we slowly got promoted, went to better houses, better pay, better treatment."

"When'd you arrive at the castle?" Playing with the handle of the delicate cup, she watched the
wistfulness work its way across the woman's face.

Being drawn out of the memories, Mrs. Potts caught something out of the corner of her eye. Belle's curiosity being more than just casual chit-chat. Tilting her head slowly to the side the housemaid's eyes slid to the young woman. There was a long, thoughtful silence. Sizing Belle up, her pensiveness, the way she fidgeted.

Belle shrunk slightly from having her mining operation discovered.

"Is there anything we need to talk about, Dearie?" She asked carefully, motherly.

"Oh, wow." Gustave breathed out as he and Stephane peered into the library.

Belle relaxed, relief washing over her face as she turned to find them lingering in the doorway. "Come in and take a look." She offered.

They both hesitated.

"Come on," she coaxed them in. "We have tea and sandwiches if that's an incentive."

Wandering in, they both gawked, slack jawed at all of the books. "This…This is... is yours?" Stephane bumbled.

"I know, I still feel that way." She admitted, getting up. "Would you like to borrow anything? It's all sorted by genre and then by author. It can be a little tricky but I can usually find what everyone is looking for."

Gustave rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "Oh no, we couldn't."

Stephane gave Gustave a knowing look.

Belle's head tilted ever so slightly to the side.

"I uh…" he swallowed thickly. "I don't really know how to read."

Mrs. Potts gave Gustave the most sympathetic and loving of gazes. "Oh Love, that's quite alright. There's no need to be ashamed."

"We're certainly not going to judge anyone." Belle gave a small reassuring smile.

"This is… a lot of books." He marveled. "Sorta makes me wish I could read."

"I could teach you." She offered, getting up and walking over. "I have some books for people just starting out. We can go whatever speed you're comfortable with."

Gustave hesitated.

Stephane nudged him gently, giving his amour a supportive smile. "You've talked about wanting to. Just over dinner last night, in fact."

Taking a moment, he slowly nodded his head. Steadily building more confidence. "Actually, yes that would be really nice."

Belle was suddenly aglow with the prospect of a student. "Well, we can start tomorrow, or whenever works best for you."
"We can talk about it on the ride back." Energized at the idea of learning a wide grin flashed from ear to ear.

"Sounds-"

Suddenly one Georges the footman burst in, his face stark white, chest heaving as he was out of breath. He looked like he had seen the dead and was ready to collapse. "Mrs. Potts!" He gulped. Seeing Belle, he turned green.

"Land sakes, boy!" She rose, exasperated with the young man who had previously been furniture. "What on Earth has you fit to be tied?"

He looked at them all nervously, tugging on his jacket. Mouth agape.

"You look like a bloody fish." The Englishwoman chastised. "Spit it out."

"The- The- The maintenance. They- They were going about and looking for repairs and…" he wanted to faint. "Mon Dieu Mrs. Potts!"

"GEORGES."

"Mrs. Potts they found Gaston!"

Belle turned white, eyes as big as saucers. "Wait, what?"

"They-They found his body."

Chapter End Notes

It certainly can't be all Versailles all the time.

Whooooa. Comments and Kudos and Hits, oh my. We're nearing 100 comments, that's crazy! Thank you so much for sticking around and asking questions, giving me critiques, telling me your hopes and fears and what's working. Ya'll are awesome.

Needless to say, the next few chapters are... interesting.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

We're almost at chapter 20! That's craaazy. I think when we hit 20 we need to celebrate with some one shot(s).

Speaking of celebrating, we hit 100 comments last week so there is a new one shot up at Two Small Storm Clouds. There's snow and babies involved. It's cute as heck.

As always, thank you so much for all the comments, kudos, follows, and everything else in between. If you have any questions, comments, corrections, I read all the comments and answer most of them so please let me know what's on your mind.

"Well, we found as much of him that's left after four months." The maintenance man sighed. "I have the boys removing him, we're trying to be… respectful."

"Hfm! Respectful." Cogsworth grumbled.

"Come now," Mrs. Potts chastised.

"I'm sorry but that man was a monster!" He exclaimed. "After all he did to Belle and her father? And then he butchered Prince Anselme! As far as I'm concerned he deserves an unmarked grave."

Gustave and Stephane bowed her heads, clearly still affected by Gaston's death. No matter how, it lingered with them.

"Cogsworth, he might have been our enemy but he still deserves a real burial," Plumette replied.

Belle was finally getting the color back in her cheeks. "I have to agree." Every looked at her for an explanation. "People in the village, certain people, could probably benefit from seeing him laid to rest."

"Belle, I would think you of all people-"

"Cogsworth, as much as I hate Gaston, and I truly loathe him, I think that's what best. And I actually think the castle should pay for the service." The head of the house was aghast, and she held a hand out to stop him from going off in a blustery fit of rage. "It would go a long way with the villagers who are still upset. It could give them some closure. It could give everyone closure."

Cogsworth sighed heavily as if the farm girl would be the death of him. Rubbing the bridge of his nose, he groaned. "Well, then we must contact the Prince. It'll come from his coffers."

"I can write the letter." She told him. "But we'll need a fast rider, someone discreet."

"Very well, I'll talk to Mr. Potts."

Turning around she covered her mouth with her hands, shutting her eyes and taking a deep breath. Mrs. Potts came over, rubbing her back soothingly.
"I need to write the letter." She finally muttered, wandering over to where she knew the stationary was kept. "I don't have a seal."

"You'll use Cogsworth's." Mrs. Potts reassured.

"I hope he's having a better time than we are." Belle said under her breath.

"I wonder what the gathering is about." Francis mused as the siblings had been summoned. Catching up with the Prince's long, purposeful strides, his brother's men trailed behind at an appropriate distance as they neared the parlor they had been requested to go to.

"Do they ever even need a reason here?" The Prince scoffed, flagrantly bucking the social norms with his plaited golden hair and lack of powder. "Lumiere, do you have any idea why they're in the parlor? To ask me stu-" His face slackened, eyes harsher, more guarded.

"No idea, Your Grace." The voices coming from the open doors of the parlor made Lumiere stopped in his tracks and the Prince do the same. Even from the back, he and Chapeau could see their Master bristling, reacting to the noise.

Francis noticed it as well and cautiously slowed his pace, watching.

Pausing, Ansell exhaled sharply through his nose and his posture changed, making Lumiere nervous. A prowl. Head slightly lowered, shoulders rolled forward, legs in a smooth gate, and although he could see it yet knew it, blue eyes fixated and dilating. Nearly stalking like a great cat. He half expected a low rumble, almost a purr of anticipation, like the time he and the staff had caught a glimpse through the windows of the Beast hunting a poor doe that had wandered into the gardens.

The sound of whining, grunting pups made the Prince want to lash his tail even though he had none. The smell of dog hitting his nose, making his lips twitch. It was so hard to fight the instinct. Too many run ins. Hunters, hounds, wolves. Taking a deep breath, he straightened his back and relaxed his hands which had splayed tensely as if they were a clawed paw about to swipe.

Francis arched a brow.

The Duke looked up from a crate, motioning for his sons to come over as the others clustered around.

"What on Earth is that?" His heir grumbled peevishly.

"A gift from England." Aunt Lucette explained as she came into the room. "The Marquis wanted to send something to show his love for the court despite the outcome of the war."

"Dogs from the finest English stock, Sire." A footman explained.

"His private stock." She added. "He has a whole kennel, but these ones are his favorite breed. Absolutely adores them, I can't get him to keep the damn things out of the castle."

"Wolfhounds." Leon grinned from his spot at the crate, lifting a large gray puppy up into his arms. "What giants they'll be, we can use them for so many large hunts."

"Only nobles can own them in England." Another Duke exclaimed.

Ansell set his jaw, on edge as the others marveled at how big and cunning the dogs would be,
running down wolves and deer easily. It made his blood curdle, times of fur and fangs flashing back. Awful, dreadful things to serve awful, dreadful hunters.

"Now listen here, boy," John said firmly as he held the skittish horse by the bridle. The animal snorting and shivering in anticipation. "If you so much as open that letter and read it, I'll have the guards hunt you down and drag you back so help me."

"Yes, Sir." The young stable boy, the best rider the grounds had save for Mr. Potts, gripped the reins firmly.

"If you have to 'ave a fresh horse, do it. Get there as quickly as possible. Not a moment to lose. And come back just as quick. " Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the others waiting anxiously at the steps. "Now you have the letter?"

He nodded his head.

"Good!" Letting go and slapping the flank, the horse bolted. Turning around he returned to the group. "If he doesn't sleep, he'll probably make it in a day."

"Lord I hope so." His wife sighed. "They wrapped the body up and set it in the catacombs for now."

Belle slowly nodded her head, glancing over to her friends who were clearly struggling with the event.

"We have to keep this quiet until we know what to do," Cogsworth ordered them all. "If anyone in the village finds out we have his body there'll be another mob."

The others all nodded slowly, shock still settling in.

Mrs. Potts noticed all the youngsters nearly green. She ushered them all inside like a mother hen. "Come on, Dears. I don't know about you but I could use a good, stiff drink."

"Anselme."

Hearing his father, he kept his disdain for the dogs in check. "Yes, Your Highness?"

"Come and choose yours." he said as the others were inspecting the pups.

He resisted taking a step back. "Oh no, I couldn't."

"Come, come. Don't be shy."

"I don't like-"

"That wasn't a suggestion." He replied firmly, a threat waiting at the tip of his tongue.

Lucette wandered in further, watching her nephew's obvious reluctance towards the canines.

The Prince came forward, staring into the box where a half dozen or so squirming, chewing,
bouncing little furballs were confined. It was hard to not appear visibly disgusted at the blasted
things. All he could see were hell hounds crashing through the forest, destruction in their wake.
Snarling and charging him. Biting him.

"Take the strongest one, My Prince." Someone suggested.

"The Dauphin already took the strongest."

"Well then take the second strongest."

Tilting his head, he leaned over. All of them pepper gray except one; the little black one in the
corner. Scrawner than its littermates, it was struggling to get out from underneath the biggest,
chunkiest pup that had pushed it down into submission. Reaching over, he nudged the larger one
away and scooped the runt up, big wet eyes gazing back up at him. Tail wagging as a pink tongue
lapped out of its mouth.

One of the kennel masters grimaced. "Oh, you don't want one, My Lord. I don't know why it wasn't
culled, weak little thing it is. Full of worms from the look of it. My apologies, we'll take that one."

His aunt observed his posture change as he tucked it under his arm and out of reach of the Kennel
Master. Her nephew unsure of his next move, but not yet wanting to give up the dog.

"The black looks rather ominous amongst all the grays, don't you think?" A more pious noble
remarked.

"It's so… scrawny."

"Well you heard him, wormy little thing, no wonder it's sickly."

"The only bitch of the litter. Take the largest male, Your Highness, that one is so... odd."

Ears pricking towards the last word, Ansell gazed down at the dog. The odd one, the sick one, the
one the kennel masters would surely cull as soon as he got his hands on it. Suddenly, he felt a rush of
defiance. "She's mine."

The Duke's mouth pulled into a displeased scowl. "Are you sure?"

"I don't mind cast offs." He said, ruffling the small ears. "I tend to sympathize, actually." Ignoring the
others reacting to his choice, his poor choice they all would say, Ansell turned around and left with
it.

"He has a weakness for the lessers." He heard his father say.

Growling under his breath as he headed to his apartment.

The Marquise narrowed her eyes at the Prince stalking off with his reject of a puppy.

The puppy squirmed, earnestly trying to lick him as he stalked off with it. Large brown eyes looking
up at the sour face of its new master with boundless love.

"Just because I rescued you doesn't mean we're friends."

Belle and the men sat quietly in the library, cradling glasses of their preferred poison. Heads sunk
low, eyes fixated far away. The vast room, normally warm and safe, felt like a cold void. It was feeding off of their collective shock and aching stomachs.

"I'm sorry I broke your laundry machine."

She glanced up at Stephane, who was more than a few brandies in. His eyes bloodshot and sincere, unable to make eye contact. "I helped them break the first one, and we threw all your clothes onto the ground. I never apologized."

"It's okay-"

"But it's not." His voice cracked. "I was so mean-"

"We used to hang out with mean people," Gustave muttered under his breath. "And they used to pick on you… or treat you like an object they could just... have."

"You don't anymore, that's what matters." She told them both. The pair so overwhelmed with guilt for being associated with those in the village who were cruel or conceited. "And we're friends now."

They nodded slowly, Gustave letting out a heavy sigh. Stephane reaching over to his chair and rather affectionately patting the hand that rested on the arm. Giving it a supportive squeeze.

The door creaked open and Mrs. Potts shuffled in, observing the trio. "Oh, you poor dears. Do you need anything?"

They all shook their heads slowly.

"No, but thank you." Belle mustered. "Has anything else happened?"

She closed the door carefully. "We've been talking about how to announce all of this once the prince responds and gives his blessing to fund the service-"

"Do you really think he will?" Stephane asked skeptically.

Belle nodded her head slowly. "If I know him, he won't give it a second thought."

"Why did we have to find him." Gustave lamented. "He should have just… I dunno… magically" he wriggled his fingers into the air. "Poofed into dust or… something."

"Mademoiselle?" Cogsworth called out from the door, ever poised, even if his knees were giving him trouble because of the weather. "Your presence has been requested in the Master's bureau."

Setting the glass down, Belle followed Cogsworth out. "So who knows?" She asked under her breath.

"The immediate staff and the men who took him off the roof." He murmured back. "At least we now know why there have been so many crows on that side of the castle."

Shivering at the thought, she followed him down the hall, the majordomo squinting. He had been struggling with his eyesight ever since the curse had been broken, using his spectacles nearly every moment she saw him. However, as of late she had noticed his handwriting had become less sharp. "Cogsworth, have you ever thought of getting new glasses?"

"Oh I couldn't, they're so expensive!" He huffed, clearly struggling to see through his old ones. "And my eyes are just fine."
Without him noticing, Belle carefully nudged a standing candelabra out of the way of his shuffling feet. His cane hitting the wall, course correcting him. "Was your sight the same as a clock?"

"Oh it was better!" smiling, he turned to her happily. "The clearest it's ever been. Gears and springs don't have health problems you know, other than needing some oil and fearing rust."

Nodding thoughtfully, a footman opened the door and she came in to find Mrs. Potts, her husband, and the head of maintenance. "Where's poor Georges?"

"I swore him to secrecy and Cogsworth gave him the day off." Mrs. Potts sighed. "Gave him some brandy from the Master's collection, Chef is whipping up his favorite dish."

"Oh good. I thought he was going to faint."

"Oh, he did, twice." Cogsworth divulged, stopping at the desk and leaning heavily on his cane. Medals rattling across his chest and stomach. "Anxious thing, that boy is. Has the fortitude of a hare that's heard a barking dog."

"Also doesn't help that he caught a glimpse of Gaston when they were taking him down." The Englishwoman added.

Approaching the table, Belle eyed the object wrapped in a heavy cloth.

"Cleaned it up," Maintenance told her "but we thought you should 'ave a look at it."

Reaching in, she found the handle and her brown eyes widened. Knowing the weight, the grip. The metal. Carefully she unwrapped the mirror and cradled the back with her palm. A chunk of the top missing from the fall, divots and scuff marks everywhere, and a dried, dark red something stuck in cracks and crevices that she did not want to think about.

The mirror's glass had cracked.

Looking up at the pensive room she furrowed her brows and raised it up. "Show me Prince Anselme."

The mirror did nothing.

Drawing it down, Belle gazed at it sadly. The sliver of hope at seeing his face disappearing "I guess the enchanted objects aren't invincible."

"It was certainly worth a go." Mr. Potts sighed.

"Bonfils, dispose of it." Cogsworth ordered the maintenance man. "There's no need for that wretched thing. It tortured the Master for years."

"Actually, can I hold onto it?" She asked, keeping it out of Bonfils' reach. "The rose is gone, and all that's left other than the mirror is the book."

"I have no idea why you would possibly want that."

She didn't say that because of the mirror he had let her go, and because he had let her go she finally let herself love him. Carefully wrapping it up, well aware it was a capsule of both good memories and bad, Belle replied softly. "It's an important part of our story."

"Very well." Cogsworth heaved. "This day has been a disaster."
Belle sighed heavily in agreement. "I certainly hope Ansell's day is better than ours."

"I'm sure he has his own pressing matters."

"Master, I have the most brilliant suit for din-

Chapeau gave his prince a once over, down to his shirt and breeches, grinding an assortment of dried goods up with the mortar and pestle.

"Come in, Chapeau." He said, grimacing and pushing the dog away from under the table with a bare foot. Grumbling. "Can you get her? She keeps licking my toes."

Carefully hanging the gorgeous suit glimmering with gems he was so proud of, Chapeau reluctantly went over and scooped up the dog, holding it outward awkwardly as he inspected it. "Sir, if I may be so bold as to ask, what's going on?"

"I finally managed to get some supplies from the palace herbalist." He explained distractedly, more focused on adding a bit of oil to his concoction. "Very lovely lady, a bit suspicious of a man asking for ingredients."

"But sir, why do you need such things?" He asked in a way one does when it is all so unseemly.

"The pup has worms." He missed Chapeau holding the dog out even further away. "But, I'm confident I can fix that. Get her on the mend."

Gazing at the hound, Chapeau screwed his nose up in disgust.

The puppy wriggled when eye contact was finally made, pink hanging out happily towards just being touched.

"Here we are, Sire." Lumiere announced as he walked in, presenting a porcelain bowl full of food that was of quality far better than most common household's dinner tables.

"Oh good, thank you." Taking the bowl he poured the paste onto the food and carefully mixed it in.

"What is that?" The valet paled.

"Some day old baguette and seared vegetables but it's mostly a side of seared salmon topped with pate and some sauce." His friend divulged. "It seems our petite chiot will only have the finest scraps in all of France."

"I know what that is." He glared over at the maître d', still holding the dog outward.

"A mixture for parasites," Ansell told both men as he put the bowl down and signaled for the hound to be released. It hopped over, nearly tripping over its gigantic feet, attacking the food with gusto.
"I'll make some more later, enough for the next few days. It needs to be mixed into her food twice a day but it should work quickly."

Chapeau tilted his chin up, having no time for puppies.

"Come on." Lumiere prodded the ever somber valet with an elbow. "It's cute."

"It smells."
"Oh Chapeau, could you give her a bath?" Ansell asked absently while he peeled off his clothes, completely unaware of friends' conversation. "She smells like an unkempt kennel."

Lumiere watched the valet become green at the thought, an impressive feat with his layers of makeup. "Master, I think it's best I take our petite chiot and give her a good scrubbing after she has dinner. Chapeau's job as your valet is so much more important. And I promise she'll return to you smelling like roses."

Chapeau breathed a sigh of relief, mouthing a "thank you" to a grinning Lumiere.

"Does our Mademoiselle have a name?" He inquired, watching a grateful Chapeau hurry to dress the Prince.

"Heavens no." Ansell scoffed. "Me? With a dog? I'm not keeping her. Someone else can name her when they take her away."

Lumiere raised a skeptical brow.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Oh, no reason, Master. No reason."

It was dark out. Mrs. Potts had insisted that a big meal, more alcohol, and a heap of cake would make them feel better. Unsure of whether it did any good, Belle gazed at the night sky, tugging on her cloak while Gustave's pony pulled the cart along the road. The village glowing as they approached, promising warmth and safety at home.

They never spoke.

"Son."

Ansell turned slowly, stiffening to the voice. It had been an exhaustive seven-course dinner, full of idle chit chat and stupid, sheltered opinions about the state of the people of France and he was working his way through his digestif rather quickly.

The Duke came over, an extravagant man if there ever was one. Stopping in front of his heir he leaned on his cane and studied him keenly.

"Your Majesty, are you not having a good time?" The prince asked, draining his glass and desperately wanting to get out of all of the makeup.

"I am, but I can't help but see something peculiar." Staring at Ansell, eyes burning into him he said under his breath "I've watched quite a few eligible young ladies present themselves to you. And each time, you've ignored them."

Sighing heavily, he plucked a fresh drink from a tray gliding by. "I haven't had the appetite."

"I find that hard to believe, you used to be such a cad."

"Things change." He watched the gears in his father's head turning and took a deep breath. "Is there
any particular reason for this discussion? Or am I simply displeasing you with my lack of virility?"

"You're to go to Paris in the morning with your brothers." Clearing his throat, he scanned the room. So many lovely young women to sample and there stood his son, bored, dead eyed, and seemingly ready to join a convent.

"May I ask why I'm going to Paris with such lovely company?" Ansell stared out into the middle distance, fingers itching for Maurice's sketch that he kept tucked in a pocket near his heart.

"To get some fresh air in you and to get you into a city." Leaning in he continued. "Seeing as you've been out in the woods for ten years, I thought it might do you well to see the sights." It was clear his son actually agreed with him for once. "Leon suggested shopping, and I agree. Our purses are full from the tax."

His head whipped towards his father, fire rising up in him. "The tax? My tax? Is that where all that money's gone to while I've been away?" He began to growl. "You hoard it for all your frippery-"

"It's ours to do with as we please." He hissed sternly. "And you can't blame me for being the one who imposed the increase-"

"This is foul-"

"This is yours."

Snorting a whuff of air out through his nose Ansell's jaw tensed.

"Now a nobleman needs to spend his wealth to show his prosperity and standing and so spend it you shall." He ordered. "I don't give a damn what you do with it but you're going. Even if I have to throw you in the carriage myself."

"Where are we going?"

They both turned as Lucette sidled up, sharp and curious.

"I'm sorry to cut in." Her eyes went from her commanding brother to his defiant son. "It's just I haven't seen France in ages and I always enjoy a jaunt."

Ansell cocked his head to the side thoughtfully. "Auntie, we're headed to Paris for a bit of shopping. Would you care to come?"

The Duke began to stew, and it drew a small, pleased smile onto her rouged lips. "Why that sounds lovely. My dear husband gave me a rather large purse to fritter away, sweet man, and my grandchildren demand presents."

"Why sister, you do love inviting yourself." The Duke mused, rankled by her mere presence.

"Only to things of your creation, Your Grace." Voice pleasant, if not cheery at souring his mood. "And I have not seen enough of my nephews, I would so love to catch up."

Oh, his father was furious. Bless his Aunt. "Then it's settle. Aunt Lucette, we'll escort you to Paris. Where we'll all throw money into the wind."

"Very well." The Duke sighed. "After Paris, you're to meet me in the stables, Anselme. We'll be purchasing new horses for your castle."

"Delightful." He grunted.
They watched the Duke slip away to his mistress and more important people. Ansell's mouth a pleased, lopsided smile. "You do love pestering him."

"You have no idea." She replied, watching her brother carefully, fingers fiddling with her glass of wine. "You're like a phantom in this palace, Nephew. I feel like I only see you in fleeting moments."

"I prefer a more solitary existence these days." He said, feeling too hot and constricted in his clothes. "Though I apologize for leaving so abruptly last night."

"It's quite alright, you're not used to crowds or attention I gather-"

"Decidedly not." Ansell sipped.

"Though you missed your gift." she finished "My husband sent a case of scotch as a little welcome back present. Finest in Britain, spared no expense." Lucette watched him carefully "Have you ever had scotch?"

"Can't say I have." He smiled, thankful for more simple conversation.

"Different than French spirits. Strong and smooth, tastes a bit of smoke, not fruity or sweet. It's an experience."

"I look forward to trying some. Perhaps with you?"

"Wouldn't have it any other way." She shifted her weight. "It was good to see you this morning, as brief as it was. I noticed you take the runt. Bit of a defender of the weak."

"I dislike things being picked on. Being made lesser than, written off." He sniffed. "One could say I have experience." Listlessly his gaze wandered the room, desperately wanting Belle to appear in her summer dress from the celebration. Bright, sweet, playful, lighting up every room she graced. Taking a long pull of his liquor and forgetting about his aunt, he rocked on his heels and thought about his love.

"Did he write you off?" She asked carefully.

Brought back to the present, Ansell scoffed. "Of course he did. The only reason he came around was because I could be married off to the highest bidder. If not, I'd be as undesirable as that little pup you brought over. When he came to see after I was-" stopping himself, Ansell took another drink. "He's just glad he can treat me like his prized stallion again."

"I'm sorry he treats you so." Lucette sighed sincerely, the Maestro keying up his orchestra in the distance.

"I'm used to it by now." Gazing into his drink the Prince watched the liquid lazily slip and slide against the crystal. "We all are, it's the way business is conducted in this family. I suppose it's different in your house."

She pursed her lips. Dipping her chin down her head nodded ever so slightly. "My children's marriages were arranged, Ansell. But we love them."

"Hmn."

"But not every aspect of your life is loveless now is it?"

Ansell looked up, deep in thought, small smirk giving it away. "As you know it's a rather recent
development."

"Everyone needs a bit of love." She told him.

"You can go without for a long time though." His mind wandered back through the paths of all those lost years. The pain slowly winding its way in, the heavy heartache of it all. The air felt heavy suddenly, the weight of the room slowly crushing. Why couldn't she be near, she'd chase away the demons. They did that for one another.

He was hurting, she could see it in the sharp blue eyes. "I can't imagine going without for so long. I suppose you were like the great Minotaur, stuck in your labyrinth."

"But according to the gossip I ate Theseus." looking away he set his jaw. Eyes narrowing as the pit of his stomach tied itself into knots. "For the record, I didn't kill him." Ansell muttered, a hint of bitterness edging in. "He shot me three times, and then fell to his death. But that wasn't me, Aunt Lucette. I never killed him, even when I had the chance."

"I never thought you did." She could see how being presumed guilty without even a trial was eating at him. "How on earth did you live after being shot three times?"

Bowing his head closed his eyes. The biggest demon of them all from that night. "I didn't. I died."

Her eyes widened.

"But I was brought back. By Belle, and a bit of magic." Her nephew's expressive face looked as if he had been stabbed in the gut. "I was never the monster in that fight. I was despondent at first because Belle had left... I didn't fight back, Auntie. I had no reason to. But when she returned?" He finally looked up at her. Lonely and in love. "All I wanted was to go to her. And when I did? He shot me in the back and left me for dead." His eyes suddenly blazed, hurt at their words. "He was no great Capitaine and I was no great Beast."

Lucette glanced down into her glass, clear as day he was getting something off his chest no one had ever allowed him to. "He sounds cruel."

"He was. But he fought in the war and was good at killing the enemy so he was a hero." Taking a deep breath, he steadied himself. "And now he's like a ghost, an occasional haunting. Reminder of the darkest night. For both of us."

"Sounds like it." his aunt paused, surveying the room to look for a door. The others in the space oblivious to the prince and his welling anxiety. "What do you say we go walk in the gardens and take in the air?" She suggested. "Relieve you of this ghost for awhile with the talk of frivolous things."

"I'd like that."

"Belle are you alright?" Maurice stood up at the sight of her. It was late, and he had wondered why her trip to the castle had been so long. "You look as though you've seen a ghost."

Wordlessly Belle hung her cloak, slowly shaking her head. "I didn't see the ghost." She finally corrected. "But one came back."
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ansell glanced up from his village report as Lumiere and a footman came in with a coffee setting. The morning light was dim and early, the birds just beginning to trill outside on the balcony as the Prince began his day.

Lumiere bent over and slipped the expensive, twisted red cord off of the pup's neck. Free of its lead, the dog bounced over, snuffling Ansell's heel.

Looking over the sheets of paper he frowned.

"I just took her out for her morning constitutional." His friend explained as the footman set coffee and breakfast out on their glimmering silver tray.

"I saw the basket and blanket near the hearth." He said, watching as the footman set a bowl of scraps with his medicine mixed next to the chair, the pup bolting it down. "Giving her a bed?"

"She needs somewhere to sleep," Lumiere noted as the footman slipped out and Chapeau entered. "Would you rather she sleep at the foot of your bed? Or in zee kennels?"

Curling his lip a bit to his fuzzy problem, he set down his report for the village and took a cup of coffee. "I haven't the faintest idea what to buy on this shopping trip."

"Suits, shoes, jewelry?" Lumiere supplied.

"I don't need any of that. I have mountains of clothes." He grumbled. While Paris sounded enticing, his last glimpse of it at night in the windmill with Belle, the spending money frivolously aspect was another thing entirely.

"Clothes that are ten seasons old. A few updated pieces would go a long way, sire." Chapeau suggested. "I believe we spoke of it before we departed the castle?"

"You're right. It would have to be practical." He told them, shifting in his suit in discomfort. "I can't stand these clothes being so bright and so tight.

"What about for Noel?" Lumiere offered. "Don't you want to look nice for your Mademoiselle then? You don't have to be too extravagant, but you should wear something formal." Grinning suggestively he continued. "She does love it when you're a bit dressed up. I believe I've heard her say you look very dashing, Master."

Mulling it over, the corner of his mouth tugged into a lopsided smile. That look she gave him when he dressed up. She had even given a hint of it when he had been all fur and claws as they stood on the staircase. That warm and lucky sensation that would spread throughout him when she did so quickly following suit.

"And you should get Belle some gifts as well."

"Alright, that's a few things. But he's going to demand I spend a significant sum, knowing him." Taking a sip of his drink, the Prince thrummed his fingers on the chair's arm.
"Buy what you feel you need." Lumiere shrugged. "Since you struggle with wants."

Exhaling, he furrowed his brows, deep in thought.

Chapeau, laying out the Master's suit for the day in Paris, stared at one lone silk stocking in confusion. Holding it aloft he began to search around the room.

Perking up, Ansell brightened and turned to Lumiere. "I think I've got it. Could you possibly run a few errands for me?"

"Of course, Master. Just hand me the list of what's needed and I'll pick up whatever it is when we're in the city." Pleased the Prince was figuring out his spending, the maître d' rocked on his heels.

The puppy pranced past Chapeau with the stocking in its mouth, head up proudly, tail wagging.

The valet's eyes widened.

Rising up, Ansell headed over to the desk. Taking a pen and paper, he dipped the nib into the ink pot and jotted down his items. "While you're at it, go on ahead and buy any supplies you need for Noel."

Chapeau grabbed one end of the stocking.

The hound let out a growl and yanked.

Lumiere did his best not to laugh at his friend's battle as the Master was too busy writing his list to notice. "Wonderful, Sire."

"I know Belle is looking forward to it, it's her favorite Holiday. She's due for some spoiling, seeing as last year during Noel I was too-"

"Surly?"

Dipping the nib back into the pot he paused his writing for a moment. "I was going to say beastly but I suppose that works too."

Shaking it's head vigorously the little black pup letting out a playful snarl as it awkwardly leapt backward. The sound of silk ripping horrifying Chapeau so much he let out a high pitched gasp.

Ansel glanced up curiously.

Managing to get the stocking back Chapeau quickly turned away.

Not invested in Chapeau's anxiety, the Prince got up and handed the maître d' the piece of paper.

Taking it and unfolding it Lumiere glanced over the items, a wide grin spreading across his face as his brows raised. "This is quite generous, Master."

"I need to take care of my people." He smiled back.

"Well, you'll be making a lot of people very-" seeing the last item, he chuckled.

"Yes?"

"For this last one, someone who would be comfortable with a woman, no?" Lumiere asked, amused at the final item for his errands.
"And the best you can find." Ansell nodded his head, excited at the prospect. "At the very least as well read as our Mademoiselle, I suspect she'll need to be challenged."

"But of course, Master." Pleased with his marching orders, Lumiere tucked the list into his breast pocket. "I'll have the stable boys prepare a horse so I can go about the city while you are occupied with buying your wares. I know Madame Marie-Lucette's lady's maid will be attending, shall I ask that she see to you as well?"

"If it's no trouble to my aunt and her lady, then that would be excellent." Watching Lumiere excuse himself to prepare for his duties, Ansell let out a satisfied breath. "Chapeau," he turned, frowning as his dog pattered over, nails clicking on the floor. "Since you're staying behind, please take care of the pup. She'll need to go out a few times."

Chapeau clenched his fists, lip quivering as he did his best not to glare at the enemy. "Of course, Sire."

Maurice came inside to see his daughter rather listlessly gazing at her breakfast, pushing it around on her plate.

"Did you sleep, dear?" He asked, concerned about the dark circles rimming her eyes

Shaking her head she sighed wearily. Most nights it was hard to sleep without the weight of Ansell on the other side of the bed. However, Belle had needed him the most that night. The safety he brought with him, big strong arms enveloping her, his warmth and deep soothing voice. It was so much easier to face those memories with him. "I'm going to see if Gustave wants to start his reading lessons and if Stephane wants to start teaching me how to fence."

"Good distractions," Maurice noted.

"I was going to try to see if anyone needed things repaired, but I don't think I can talk to anyone else." She confessed, looking up at her father her stood next to her, a supportive hand on her shoulder.

Belle leaned against his arm quietly.

"I don't know, just find them."

"But Your Grace, it's been."

"They couldn't have gone far. And he's far too clever to have died after all these years." The Duke snapped at one of his attendants, the man scurrying out of the bureau as Ansell slid inside. He studied his Prince shrewdly from his magnificent desk, paperwork neatly piled and sorted around him.

"You're half dressed."

"Dressed for travel, Father. I don't know how anyone gets on with this humidity in all of their makeup and wigs." He corrected, clasping his hands behind his back. Chapeau had been beside himself when he had asked for his hair back and no powder. "Besides, it's not like anyone else will be seeing me other than family."

"You try me, boy."

Shrugging, he watched his father's jaw twitch to such flippant behavior. "I've always been stubborn, I know I've been gone for awhile but I would have thought you'd remember that." looking around
the room, his father's wig cascading and glimmering in the sunlight, Ansell took a deep breath and opened his mouth to ask why he had been called for.

Uncle Hugon bumbled in, his family in tow. Julien gawking at Ansell like he was a curious new toy to break.

Ansell glowered at his cousin.

"You don't scare me." He muttered.

Raising an expressive brow, the Prince turned back to his father curiously.

"Your Grace!" Hugon came up to the front as his eldest brother gestured him forward. Taking a deep bow, the husky man flashed an over eager grin. "What an honor-

"Oh shut up, you twit." The Duke barely even gave the effort to snarl. "You were always the stupidest, most translucent nitwit out of all of us."

Hugon's face slackened, mustache twitching in disbelief.

"You've been at Versailles all of two days." He continued, coolly reading over some letters. "You spoke to Prince Anselme once, made an absolute ass of yourself, and frankly, your boy insulted His Grace."

"He's just so young." Marie-Therese stepped forward.

"Youth is no excuse for not knowing how to treat royalty properly." He sniffed, not even getting up from his desk, not even bothering to meet their eyes as he wrote on a piece of paper. "Also you think you're so very clever to try to waltz into to court and slyly wrestle the Dukeship from my heir. But it's all anyone is laughing about." The Duke finally lifted his eyes up and watched them, necks red with embarrassment as their makeup was so thick on their faces. "And as entertaining as it would be for the rest of the court for you to stay and clumsily try to fit in, frankly, I tire of you."

"Brother!" Hugon boomed.

The Duke stood up, slowly straightening out his jacket. Looking like a cat bored with a mouse. "If you don't leave on your own, I'll have you dragged out behind a carriage."

The family inched back.

Clinging to the side of the room, Ansell watched everything unfold intently.

"Fall in line, Hugon." He commanded. "Go back to your manor, and your spirits, and your parties where you're the most interesting person." Eyes narrowing he finished with a growl. "And if I ever hear about you sniffing around for a title again, I'll ruin you."

Fat lip quivering, Uncle Hugon clenched his fist. "I'm your brother, You Grace."

"So?" Turning, he addressed his son. "That'll be all, Anselme."

Stiffly walking out of the bureau Ansell headed briskly towards the front of the palace as Uncle Hugon and his family suddenly found themselves being greeted by guards.

"I see His Grace is throwing around his weight." Aunt Lucette said in the hall, watching her brother huff and puff at the indignity of being removed from court.
"Just reminding everyone of their place. That we're subject to his whims and moods." He told her dryly. Meeting up with his aunt he offered an arm. "Shall we?"

"To be fair, your uncle was and is the most obtuse apple to ever fall from the tree." She confessed as she was escorted towards their trip to the city. "Ever since we were children he's had as much sense as a fish trying to get out of a bucket, and out of the five of us was the only one stupid enough to challenge your father outright."

Ansell stifled back a chuckle, staring at his aunt and clearly not believing her proclamation.

"Please, I live in Britain and I'm merely a pest, a thorn," Lucette exclaimed. "I needle."

"Yes, it's admirable that you've turned that into a sport."

"Do you think you can manage?" Belle asked Gustave as he held a children's primer. The three had taken their horses and a basket of lunch far away from the village and to a nearby meadow. Shrouded by trees, a creek gurgling nearby, they felt safe from the mess that was about to befall Villeneuve.

Furrowed his brows as he sat on the blanket under a tree, Gustave squinted thoughtfully at the book's letters. "This one's about a cat?"

"That's good! That's very good." She grinned at him. "If you have any trouble, just call me over and I'll help."

"Look at you, Gus." Stephane said proudly, patting a shoulder. Moving in, he hesitated and glanced over at Belle.

Rising to her feet Belle rolled her eyes at them, the breeze making her skirts sway. "You think I'm the one to judge?"

Gustave fiddled with the page of the book, cheeks flush. "Well…"

"He was furry with paws and a tail." She reminded the pair. "You two are the least scandalous relationship."

Stealing a quick, encouraging kiss from his Gus, Stephane jumped up and grabbed two swords. With a flourish, he handed Belle one of them.

"Alright, Mademoiselle, shall we begin our lesson?"

"Come on, Anselme. Don't you want to spend some of that hard earned royal pension?" Leon asked enticingly as the carriage rocked through Paris.

Ansell gazed out over the cacophony of the city, a city he yearned for during all his years locked away and suddenly found harsh. Too stark, too loud, too dirty, too many things vying for the attention of his heightened senses. "I don't see why we had to go when the town around the castle is full of artisans."

"Don't you miss Paris? You've had so many ill-gotten adventures here." Francis supplied.

"Most of which ended in the nude." Francis reminded him. "Remember that one time? They found you astride the statue with just a waistcoat on?"
Ansell stared at him humorlessly.

"We can have our pick of wares that can't be made by the same tailors and craftsmen everyone else uses." The Viscount explained with a toothy grin. "You should purchase some jewelry, or clothes, or have some fine furniture made to fill that terrible cavern you call a castle." watching the heir lift a handkerchief to his nose to a particularly strong smell wafting through the breeze, he turned to the Marquise. "Madame, is there anything you need?"

"I promised my granddaughters some silk for new dresses." Aunt Lucette replied. "And my daughter some silk for dresses. Really, I just need bolts of fabric and some toy soldiers for the boys."

"Shoes are always a good choice, Ansell." Francis offered. "I know father will be taking you to a stable later for horses to replenish your stock. You could always have some new tack made."

Ears pricking to the idea of tack, he cleared his throat from the dust of the streets. "I do need some new suits for home, I spoke to my valet about it." He confessed, his face slackening as the most ostentatious tailor shop in all of Paris appeared from the window. The wheels of their ride slowing to a stop.

"Suits it is then." Leon agreed as the coachmen opened the door and turned down the stairs. "I hear they use rhinestones here, exquisite beadwork-" climbing out of the carriage with Francis. Turning, they saw Anselme and Aunt Lucette hesitating.

"Anselme, aren't you coming?" Francis asked

"Auntie, didn't you say you needed fabric for your girls?" He asked raising, puckish brow.

Lucette caught on, nodding her head demurely. "They each want a bolt, no two can match."

Sticking an arm out the window he signaled the driver to take off. "You two go on and enjoy yourselves, I'll escort our Marquise on her errands." Before they could protest, the carriage jostled away, leaving his two brothers to their haute couture. Pleased, Ansell opened the door and hung out the side, telling the driver their new plans. Swinging back in and shutting the door he allowed himself to relax while he sunk into the velvet cushions.

"You're a right wicked one sometimes." His Aunt's lips were pulled into a wry smile.

"Are you telling me you're going to miss Leon's winning personality?"

"No, but Francis is tolerable, if not pleasant."

"Well, if I must spend buckets of money, I want to be able to spend it my way." He divulged. "And that certainly doesn't involve squandering it on jewel encrusted jackets."

Aunt Lucette's brows raised.

"What?"

"That's the last thing I'd ever think I'd hear from you." Flicking open her fan, she cleared the air around her nose.

"I have some more practical things on my list and I suspect you'd be the perfect shopping partner." He told her with a hint of a smile.

"Well, the British are rather practical." Smoothing her skirt, she glanced out the window. "And after
twenty-eight years it has rubbed off on me."

"Let's go get the bolts of fabric first. I'll need your help with choosing some of my own."

"What are you planning, dear nephew?"

"To take care of my family." He told her sincerely "My other one." Hanging out the window he titled his head up to study the sky, tan from the smoke and the dust.

"Would this be your staff?"

"It is." He nodded, mind wandering to the thought of how alive Belle would be in the city, ready for an adventure. That sweet, excited smile on her mouth as she walked with him. "I need to take care of my staff. They've been neglected for years, partially my fault, partially father's. It's amazing they didn't run away screaming the moment they had all changed back."

"How generous of you, Nephew." She said.

"I don't see as generous, just the right thing to do." Overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle of the city, he retreated inside. "I don't remember it being this dirty."

"You've been in the woods for a decade, things change." Lucette reminded him. "Also, one can grow used to the countryside."

"Suppose so." He reckoned Belle would need to go to the opera, and he would need to find a place for cuisine. Then again, he just wanted to return home to her; to clear blue skies and the murmurs of the forest. Rolling meadows and fields of flowers. That lovely, sun kissed face that was too good for him.

Lucette watched the Prince, that far away look in the blue eyes that meant he was miles gone and with the girl that broke the curse. "I never cared for how my brother treated staff." She broke the silence, looking him over as he came back to Paris. Was this really her greedy nephew? "He was happy to spend money on everything but those who needed it the most. Everything indulgent, like a monkey hoarding a shiny object. Your mother was always so giving, I suspect they stayed on out of respect to her."

"Well, the deserve better by me and I aim to try to fix that with you today. I have ten years to make up for. At least before my father pulls me away to look at some idiotically expensive horses." turning to her, he stared at her hopefully. "Will you be my partner in crime, Aunt Lucette?"

"My dear boy, you've found the right accomplice." she let out a light, cheery cackle.

Chapeau exited the palace, reluctantly holding the red cord as the black hound trotted out to relieve itself.

The dog gazed up at him, panting happily.

The valet's mouth turned down, eyes shooting daggers at the creature that ruined a perfectly good pair os silk stockings. "He doesn't like you either you know."

Clumsily flopping to sit, she scratched an ear.

Sighing at the burden of caring for the horrible flea bag, Chapeau turned to the sound of galloping hooves. The horse, slick with sweat, skidded to a stop in a cloud of dust.
The stable boy leapt down, knees buckling, causing him to fall. Gazing up at attendants rushing over to him, he panted and looked around frantically. "I'm here for Prince Anselme!" He gasped.

He gawked at the boy as the young man dug a sealed envelope out of his jacket.

"Someone tell the Duke!" A man ordered.

"No!" Chapeau rushed in, pulling the hound along as he forced his way through the crowd. "He's our boy! I'll take him." Grabbing the stable boy as the horse was walked away, he hauled the wiry lad to his feet.

Coughing to get more air in his lungs, he weaved and waved the envelope. "Monsieur Chapeau, I have word-"

"Shut up."

"But sir, something terrible-"

"Will you be quiet?!" Taking the envelope he stuffed it in his breast pocket. "Don't draw attention! The last thing the Master needs is his father knowing something's wrong!" Dragging him away, puppy in tow, the valet glanced around suspiciously to make sure no one was watching.

"I think she'll find you dashing in that." Lucette exclaimed as they left a more conservative tailor. Their other purchases were being sent to Versailles and they were finishing their spending spree with some clothes for the Prince.

"I certainly hope so." Helping her into the carriage, he climbed in. "Thank you for assisting. My valet would drape me in the most ostentatious materials known to man if it was up to him, and my family is a bunch of dandies."

"You're rather understated these days." She noted as the carriage lurched off to find his brothers. "Is that a fashion she prefers to see you in?"

Ansell rested his arm against the length of the carriage's open window, peering out at the rabble going about their day like so many ants on a hill. "We go about our days preferably in casual attire," He explained. "That said, Belle does love a good ball, and she does like me looking formal, minus some of the more frivolous accouterments-"

"The wig and powder?" She guessed. "And I suspect she's the same?"

A dreamy smile slowly began to creep across his features. "She has the most beautiful brown hair, like roasted chestnuts." He began tenderly "It's always up or back when we go out in a more formal setting..." The blue eyes sparkled at the thought of his love. "Her eyes are like chocolate, and they're so keen. You can tell they're always five steps ahead of everyone." Shaking his head to get it out of the clouds, he turned to his aunt who was taking it all in. "I'm sorry, Auntie. I get offly stupid when it comes to Belle."

"Love makes us do funny things." She dismissed, looking down at her hands, her perfectly well-manicured nails. "Though your vagueness leaves one wanting. Simply adds to the mystery of why she didn't come to court with you."

Hemming and hawing, fighting his natural defensiveness, Ansell blurted out. "Because her father is an artist in Villeneuve and she's considered a peasant by these people's standards." He finished testily.
She leaned back. "I see."

"I detest this-" The Prince bristled "This parade of stations and titles. Father's constant reminder she'd never be welcome."

He was fighting his anger and heartache, it was plain as the nose on his handsome face. "And your love with her is so true."

"I just want to go home to her." He swallowed. "We've been through so much together and I just lay awake at night. Aching, reliving everything we've worked so hard to move on from."

"You're not leaving her forever," Lucette reassured. "What? A few more weeks?"

Shutting his eyes Ansell sighed heavily while the weight began to press on his chest. It felt too long, and the air was suddenly stifling as he pulled at his collar.

Her lips twitched. "You know, for a lovesick man who does an awful lot of pining and moping, you haven't given me enough information, Ansell." Getting his attention, Lucette pressed on. "How long have you known this Belle? And more importantly when are you two dears taking vows, giving my brother a heart attack?"

Ansell laughed at the distraction, shaking his head. "Oh yes, that would be sooo well received. The Prince and the Peasant Girl. Can you imagine the wedding announcement at court? The scandal it would cause? Who do you think he'd throw in the dungeon first?"

"Oh, nephew, it wouldn't be all bad. I'd send you some lovely china for your newlywed's cell." She smirked into her fan.

Blushing at the thought of Belle, a grin brightened his features. His ferocious, sweet, wickedly smart Darling. "Well, if I must give more information we've known each other for over a year. Met last July."

"When you were still particular looking?"

"Yes, and I was still a rather nasty piece of work." Rubbing his thumb over the window sill frame he wet his lips. "But she stayed with me, thick and thin. Had so many chances to run away and never look back."

"Sounds like a keeper."

"But not in matching his and her shackles." He huffed under his breath.

"It can't be all that bad. There must be away to keep you two lovebirds together." she took notice of her nephew not responding to the thought. "So what's she like? Come on, you can't leave an old gossip like me hanging like this, nephew."

Ansell grinned to himself, mind wandering away to far more lovely thoughts. "Well, she likes to read-"

Belle set her book down, sighing as Maurice looked up from his still life. His daughter, normally busy and curious, stared out the window forlornly. The sun was sinking over the village towards the horizon, inching towards night, cooling the air in the process.

Slowly she got up and went to his work station, bussing away an empty teacup. The early afternoon
out with Gustave and Stephane had only been a short distraction from her worry and ongoing heartache. "I'll begin dinner, Papa. You keep on working."

"Thank you, Dear." It broke his heart, seeing her so low. "Do you want to talk?"

After a beat of struggling with the words and battling herself, she relented. The words feeling like they were crashing through a dam. "This would be so much easier with him here." She explained, heading over to the kitchen. "We've been around one another for over a year. Even when we were fighting like cats and dogs, we were still under the same roof... learning how to support one another. And these last four months?" Letting out a scoff the brown eyes gazed up at the ceiling before taking out the dinnerware. "We know how to get through the hard times together." Belle stared at the bowl in her hand. The wearing paint of the little farmhouses and countrysides, the little chips and cracks webbing across the rim. "That's what we're good at, facing it all together."

"You know, Belle." Maurice set his paint brush aside. "It doesn't help that you spent an entire month either being forced away from Ansell, trying to help Ansell, or planning how to help Ansell. And now you're apart again and with the seas being rough, you still focus on how much you miss him."

Brown eyes meeting his own, she watched him pull his glasses further down the length of his nose. "My dear, your entire mindset has revolved around Ansell's future. I think you need to focus on your own." He hinted firmly. "It might be a better distraction from all of this Gaston mess. Planning for your future."

Leaning back against the wooden counter, Belle ruminated over the words. "That isn't a good distraction." she forced out.

"Why not?"

Wrapping her arms defensively around herself Belle took a moment before answering tensely. "Papa, it'll only make things worse."

"How? I don't see you as a housewife." He hinted.

"No, of course not."

"Belle, what do you want?" He asked gently.

There was a long, achingly uncomfortable stretch of silence. It was clear to Maurice that his withdrawn daughter wanted something, yet refused to voice it. Pursing her lips, hands worrying the strap of her dress, the brown eyes darted in thought. Studying the grain of the kitchen table she had built a few years back, her stomach sunk to her boots.

"It's alright to say what you want to do-"

"I don't think I'll be allowed to do it." She finally in a hushed tone.

Tilting his head to the side Maurice gently prompted. "You can still say it."

Belle refused to look him in the eye.

Her father sighed. "You know enough about repairing clocks and building gearwork that you could always do repairs?" He offered. "It pays well, and you can work from home."

She nodded absently.
It was clear to him that wasn't the answer. "Just say it, Dear. Let it out."

"They'd never allow a woman to teach." Belle finally mustered, letting out a sad scoff as her face suddenly felt hot. "They wouldn't even let me go to school, Papa, so why would they let me be a teacher?"

There was so much sadness in the big brown eyes it was heart breaking. Maurice rose up and walked over. "Oh Belle,"

"It's so much easier to help him with what he wants, because he can get it." She confessed, tears threatening the corners of her eyes.

"Knowing you, there's a way." He encouraged her, walking over to her.

"I've never even had a real teacher, why would they let me be one?" there was bitterness there, something Maurice rarely heard from her. "Maybe it's best I just focus on clocks." Moving away from him she covered her mouth with her palm, eyes stinging as Belle fought to stay strong. "I told you it would make things worse." She muttered, grabbing her cloak from it's hook. "I'm sorry, I need to get some air."

Maurice stood in the kitchen guiltily as the door shut.

Ansel sighed heavily as he entered his chambers. Kicking off his heels, he shut his eyes as footsteps approached the door.

"Your Grace," Lumiere announced himself.

"My errands?" He asked.

"Done, Master." He helped Ansell out of his jacket. "And I saw to your purchases, everything should be sent to the castle in the next few days."

He straightened out his waistcoat. "Excellent. The sooner the better, I believe our family could use a distraction."

"I agree. Are you going to dinner?"

The prince shook his head, waving the thought away with his hand. "I'm far too tired to muster the energy to pretend to be extroverted. Could you have dinner brought up? Whatever they're serving for the others will work fine." Turning around he searched his chambers in befuddlement. Something was amiss. "Have you seen Chapeau?"

"No Y-"

The door opened and the hound hopped in, skidding across the ornate floors to leap in front of the Prince who ignored her.

Chapeau came in quickly. "Your Grace!"

"I didn't think we'd see you here."

"I went for a ride and thought I'd stop by." Belle managed, keeping to herself how many times she had cried out of pure frustration. Pulling off her cloak, she forced a smile at Mrs. Potts.
It was clear something was amiss with their girl. Whether it was Gaston or something else on top of that stress, the Englishwoman didn't know as she took the cloak. "So close to sunset? Should we set you a place for supper-"

"No, no." She sniffled, hoping her eyes weren't too red. "But thank you. I just wanted to head upstairs and get a few things I forgot. Perhaps pick up some new books."

"Of course, Dearie." Mrs. Potts smiled sympathetically. "You head on up, let me know if you need a spot of tea."

"Mon Dieu, what's wrong?" Quickly storming over, an envelope was thrust out to Ansell.

"I haven't read it yet, Master." The valet announced hurriedly. "But the rider arrived this afternoon as white as a sheet. He said something's wrong at the castle and Mr. Potts ordered him here. The boy ruined two horses to get to Versailles as quickly as possible."

Breaking the wax seal Ansell pulled out the letter, quickly unfolding it and reading the news. "I feared the Duke may want to know about whatever issue has arisen so I took the boy before his men could be called." Chapeau explained, he and Lumiere watching the blue eyes sweep back and forth across the letter. "He's in the servant's quarters resting."

Fingers gripping the paper tighter and causing it to crease, Ansell's jaw tensed as each word hit him like a brick.

Watching the anger visibly rise in the Prince, Lumiere took a tentative step forward. "Master, what is it?"

Blinking back his rage he turned away. "He just won't go away." He muttered to himself. "Sire?"

"Gaston." Ansell barked, taking a deep breath to try to steady himself. His muscles taut and unyielding to the attempt. "His body's been found, and Belle is having to deal with it by her own."

Chapeau clutched his chest.

With a few long strides, he was at his desk, taking out paper and pen, furiously writing. "We will pay for the service-"

"Master!" The valet exclaimed, disgust in his tone. "He killed you and nearly ruined us all-"

"I know." A growl began in the pocket of this throat. "But it would go a long way if we at least acknowledge the fact that he was a leader of the community... I dunno... something about respect." Handwriting jagged and quick, he began to curl his lip to the information. With one wrong stroke the nib ripped through the parchment and he snapped. "DAMN!" Hurling it across the room Ansell roared, red and wild eyed. "THAT DAMN MAN! THAT MONSTER! WE JUST GOT OVER HIM!" Raking his hands through his hair he panted and growled in a rage. "And now Belle's facing all of this- This- This- REMINDER OF A NIGHTMARE BY HERSELF."

"Master-" Lumiere began gently.

"WHAT?!" Whirling around and seeing his friend, Ansell's began to relax. Remembering how he needed to not fly off the handle, he took a deep breath and cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Lumiere."
Speaking gently, he hoped to help Ansell relax. "There's nothing to apologize for, Master. That night may have ended happily, but the rest of it was something we would all wish to forget."

"That's not an excuse to yell at you, friend." Taking another deep breath and leaning against the desktop, he planted his palms flat on the surface to brace himself and refrain from destroying anything else in the apartment.

It hurt Lumiere to see the Prince so distraught, anxiety and anger he had worked so hard on to curtail before leaving for court surfacing once more. "Sire, I know that those memories are painful for you both, and you've worked hard to get over them together." He replied. "However, Belle has the castle and her father. Perhaps they can help her feel less alone in the situation."

Still distraught over the news it was clear the Prince wasn't about to buy into the thought. "Perhaps it's best I'm left by myself to craft my response."

Belle carefully folded a dress she had forgotten in the royal chambers and tucked it into her satchel. Reaching over, she took a hairbrush and other assorted items resting on the table next to the bed that had also been accidentally left behind. It was so easy to forget the little things, especially when the chambers was a second home. Slowly taking her time to pack everything, secretly wishing Ansell would come in through the doors, hold her, and help her work through all of the worries, Belle kept herself steady. She felt guilty about her father, knowing he was only trying to help by offering a productive distraction. However, she had to get away. And the best place to hide for a bit was the one that felt safest.

Pausing, remembering, she slowly turned to face a large, ornate wardrobe.

Ansell's wardrobe.

His men left and Ansell finally sunk into his chair, staring at the letter with Belle's soft, round handwriting. Seeing the envelope, something still in it, he reached over and picked it up, carefully turning it upside down over his palm.

A ring attached to a blue ribbon tumbled out.

Gently pulling out one of Ansell's shirts, Belle held it up to her nose and took a deep, long smell of the fabric. Suddenly he was there with her, and she let out a small, sad sob.

Pulling it to her chest, she held it tightly and steadied her breath.

Shutting his eyes he let out a soft chuckle. The simple little band she wore on her finger tied onto one of her longer ribbons. Bringing the favor up to his mouth, he kissed it.

Missing her all the more.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: 20 chapters! Whaaaat. This one is a day late and I am SO VERY SORRY because I hate being late on anything. However, work and life and cats and boring stuff
got in the way of posting on time. Also, I may have accidentally kinda, sorta, deleted a huge chunk of edits. Because I'm a smart guy.

However, this is the second longest chapter to day at sixteenish pages (crazy) and there's a lot going on here. Lots of moving pieces (that there may be a doc with an overly complicated outline and list of), lots of dialog, lots of puppy vs. Chapeau, a little bit of Gus and Stephane.

We've made it to 20 chapters! That's insane, and you're still reading this! So thank you. Thank you for your comments, kudos, and bookmarks. As a way of saying thanks, I've posted three one shots to the future fic one shot collection Two Very Small Storms. TVSS is the companion piece to this novel and is fluffy as all get out if you need something to cleanse your palate.

Thoughts? Likes? Dislikes? Opinions on puppies, princes, peasant girls? Let me know in the comments below.
"I think that's everything." Ansell said as he inspected the carriages, patting one of the new horses' shoulders. There were three wagons carefully surrounded by his mounted guards to keep robbers at bay. Looking up and down the line, he checked the boxes and the goods headed for his castle.

"The list has been checked twice, Master," Lumiere reassured, well aware the Prince was excited about the prospect of sending gifts home.

"Good." Being nosed by a little bay tied to one of the wagons, he smiled and rubbed its jaw. "You're going to make someone happy." He told the filly, petting the velvet nose as it nicked softly. "I think after the trials of yesterday everyone could use some gifts."

"It'll brighten a lot of faces." He agreed, noticing Chapeau reluctantly holding onto the pup's leash as one would hold a chamber pot that had been in the sun. The little dog bouncing and sniffing the wooden wheels curiously.

"Quite a few odds and ends."

Turning to his brother's voice, the Prince found Francis and Lucette heading towards his caravan.

"You've been a busy boy." His aunt noted, eyes moving up and down the line.

"I took spending my sum seriously." Pulling the steps down he opened the door to the most luxurious carriage and peered inside. "Gentleman, I wanted to thank you for your services before you headed off to my castle."

The pair, dressed in their finest, bowed the best they could. "The honor is all ours, Your Grace. We're glad we could be of service."

"My housekeeper, Mrs. Potts, will see to your needs." He reassured them. "I wish you a nice trip." Climbing down, he walked up to the head driver, pulling a stack of letters out of his breast pocket. "Make sure these get to the right people."

"Yes, Your Grace." He tipped his tricorn, large feathers flouncing.

Looking to Francis who was poking around, lips pursing into a thin line, he said. "You're not going to tattle on me for not spending it all on jewels and silk, are you?"

"Your generosity is safe with me." The brother reassured. "Be thankful Leon's not here to report back to him. Though you should have bought some more courtly fashion to appease him."

"That's coming tomorrow, you can thank Auntie for needling me into a few suits for my stay here." Voice trailing off he furrowed his brows in thought.

"What is it, Master?" Lumiere asked.

"I think that's everything-" suddenly struck with genius Ansell perked and quickly turned around. "Puppy!" He called out.

Having an idea of where it was all going, Chapeau eagerly let the leash go.
The pup charged over, clumsily skidding to a stop and tripping over her paws. Clambering upright, she pawed at his shoes with a wide, oblivious smile. In the few short days she had been with the Prince she had improved greatly.

"Good dog." Scooping the pup up, taking off the lead, he handed the animal over to a coachman.

"Good riddance." His valet muttered to the maitre'd.

"Can you watch her during the trip?" Receiving a head nod, he pulled the large, pink ribbon out of his hair and tied it in a neat bow around the puppy's neck. "May I please have a paper, quill, and ink?" Taking a small pen and ink pot, he thanked the coachman and jotted down the ingredients for the dog's medicine. Carefully waving the note to dry he handed everything over. "Make sure Mrs. Potts gets that, she'll know what to do. And put the hound on Chip's list." Ruffling the dog's ears, he gave a pleased smile towards getting rid of the annoying little thing. At least with Chip she would have someone to play with. "Au Revoir, pup."

The unsuspecting dog panted happily, trying to lick the Coachman.

"Nephew!" Lucette chastised. "Do you not like gifts?"

"No, I like gifts. I loved the scotch you gave me."

The village's reaction to Pere Robert announcing Gaston's service and accompanying banquet in his honor was mixed. As the priest stood on the platform in the town square, surrounded by villagers, some shook their heads and walked away, others fumed, the triplets wept.

Belle hung back next to a flower stall she could easily duck behind while Stephane and Gustave stood further up near the baker.

"Why weren't we told of this sooner?!" The Headmaster bellowed, stirring up some supporters while his face turned bright red. "How long have they had his body? Keeping him from his final resting place?! This is a disgrace."

"I believe the discovery was recent," Robert said calmly, watching the crowd carefully. He had been tasked with the announcement due to the people seeing him as an impartial voice, though it wasn't the actual case. "The Prince was notified immediately and when he read the report he vowed to cover the costs." Glancing across the crowd, he eyed his favorite bookworm in the back. It was difficult to not be nervous about her hanging around the square when he had vivid memories of being one of the few to reject Gaston's ideas of the beast and the villager's sudden desire to overtake the castle as a giant, mindless, bloodthirsty mob.

"Still isn't right." Clothilde shook her head with a long scowl as others joined her. "You know we wouldn't have had this in the first place if it weren't for that girl."

As a dozen or so men agreed, becoming louder and telling the remaining people how they felt, Belle quietly slipped away before she was seen as the crowd became more worked up and opinionated. Her lessons with Stephane and Gustave had been in the early morning, and she had quickly done any errands before Pere Robert made his announcement. Ducking behind a building, she made her way home, hoping to distract herself while things settled down.

Maurice was focused on a sketch as she came in, not even looking up as the door opened. "So how was it?"

"One thing's for certain, no one dies like Gaston." She sighed, shutting the door and leaning her back
against it. "Thankfully this time his influence didn't end with pitchforks and threats of lighting the staff on fire. So I'll consider it a marginal improvement."

Furrowing his brow, her father staring at his sketch with displeasure towards his own work. "It's hard for me to believe that a man who tricked them all into storming the castle so he could kill the beast out of spite is still so revered."

"It's a small group of people." She explained, pulling up a chair next to him. "They rile everyone up and make things worse." Slouching in the chair, Belle smoothed out her skirts, fidgeting with her apron. "Honestly it's mostly the Headmaster and Clothilde, neither of them like me."

"That Headmaster is a terrible bully." Maurice bristled.

"That doesn't mean he should be out to get you." Setting his piece of graphite down, Maurice adjusted turned to her. "Have you thought about our discussion?"

"He'd be the last person to let me teach," Belle reminded him. "I have a feeling he'd rather set the school on fire than allow a woman to instruct. Especially a woman who wants to integrate girls into the classrooms and has all sorts of ideas on how to improve the school."

His daughter was frustrated, scowling at the idea of one man denying her of her dream. "Then find a way around it."

Cocking her head to the side, she stared at her father curiously.

"Maybe you don't have to teach at his school." he shrugged, taking a cloth and cleaning his glasses. "But you're very good at instruction, there are several little girls running around the village who know how to read because of you." Watching her mind go to work on the problem, he finished. "I know you, Dear, you're nothing if not resilient and clever."

"The Headmaster will hate me for this."

"Sounds like it's par for the course."

"Oh, I know." A mischievous smile tugged at the corners of her mouth as she mused over the idea of her bully having a conniption.

Maurice chuckled. "Be careful, Belle."

"It's not my fault if it rankles him because of his outdated views." She replied. "Whatever this eventual plan may be." Smiling at him sincerely her voice softened. "Thank you, Papa." tilting forward, she turned her attention back to his sketch. "Have you figured out the inner-design?" Belle asked, leaning over his shoulder and reading the notes for his next music box.

"Nearly." He sighed. "But I can't seem to figure out this element." Rapping his pencil on the table, he pointed to an interior sketch. "I don't think this will support the rest of the box, but it's such a small space to reinforce. Damned thing."

Pursing her lips, she stole the pencil and looked the design over before scribbling down a fresh measurement and rudimentary sketch.

Squinting, he adjusted his glasses. "Belle, that will certainly not- oh that actually works quite well." Surprised he began revising the rest as she smiled. "Thank you." Jotting some notes down he asked.
'And what do you have to do today?'

Getting up, she went to tidy up her stacks upon stacks of books. "Hiding from a possible mob and now, apparently, scheming." She announced. "I'm sure I can find other things around here to busy myself with. You?"

"Errands, then I need to take stock of my paints." Stiffly rising with a groan he stretched. "I'll let you know how the town is."

"Thank you."

"I never took you for a botanist." Francis mused as Ansell carefully set a sprig into a small journal. They were walking the immaculate gardens with Lucette, enjoying the breeze together.

"It's a newer hobby." He announced, thumbing through the pages of his latest finds. Pressed herbs and flowers paired with notes in his gradually improving handwriting.

"Is that what you've been up to when you haven't been dragged about the palace?" Watching the heir, he raised a brow.

"Sometimes." Tucking the book into his breast pocket, the piercing blue eyes swept over the perfectly sculpted hedges. Everything laid out in perfect symmetry, sweeping and fit for the gods. "I also do like taking Cavall out and getting the air. It's much more invigorating than lying about and eating pastries all day."

"That's not the only thing we do lying about." Lucette hinted.

"Aunt Lucette." Raising his brows in astonishment his mouth slipped open. "What about Solomon?"

"Oh, I love him dearly. But I would be lying if I said we don't have our own proclivities." Stopping and cupping a rose, she smelled the pure white blossom. "And need I remind you this is Versailles, not a convent in the Alps. When in Rome."

"It's amazing you're so prudish." Francis ribbed. "You used to have quite the appetite and appreciation of the feminine."

"I still do." The prince defended himself. "Just more singularly." Wishing to change the subject, his gaze roamed to the fountain. Far away, past the bubbling stone fish, there was a man in resplendent clothing, being trailed by a massive entourage.

Francis' eyes widened. "I believe that's the king."

"He's a bit of a rare sight," Ansell noted. "It's the first time I've seen him since I've arrived."

"His Highness is in mourning." His aunt reminded him. "I hear he's rarely out unless he's headed to his little harem."

France gave her a magnificent amount of side eye. "It's called Parc-aux-cerfs."

"You can call it any frilly little thing you'd like. At the end of the day, he has a house full of virginal girls all to himself."

The great ruler of France disappeared into the maze of greenery, leaving them in silence. "You know, as a ruler, I can't help but stand here and think I should be back at home helping my people."
Francis rocked on his heels as he admired a marble statue. "You were never one for governing unless it meant taking large sums of money and spending it on yourself."

Frowning at the truth, he fought through the guilt that wanted to overtake him like thorny vines winding and wrapping through his body. "True," He composed himself. "And I did little after I transformed back. Lowered rates for renting lands, helped a few struggling families, but just that." Watching his brother's expression shift Ansell could tell that he felt differently. "I need to do something more, a bigger gesture."

"It sounds less like you're governing, more like you're throwing money away," Francis said with a touch of edge in his words. "Money that goes into your family's coffers."

Turning, he stood a bit taller, taking a strong step towards his brother. "But for what? We just spent a small fortune on horses and heels."

"Ansell, one must keep up appearances." Lucette reasoned. "I may fight with your father on many subjects, but as the future ruler of the family's lands it is your duty to keep the coronet solvent."

"And I know I can-"

"This is that damned tax, isn't it?" His brother exclaimed.

"I was greedy-" He pressed.

"And you were thorough enough to have your lawyers draft an iron clad law." He reminded. "One you can't undo, one that flows into our chests."

Frustration broke through as he shook his head. "No, father dispersed the money amongst all of you after after the curse-"

"Well, you must live with your choice." Huffing, Francis turned to stand off with the Prince who was slowly beginning to curl his fingers into fists.

"Be judicious with what your taxes bring in." Lucette's voice was firm, a touch sharp. "You should help the town, but you should have assistance with balancing the money."

"You don't understand, this tax-"

"It's not just you the money goes to," Francis argued.

"If there is excess, then you should locate it," Lucette responded. "However, it would be wise to examine all aspects of your estate's liquidity. And that includes setting some aside for family and emergencies. There might not be as much as you think."

"Emergencies?" Ansell scoffed, gesturing widely around them. "Do you see us going to war with a neighboring province? Everyone is here! Sleeping with each other's wives and getting fat on decadence. And I'm not talking about all of the lands in the province. I merely see to the town near my castle. Father rules the rest, that was his agreement with my mother. It's paltry compared to what he should be bringing in."

"The money you bring in is still important and it's selfish to fritter it away on subjects as you see it!" Francis hissed.

"There is generosity, Nephew, and then there is foolishness," Lucette warned. "Know the difference."
Mulling over her words, Ansell tilted his head ever so shrewdly. "And how much do you get?"

A hand flew to her chest. "I never!"

"You certainly like to rile up Father, but you can't tell me Grandpapa didn't set aside some kind of sum for you." Watching her, her eyes slipped to the gravel ground and he scoffed. Lip curling a bit to them both. "Your husband is a Marquis-"

"I absolutely believe in being charitable," She spat defensively, opening her fan with a severe flick of the wrist. "But do not school me on finances."

"You have no idea how this money is tied up!" Francis exclaimed.

"Then I'll aim to find it! Mon Dieu, how much does he take from my lands? To hear it from you, it's as if it's the only thing holding this- this dynasty up." Exhaling forcefully through his nose he shifted his weight and fought the urge to pace. "I will not be goaded into submission on this matter. At the end of the day, it's my money, you've just grown accustomed to the excess he's diverted to you after all of these years he's kept me in exile." Turning away, he massaged the bridge of his nose. "Please understand I don't wish to harm anyone, but I do disagree with how he's handled what my taxes have brought in. I think I can do better, as their ruler, and now I'm beginning to I think he hasn't been exactly truthful about how vital my money is to the family's riches."

Francis shook his head slowly. "Anselme, please don't ruin a good thing-"

"It's not good, Francis. It's broken and I want to fix it."

Closing her eyes Aunt Lucette sighed. "All of this talk of money is so unseemly. Either we change the subject or I find a salon to attend to where I can listen to pretty ideas and drink myself silly."

Maurice took off his hat as he closed the door. Hearing rustling and jostling towards the back of the cottage. "Sounds like you're keeping busy."

"I am." Belle's voice replied. "Is it any better out there?"

"The coast is clear." He said with a hint of frustration that his daughter had to hide. As the clanging and shuffling became louder, he furrowed his brows and followed the sounds. "Whatever are you-" curiously looking at his daughter going through a cupboard, crate of things on the floor, he watched her upper half come out from inside a particularly deep one that was towards the floor.

Turning, covered in dust, Belle wiped her hands on her apron as she sat on her knees. "Did you get your glasses fixed?"

"Patched, I'm afraid. Kept saying I need new ones, and I suppose I do. Things are getting a touch blurry, however, I don't want to spend that much money at the moment." He told her, setting some supplies he had picked up from a merchant down. Still trying to parse out what she was up to, he scratched his beard. Eyes landing on the crate beside her. "And what exactly are you doing?"

"Well I was away for over a year, so I thought I might tidy up… and then I found out how messy you are without me around." Coughing out some dust, strands of hair falling out of her updo, she caught her breath. "You know, you're not very good at throwing things out."

Realizing what was in her rubbish bin, his face slackened. "All of that is useful!" Hurrying over, he was blocked as she scooped up the crate.
"It's all broken!" She told him firmly, dodging hands trying to wrestle the junk away.

"I can use it for another music box. Belle, give it back."

Pulling it more closely against her, she braced herself for a standoff. "Papa, it's all junk. Even I wouldn't repurpose it."

"But look at this-" Quickly grabbing a hunk of loose parts that in a former life had been someone's pocket watch, he fiddled with it in earnest.

"It's covered in rust," Belle said pointedly.

"It just needs some cleaning!" He explained defensively. "The insides should be fine."

The brown eyes stared at him reproachfully.

Maurice stared back stubbornly.

His daughter raised a brow as an awkward, tense silence filled the house.

Face falling, he reluctantly tossed the watch into the crate.

"Thank you." She said, toting the garbage out.

"If you want junk, you should clear out the shed." Maurice offered, a touch hurt. "The only one who's been in there is Ansell."

"That's next on my list," Belle reported over her shoulder, heading out the door and setting the box on the side of the road to be picked up. Letting out a deep breath of accomplishment, she waved to Agatha before heading to the shed. Dusting her hands together Belle went past the stables, asking Phillipe how his day was going, and stared at the shed with a touch of trepidation. Steeling herself for a mess, she opened the door.

Her eyes widened.

The entire ceiling was covered in bundles of herbs. All hanging on neat lengths of twine, each with a little tag. Reaching up, she read one of the tags. "Rue" in Ansell's scratchy cursive.

Smiling and shaking her head in disbelief, she stared at the fragrant ceiling for several long minutes.

"Arguing aside, it was a pleasant walk in the gardens with you both." Francis exclaimed as they entered the palace and walking through the glistening halls.

"It is hard to not get heated when it comes to some subjects," Lucette exclaimed, fanning herself as a familiar young woman passed by.

"My Prince," She paused and curtseyed.

He stood there, trying to remember her name. Something with an "E"? She had introduced herself right before he left his party. "Ah yes, Mademoiselle-

"Elke von Tessmer." she reminded him.

Francis and Lucette watched quietly.
"Yes, of Saxony. Forgive me, I'm dreadful with names." He bowed. "How is your stay at Versailles?"

"Well, though I was hoping to see more of you." She replied demurely.

Aunt Lucette drew her fan up in a way that covered her twitching lips.

"We did come all this way to celebrate your return." von Tessmer explained; all flowing lace, shimmering silk, and a heap of wig.

"Ah, you'll have to excuse my absence." Straightening his posture, he slipped a hand behind his back, wishing to escape. "I can be solitary at times, not one for court. I prefer to read:"

"What a coincidence. Have you seen the library?"

Blinking a few times, Ansell's eyes suddenly brightened. "No, I've been in search of it for some time now. I haven't been able to find it with this palace being the maze it is."

Smiling coquettishly her chin dipped. "I'm more than happy to take you some time. I'm a bit of a bookworm myself and find myself there often. I enjoy philosophy."

Realizing what was happening he bowed his head. Giving a polite, forced smile as his shoulders tensed. "Perhaps another time, Mademoiselle. My day is quite full."

"As you wish, Your Grace."

When the young woman slipped off, his family converged on him. "Well now, she was certainly your type." Francis hinted while they continued walking. "Bookish yet beautiful."

"She's not Belle-"

"She doesn't have to be. Marriage doesn't mean you have to love them, it just means you signed the paperwork." He explained keenly, eyes sliding to his left. "Auntie?"

She fanned herself quickly. "You could at least put on a show, Nephew. And the end of the day you go home to your Belle. For now, you're under your father's scrutiny."

Scowling at them he straightened his waistcoat forcefully. A dull ache beginning behind his eyes. "Of all people-"

"The more you play the game, the less he toys with you and the faster you get back to your castle."

"You make it sound as if being with that young, supple-looking Saxon is such a sacrifice." His brother scoffed. "Surely your mademoiselle would understand you having to take such measures to appease father. He's noticed, you know; your peculiar lack of interest."

Letting out a heavy exhale, Ansell stopped at his apartment door. "Thank you for walking with me."

Displeased with the prince's stubborn streak, they bowed and left as he entered the small parlor that led into his bed chambers. Lumiere and Chapeau stood at the massive, gilded bedroom door, looking like piles of nerves.

"I need to rest." He told them, head sharp with a migraine. "Please draw a bath and bring in some tea, I have a splitting headache."

"Sire-" Chapeau bumbled.
"And do it quickly." Pulling off his wig he handed it to the valet, scratching his scalp and letting out a moan of pleasure from the freedom. "It's so hot under that damned thing."

"Master, your father-" Lumiere gulped.

"That is the last person I want to hear about right now." He growled, grasping the handle of the door, not even waiting for them to open it. "Father this and father that. I can't wait to get out of here and away from this shadow he casts."

"My Prince, you need to know-"

"Please, no reports until I've gotten over this headache." Pulling open the door he began to enter.

"Master!"

"Lumiere! What is-"

He turned to see the two prostitutes waiting on his bed for him.

"Oh."

Chapter End Notes

There's spending money on your friends and family, and then there's taking money AWAY from your family.

Not as nearly as late as the last one but you'll have to excuse my tardiness. My ongoing goodish health thing has had some effects I've had to adjust to, so I'm not quite at the top of my game. I'm well though (nothing to worry about!), just learning how to deal correctly.

We're past 20 chapters now! I want to thank everyone for their support, your interest certainly keeps this story going. If you have any questions, comments, thoughts, corrections, ideas, angry screeds about how this is all wrong, let me know down below.

Until next week.
Lumiere and Chapeau were sweating bullets while they eyed the display lounging about in the royal bedroom. The maitre'd was the first to step forward, clearing his throat. "Master, compliments of the Duke. He uh… wanted to make sure you knew that."

Ansell's expression was one of dread towards a sight any other man would gleefully run towards, tearing his clothes off in excitement along the way. Glancing over his shoulder as if he wished to be saved by his men, he quickly stepped back and shut the door before the women could coo at him.

"Your Grace-" his valet began.

"What am I supposed to do?!!" Everything was suddenly constricting him while he let out a gasp and loosened his cravat. Pressing his back flat against the door, struggling with simply forming a thought, the prince gaped as if a bull was about the ram him into the other room.

"Well, your father certainly wants you to do one thing." Lumiere uttered under his breath. Ansell gave him a pained look.

"Sire, I wish I could give advice." He replied earnestly, sadly. "All I can say is; if you refuse he'll find out."

Steeling himself, he swallowed thickly, closing his eyes. "I'm not doing it."

"I never suggested you should."

Eyes still closed, he tried his damnedest to relax. Ansell's first inclination was the have a fit; roaring, spitting, and throwing the girls out, then going and starting a row with his father. It took everything for him to not go flying off the handle at the affront to his sensibilities. Taking a deep breath, eyes opening, he wet his lips and gently grasped the door handle, hesitating before entering the room. Muscles taut, he glanced over at the young women; curves in all of the right places, splayed out on his bed like delectable sweets on a platter.

He shuddered.

"Your Grace." One of them purred, sliding off the bed, robe hanging off of her shoulder. "We've heard so much about you."

"And yet I know so little about you, Madame." He tensed, heading over to the side board and pouring himself a generous measure of scotch. "Your services aren't needed h-

"I am Tatienne." Snaking her hand up to his shoulder she toyed with his jacket. "And my companion is Ygraine."

"You can stop." Ansel knocked back the liquor, hissing through his teeth at the harshness. "I'll make sure you-" Slowly turning around and reaching for the table's drawer, Tatienne pulled him in for an unwanted kiss as Ygraine prowled over, fixated on her prey. Letting out an involuntary groan, he was pushed against the furniture at the same moment her hands found his thigh and moved inward.
He wanted to push her away, yet at the same time...

"There you are." She nibbled, smiling against his neck. "So eager."

Taking a deep breath, he bit his lip when the second woman's gown fluttered to the floor. Struggling, she pinned his shoulders. They were so different from Belle. Not better, but...

"Let us take care of you, My Prince."

Drawing in a sharp breath he pushed her hand away. "Please, I'm not in the mood." Slipping away, suddenly the other was in front of him and Tatienné snaked her arms around his back. "Madame, I-"

Before he could snarl at them, one kissed the Prince passionately as the other nipped and kissed his ear and neck from behind. "It's alright, Your Grace." She breathed against his jaw. "You have needs that must be tended to."

He agonized over it, pushing her hands away. Yet each time another set would stroke him, pet him, pull him closer. Ansell felt drunker and more helpless with each kiss. Heaving, fighting, losing. They were both so warm, and he was so lonely after weeks of having Belle constantly then suddenly being cut off, and it was such an easy habit to comfortably slip back into.

"There," she watched his eyes, hooded and gazing hungrily at her lips. Hands swiftly getting him out of his coat and waistcoat. "Let's get you more-"

Ansell grabbed her forcefully by the hips and kissed her lustily. Pushing her against the side board, he groaned at the woman behind him pressing on his back. She was so ravishing, so inviting. He used to entertain so many women, so many different bodies to sample. It had been so long since-

"Oh, My Prince," Tatienné whispered into his ear from behind, hands yanking down his breeches.

Eyes flying open, Ansell grasped his breeches and shoved her away. Wrenching himself out of the women's arms he panted and fought through the familiar compulsion. "NO." He snapped at them, frantically trying to keep himself from being more undressed.

The women stared at him in disbelief.

"I can't do this!" He panted, grabbing his robe and lashing it down. "I can't!"

"Your Grace-" Tatienné began as she approached him.

"STOP." Ansell ordered, wiping rouge off his mouth and smearing it towards his cheek. Aching in every muscle to take them both and lie about it later. "I said no and I mean it!"

Confused and a touch insulted, the women stood there.

Letting out a roar of frustration, he pounded a fist against the wall, making the women jump backward. Planting his hands against the wall to brace himself, he took a deep breath, heart racing.

"Knowing my father, he'll want a report from you." Standing up straight, he forced himself to appear in control. Reaching down, he opened the side table's drawer and pulled out a large leather pouch jangling and heavy with francs. "And I'm sure he's paying you handsomely."

"Well, I've never been so insulted in my life!" Ygraine exclaimed.

"Trust me, if this was ten years ago this would have ended very differently." He reassured, turning and walking over to them. Pressing a generous amount of money into their hands, he looked them
sternly in the eye. "Make up whatever you want. Tell him how virile I was. You ask him to send you back, I'll hint I want you back, he'll pay you to see me and each time I'll pay you equal to give him another report about my great conquest."

The two dumbfounded madames stared at him.

"So, you want us to lie about having lots of sex with you-" Ygraine began.

"But you don't want sex?" Tatienne finished.

Still rattled, he raked a hand through his mused mane. "That's the long and short of it."

"Double the money to not do anything?" She repeated skeptically.

"Yes. Though I suppose you'll need to stay here for an hour or so to give the illusion I'm hard at work."

"So what do you wanna do?" The latter asked as she pulled on her gown.

He shrugged, wincing to the amount of blood flow he was still experiencing. "Just stay… here."

While the Prince swiftly dismissed himself to his parlor, the women unceremoniously took a seat on the bed. "He's an odd one." Tatienne puffed.

"Doesn't matter as long as he pays us."

Lumiere gawked at the prince; half dressed, makeup smeared on his face, wide eyed with panic, and looking uncomfortably aroused as he shoved the door open forcefully and slammed it so hard behind him the hinges shook. "Mast-"

"JUST GET OUT!" He barked, turning and collapsing onto the fainting couch, shutting his eyes and groaning in agony as his help scrambled out the door. "Mon Dieu."

Belle pitched the brown water out of her bucket and into the bed of vegetables, shaking it out before walking to one of the town's water pumps. Waiting her turn, she nervously scanned the village. The Gaston supporters, for the most part, relegated themselves to the tavern and she had no desire to go within a hundred feet of it. However, they could still be out and about and sore from the morning’s announcement. Reaching the front she pumped the handle and filled the bucket up again, stepping to the side when a family of goats came to drink from the trough.

"Is she finally doing women's work?"

Glaring up, she bristled at the voice as the Headmaster sneered at her from the safety of a group of other men. Averting her eyes, not wanting to fight, Belle gathered her bucket and began to walk away.

"What are you doing, little Mademoiselle?" A goon lumbered over from the pack. "Wouldn't be Gaston's wife but happy to do the work elsewhere?" Lunging, he grabbed the handle.

Glowering at the man, well aware he used to be one of the great Gaston's hunting buddies, Belle shoved the pail at him. The bucket slammed into his generous gut and set water splashing into the ruddy face, making him stumble back. Turning, brown eyes were full of daggers towards the Headmaster, she charged towards him. Her fists clenched, boots pounding on the cobblestones, patience non-existent. "What's your-"
"Annnd I'll take that," Gustave said hastily while he grabbed the bucket from the startled hunter and Stephane seized Belle by the back of the dress.

"Know your place." The Headmaster hissed at her.

Stephane grabbed her from under the arms, hauling her away at the same moment she lunged forward at the Headmaster's order. "Belle!" Dragging her around the corner of the building, he struggled with keeping her from charging back to the water pump. "Belle, listen-"

"Know my place?!" She seethed. "KNOW MY PLACE?!!"

"I know! I know!" Pinning her by the shoulders, he got the enraged bookworm to make eye contact with him. "There'll be a time and a place and Gustave and I will most definitely be by your side when we all scream our heads off but today's not that day."

"I'm so sick of being treated differently because I'm a girl!"

"You should hear what he says about us." Gustave huffed as he set the pail, freshly filled with water, down.

Catching her breath, she stared at her friends, anger slowly ebbing. "I just want him buried and I want this over with." She exclaimed with vexation. "It's barely been a day but it's like they think it gives them a reason to be even bigger bullies."

"They'll get sorted out," Stephane reassured her. "However, I think it's best if you and I try to not start the next great war over the next few days."

Slouching against the wall, she pursed her lips stubbornly before mumbling. "You're right." Wrapping an arm around her waist she noticed her water bucket. "Thank you."

"Anytime," Gustave replied warmly, turning to his amour. "And you, practicing restraint?"

"You're starting to rub off on me." The swordsman admitted before turning back to their friend. "I know the answer, but I still have to ask- Would you like us to walk you home?"

"No, but thank you. I'll see you around." Giving the least convincing of smiles, Belle slipped off back to the house. Quickly entering and securing the door, she added soap to her water and stirred the mixture until it foamed. Walking the bucket and a pile of rags to the next set of windows she needed to clean, she looked out to see the Headmaster and his cronies strolling and blustering down the road, commanding the space around them. Joking, laughing, unrestrained and untroubled.

"Bullies?"

Belle noticed how white her knuckles were gripping one of the damp rags. "Just the meanest fish in this small pond." She frowned while her father walked up and watched the gang of men meander down the street together. "I try to stay out of the cross hairs but with him and Clothilde, it's every little thing." She fumed. "I think the only way they'd be happy if I was chained to a stove as Gaston's wife with a bunch of children at my feet."

"That wasn't going to happen one way or another," Maurice exclaimed, having to keep his own rare anger in check. Observing the shine and clarity to the windows, taking note of the underlying fury in the keen brown eyes, quickly trying to think of how to assist her in cooling off he said. "Did you have fun terrorizing my scrap collection?"

Relaxing, she forced a smile and chuckled, shaking her head slowly towards how ruffled her father
"The house needs a lot more cleaning than I imagined." She said. "Did you dust while I was gone? Just once?"

"No, it seems I was alternating between being in a state of panic or depression and that does little for dust and dirt." Looking at her in a prompting manner, he took a rag that was offered to him, dipping it in the sudsy water. "I take it you went outside? I'll wash, you dry."

"Yes." She grumbled. "I think it's best this laying low continues for awhile."

"I'm so sorry, Dear~"

"It's not your fault. You're not stupid, or mean, or bafflingly sexist." Belle sighed. "And I'll find things to do."

"Like your scheming?" He offered, scrubbing a window before moving to another. "How has that been coming along?"

"There's really not much to scheme about." Knitting her brows in determination she dried off a panel. "If I want to teach, then I do it somewhere that's not the school."

"What about the library at the castle?" He suggested, "one thing's for certain, you'll never run out of books."

"I've thought about that, but, it's too far from the village. The children should be able to walk to class and then back home. It'd have to be somewhere nearby." refolding her rag to a dryer side she glanced at him. "And the house is too small, there's no place for a proper space to do lessons."

"You do have friends around town, you know." Her father reminded her as he worked on a particularly stubborn spot of grime. "Not everyone, as we've discussed. But friends, some very open minded ones."

Belle paused for a moment, her hand sliding down the pane.

"Doesn't the castle own most of the buildings?" he thought out loud. "I bet Cogsworth could help you find a vacancy. Your prince wouldn't mind and I suspect you wouldn't have to pay rent."

"Possibly." She agreed rather absently, going through the entire situation in her mind. "However, I think I should do this on my own. Not rely on his status. I mean, of course, I'll go to the castle and see what supplies I can find. I don't want to not have books or slates. And I'd love to have a map on the wall, some illustrations."

Maurice smiled warmly at her.

"What?"

"It's just nice to see you chasing what you want."

Tilting her chin down, she blushed. "I really hope I can make it work."

"If you need any help you know where I live." Watching her lips twitch he chuckled. Their playful banter died down and they kept working in silence. Belle's mind wandering away from the idea of starting a school to other topics as they moved their window washing to the other side of the house.

"Have you thought about what I told you?" She finally mustered. "Coming with us?"

Maurice exhaled tiredly.
"Papa-"

"That's not a no." He corrected. "But you have to remember, change doesn't come easily at my age."

"You'd have us. I don't know if you've noticed but we're both rather fond of you." She reassured.

"And where exactly are you two going?" Maurice furrowed his brows. "The world is an awfully big place."

"I think the plan is sticking to Europe, but we're both supposed to investigate and come back with our findings." She explained. "Obviously, he's at an advantage. He's receiving current reports and talking to people who know what's happening in the world. I just have maps and what I can glean from travelers passing through the village."

"And what are your findings telling you?"

Belle slowed her drying, turning to him. "That anywhere where at least one of us can speak the language is so much more promising than staying in France. The only caveat being if we could actually get our marriage approved here, but even then?"

His daughter wore a look of nervousness. "Well, wouldn't that be the best-case scenario? He'd be the new Duke, you the Duchess-"

"I suppose." She hedged uncomfortably.

Mulling it over, he watched how it was very clear Belle had no inclination to be royal. "Technically, you'd start as a princess." He reminded her, using the statement to gauge her feelings. "Like in one of your books."

"I'm not a princess." Trying not to grimace, it still escaped.

He wasn't sure if it was because she didn't wish to be a princess, or she felt she wouldn't pass approval. Either way, Maurice sighed and inspected their work. "You don't have to be one if you don't want to. If you and Ansell want to live in a little village teaching children and drying herbs, then I'll support you two. One hundred percent. And, if you want to be the next Duke and Duchess... well I suppose at that point with an entire province to rule you won't really be needing support but the point is I'll be there, Belle. Because you're my little girl."

"I'll always need your support."

Silently, lovingly, they smiled at one another, sharing the moment. Maurice eventually breaking the silence. "I really should have washed these while you were gone."

"Well, next time I'm taken captive by a monster-"

"Next time? There better not be a next time!" Belle's teasing laugh was a pleasant sound in his ears. "You already have this one hook, line, and sinker. Please don't start all over and put me through this again."

"Not that I was planning to." She reassured cheekily.

"Good, because I like him."

"Me too."
Ansell stared up at the ceiling as Lumiere crept in. The Prince appearing agonized by defeat while he lay draped dramatically over the fainting couch.

"Lumiere" he kept his eyes to the ceiling "It felt so easy to get back into that habit."

Lumiere clasped his hands behind his back, assessing the situation carefully. It felt so strange to assist the prince, his prince, in navigating the perilous waters of palace chastity. "Old habits are hard to break, Master. It takes effort, and it is not without mistakes."

"I love her so much." Shaking his head the Prince dragged a hand down his mouth. "I would have ruined it! And for what? A pair of harlots my father paid to break me." He scoffed. "All of it just undone because of a moment of weakness." Feeling sick to his stomach he lamented. "she's so wary of me being able to restrain myself. She's so unsure if she could take that kind of… betrayal. I mean, that's what it is for us. It's not like the others, that silent agreement."

"And there is nothing wrong with that agreement, however, it's not for you two." He explained. "It was never going to be easy, not with zee temptations everywhere."

"How could I let myself get so close?" Finally allowing himself to look at Lumiere, the blue eyes were wracked with guilt. "I was willing at one point, Lumiere. I was ready, it only stopped because my conscience kicked it at the very last moment."

"I would consider it a victory." He reassured. "You were tempted but you didn't follow through, no? And now you've learned from your mistake and will do better next time."

Ansell wasn't sold on the pep talk, slumping forward in defeat.

"May I suggest we have that bath drawn? I'll see to your… guests... while you relax. You're so very tense, Your Grace."

"I made a deal with them." He grumbled. "I'll match my father's pay if they report back to him that I proved to be... willing." Disdainfully curling his lip, he turned his head away. "They've already been paid for today."

"Very well, I'll remind them before I show them out in a while." Reaching down, he clasped the Prince's shoulder. "You're proving him wrong."

"It doesn't feel like it."

Chapter End Notes

Oh man, super late again. And I am so sorry. We should be out of the woods of missing deadlines and back at our usual Tuesday schedule from here on out.

But thank you for reading! And thank you, thank you, thank you for bookmarking and kudo'ing and commenting. Was it good? Was it bad? Was it riddled with errors and fallacies? Do you have theories? Or is everything just awful? Let me know down below.

Sidenote: I struggled for WEEKS with how the Ansell vs. the Harlots chapter was going to go. A lot of back and forth. Sometimes he was unfaithful, sometimes he was the valiant guy who said no and meant no and that was that. And yeah, there was a
moment where the chapter nearly had him waking up in bed the next day lamenting what he had done. In the end though, I thought it was important to have it not be so easy, but still, let him have a win.

Next week: Belle Chapter!
Tucking a stack of hymnals under an arm, Pere Robert opened the door to find Belle standing in the cooling early fall night, the hood of her cloak up to mask her identity from anyone wandering the streets that night.

"May I?" She asked.

"Well of course." Ushering her in, as soon as the door latched Belle pulled back her hood, chestnut hair unfurling against her nape. The brown eyes leaving him and roaming about the chapel. "And what do I owe the pleasure this late at night?"

Her gaze fell on the magnificent oak casket. He didn't deserve such a final resting place, however, her prince had spared no expense to show honor to the respected member of the community. "I'm obviously not attending tomorrow, but I wanted a look." Belle explained, mind wandering. "I'm so sorry it's late but I didn't want to be seen-

"Not too late at all. I was just putting on the finishing touches." Gesturing towards the aisle, he said. "By all means."

There were garlands draped over the sides of the pews, leading up to the casket which had an enormous wreath resting atop the ornately carved lid. The flowers woven in were roses, blood red, which amused her to no end. The service would be fit for a nobleman, a great man, not one callous and wicked. A murderer. A brutal monster. It made her furious he would receive such a send-off; flowers and oak and honor. She could see the beast's face as he was shot, then again. And there was Gaston leering; happy to have made his kill. You will marry me, that beast's head on our wall. Poor Ansell; the light dying in his eyes as she cradled his face. Leaving her.

Belle closed her eyes in an attempt to compose herself. Yet all she saw was her beloved being struck and stabbed and shot. Yelping, roaring in pain; trying desperately to get to her. Leaving her when he needed to stay. The darkest night of their lives. An unhealed scar, all because of that brute.

Swallowing thickly she pushed it all away, knowing it would be hard to sleep that night. "It's quite the funeral. No procession?"

"I felt after all that happened there was no need to parade him through the streets like a hero." Pere Robert explained, frustrated with such opulence being bestowed upon a man who barely deserved a wooden cross. "We'll walk him to the cemetery, but that's the extent of it all."

"I heard there's a banquet." She said flatly, reaching out and cupping a rose. Knowing Ansell, the choice of flower had been intentional.

Pere Robert reluctantly nodded his head. "At the tavern. With caskets of wine and platters of beef. Needless to say, I shall not be in attendance."

"I'm sorry you have to do this."

"I'm sorry you had to live through it." He sighed honestly. "But, it'll be over soon. The great Gaston laid to rest. Hopefully allowing us all to move on." Clasping his hands behind his back, he turned to her. "In an attempt to lighten the mood, I was wondering if you were taking pupils?"
Belle tilted her head at him.

"The little Gagne girls, Marie-Jeanne and Pauline, I overheard their father asking about someone teaching them how to read." He explained. "I didn't offer your services nor bring you up as I know things are a little… tense… at the moment." He said. "However, I do know there are a few little girls running around town borrowing my books because of you."

Belle brightened. "I absolutely want to say yes, but I think it's best to wait a few days."

"Understandably." The priest nodded.

"I'll talk to Monsieur Gagne after this has settled." She told him. "As long as we aren't caught learning in public, there shouldn't be a problem." Belle finished testily. Before she could continue and discuss her idea of having a few more pupils there was a quick knock on the door.

Maurice slipped in. "Pere Robert," He tipped his cap, eyes wandering the space, voice becoming terse. "So this is what being a heartless bastard gets you? Quite the funeral for shooting an innocent prince and throwing an old man in an asylum."

"My thoughts exactly." Belle agreed tensely, turning back to her friend. "We've locked the house up and are taking the cart to the castle for a few days. I just wanted to stop by before we left."

"I'm glad you did. And I wish you both a safe trip and a hopefully peaceful holiday."

"Thank you, Pere Robert." Maurice shook his hand. "You know where to find us if they decide to set the house on fire-"

"Papa."

"Kidding, kidding… mostly kidding."

Maurice walked down to the breakfast table, sketchbook loosely in hand. He had allowed himself the leisure to sleep in and as he passed through the sweeping hallway. The early morning sun trickled in through the enormous windows, giving a stunning view of the gardens and some inspiration as to what his projects would be while on their short vacation away from the village.

"I hope you slept well, Maurice." Mrs. Potts said as she approached, a footman following with a tea tray.

"Very well, and good morning." Sliding into a chair and reaching for the teapot, he stopped as he suddenly remembered the rules. The footman clearing his throat pointedly as he poured the cup for him. "Though I do wish it was under better circumstances."

"You're not the only one." Shaking her head in frustration, she gestured for the tureen of oatmeal to be brought out. "I've heard they haven't been very kind to our girl."

"Not everyone, there are good people but…" Maurice frowned into his clean porcelain bowl as breakfast was set in front of him. "Mrs. Potts, I try so hard to not get involved and allow her to fight her own battles. It's extremely clear she's capable. But as a parent?" Irked, stared up at her in frustration. "It's nearly impossible."

"I understand, Love. You want to protect your little one."

"But my little one fought a man atop a crumbling castle in the dead of night while a mob was trying
"A good reminder that she can handle herself." Mrs. Potts noted, watching Cogsworth hustle towards the door to enter and presumably announce either a problem that affronted him or a triumph that stoked his ego.

Furrowing his brows in thought, Maurice changed subjects. "Whatever happened to Cogsworth and Clothilde?"

Cogsworth froze.

The housemaid stared at him pointedly as he began to sweat. "Why don't you ask him yourself." Catching the majordomo attempting to escape she raised her voice. "Oh, Cogsworth! We were just talking about you."

"Oh," Attempting to appear surprised, he leaned on his cane before reluctantly heading into the room. "And how am I coming up in conversation?"

Maurice felt uncomfortable being the only one seated and naturally wanted to tell them to sit for breakfast. However, he refrained, as it would upset the Englishman. "I was wondering about you and your wife Clothilde. She-"

"She's not my wife." He corrected all too quickly to not be defensive, eyes sweeping to the side at Mrs. Potts. "Years after my dear Yves passed, I took to courting Mademoiselle Clothilde."

"You had been courting her a while." Mrs. Potts reminded him firmly.

"Yes, well..." Moustache twitching nervously he tucked a hand into the space between the buttons of his waistcoat. "I was no longer going to see the Mademoiselle, however, the curse happened as I was about to speak to her. Needless to say, the state of our relationship was... extended." As soon as Maurice looked away, he scowled at Mrs. Potts.

She ignored him. "I don't think she took it well."

"I was as gentle as one could possibly be!"

"I'm sorry it didn't work out, I was just wondering," Maurice explained as untied the leather strip holding his sketchbook closed. "She's been rather testy, and was never a fan of Belle to begin with but-" Pausing, he skimmed the area curiously. "Have you seen Belle? She's a late sleeper but she's normally up by now."

"Good! Again!"

Belle huffed as she drew up her blade, her footwork a careful circle as she watched Stephane. He moved smoothly across the fencing hall floor, reminding her of a snake sliding towards its prey until it coiled and struck in a burst. He made the first move and she parried, trying her damnedest to keep up with him.

"Watch your wrist." He ordered, effortlessly fending her off. "Come on, I know you have it in you. You were doing so well on Tuesday." Stepping to the side to dodge he smacked her on the arm. "Sloppy."

Gustave looked up from his book, watching the duel before returning to the word he was trying to sound out.
Concentrating, she quickly stepped forward, then back, their foils singing as she concentrated of the duel. Feigning an attack, she moved quickly and struck him in the chest.

"Well look at you!" He stopped, grinning.

"You gave that to me." She puffed in frustration, shoulders slouching tiredly.

"Well... yes but I didn't make it that easy." Quickly, he smacked her on the side of her shoulder.
"Why are you slouching? Guard up!" Watching her, he grinned at his pupil. Fiesty, eager to prove herself, and not to mention a dear friend. "Belle, that wrist."

"But this feels like I have cont-" Suddenly her sword went clattering to the ground, her teacher's blade pointed at her. Mouth falling open Belle let out an indignant growl.

"Don't have a stiff wrist. You keep doing that I'll keep knocking the sword out of your hand. Now come on, Belle. En garde!" He watched her and her weaknesses carefully. "Nice footwork, but you're stiffening up your arm now."

"I'm trying." Belle was wearing down and wasn't quite as quick or as clean as she had been at the start. Gliding across the floor, Stephane watched her mind at work. So very clever and trying to keep a step ahead. Watching every jump, thrust, feign, and parry, he stopped her by twisting his blade and circling her own, locking her against his own foil so she was unable to move. "I think we're done for today." He said, his pupil conceding. Turning to the door he bowed at their audience. "Good morning, Monsieur. Are you here to see your daughter be thoroughly trounced?"

"Try harder." Gliding across the floor, Stephane watched her mind at work. So very clever and trying to keep a step ahead. Watching every jump, thrust, feign, and parry, he stopped her by twisting his blade and circling her own, locking her against his own foil so she was unable to move. "I think we're done for today." He said, his pupil conceding. Turning to the door he bowed at their audience. "Good morning, Monsieur. Are you here to see your daughter be thoroughly trounced?"

Belle turned to find her father watching them curiously. "Good morning, Papa."

"Good morning Belle, Stephane, Gustave." He nodded his head. "Dueling before breakfast?"

"We have to go in a bit," Gustave explained, carefully tucking a ribbon into his book about a kitten in a vegetable patch. "So we thought we'd squeeze in a few early morning lessons before having to slip away and sit through the most insufferable funeral the world may ever see."

"And how's our musketeer?" He asked the swordsman, watching his daughter catch her breath. "Besides her thorough trouncing?"

"Cocky." Sheathing his sword he checking his hair to make sure it was still in place.

"What? My daughter? Cocky?"

Belle shot her father a quick, dirty look as she untied her messed hair and began to gather it back up into a neater poytail.

"She needs to remember to loosen her arm," Stephane explained, straightening his waistcoat. "And watch her footwork. I tripped her twice. How are you, Monsieur?"

"Alright given the circumstances. I believe I'll be painting the next few days." Watching Belle, who was red faced, sweating, and wincing, his mouth twitched in amusement when he turned back to Stephane who didn't have a hair out of place. "I hope today isn't too terrible for you two."
"We're not going to stay for the banquet, thankfully." Gustave explained. "Belle, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course." Pulling him aside, they went to go discuss his book.

"I'm having Gustave take me out on a picnic," Stephane explained, well aware that as a former Parisian artist Maurice was a bit more open minded than the rest of the village. "Nice bottle of wine, some good cheese, a view that doesn't involve drunks sobbing over Gaston with food in their mouths."

"Wise choice. You know, you two should come back up for dinner tonight." He suggested. "Belle and I can always use the company, and I'm certain Mrs. Potts would love more people to fuss over."

Grinning, Stephane watched as Belle and Gustave returned. "You know, we may very well do just that."

"I heard you got whipped in fencing."

Belle raised a cagey brow at Mr. Potts as she fed Roman some slices of apple. After changing into a fresh frock after her strenuous fencing lesson, she had wandered the gardens, eventually finding herself in the stables. The air was warm, smelling of sweet hay as the horses were being lovingly tended to. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

He chuckled in amusement. "Are you making your rounds?"

Petting the velvet nose she offered up some more apple. "Trying to. I wanted to see my friend, make sure he's feeling better?"

"He's fine. Like I said, everyone and everything that was under the curse caught a bit of something after it was lifted." He explained. "It's a funny thing."

"It's been ten years, maybe everyone has to adjust?" She offered.

"The prince didn't get sick though."

"True, but he wasn't an object." Being nudged by a big snout snuffling for treats, she let Roman smell and lick her hands to show they were empty. "And any rate, I'm glad he's feeling better. Do you think he could be saddled this afternoon?"

Mr. Potts shook his head. "Sorry, Belle. The cold showed us that ol' Roman's getting a bit long in the tooth. He's out to pasture now, though you're welcome to come and see him in his retirement."

Nodding her head she ran her hand up the side of the long face. "You didn't tell me you were an old man." She told the horse, listening to a soft knicker reply back. Before she could ask both Mr. Potts how he was doing, a dozen little shoes could be heard thundering up the path.

The stable master grinned. "You better brace yourself for the siege."

Belle laughed as the children raced in, calling out to her, asking her a million questions all at the same time. "Goodness, good morning!"

"Belle! Mum said you're staying over!" Chip exclaimed breathlessly.

"I am!" gathering up the smallest of the group, she tickled her chin. "Should we play or should we have a story?" The bright little faces lit up and suddenly she heard them all cry out what they wanted.
"Alright, alright. How about… we play." She began, setting the little one her up. "And then we have a story after lunch?"

The whole group grinned, talking every which way. Every girl and boy eager to tell to their friend everything that had gone on since her absence.

Belle took Chip's hand and turned to Mr. Potts, wide grin on her face. "Sorry, I think I'm being kidnapped."

"Go see to our teacups, we can talk later."

"The end."

The former teacups all gazed up at Belle on the rug, little faces sinking at the story being over. They had played outside until they were breathless, then been fed by the cook, and Belle had gotten them to settle for a good hour with the book. The pack, normally in a perpetual state of motion, had patiently munched on warm cookies while she read the tale.

"Can you read some more?" A little girl asked, rocking on the rug where she sat.

"I think that's enough for today." Watching all of the sad expressions, she smiled and closed the book. "I'm here tomorrow, we'll have another story time then. Now, is everyone still reading their own books?"

"Some of the words are too big in mine." One of the boys admitted sheepishly, clutching a reader in his hands as the rest of the castle's children headed out.

"Do you want some help?" She asked, looking at the small book in his hands. "We can take a look right now and work on what's difficult."

"We have to go play pirates." He told her, serious about the next activity as if it were his job. "Can you help tomorrow?"

"Of course." Belle smiled, watching him charge off and tell the others to wait up. Rising from the beast-sized armchair she went put the book back on its shelf, the children's stories shelf, and took the time to tidy up some of the messy stacks on the library tables. Maps and books regarding other nations littered the surfaces, as well as reports Ansell had received to brush him up on the state of world politics and history. She had taken them from his desk and had been reading in her spare time, trying to get a sense of the world outside France as well as it's entangled nobility.

The maps and reports were beginning to help her form some sort of plan. And the more she did, the more she hoped she could convince her father to come along. He was getting older, nonetheless, the idea of starting a life far away without him made her heart sick. He needed to be there for all of the important milestones, and Belle was also suspicious about how the Duke would retaliate when he found his heir had disappeared. The worry that often sunk to the bottom of her stomach, keeping her from concentrating on other activities and plans.

Brushing the fears away, Belle skimmed over the maps and sighed while shuffling a stack of notes.

The door opened and her father came in with his easel and other supplies. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything?"

"No, of course not. Still life?"
"This room is so beautiful, I'm a bit surprised I haven't done anything in here." He explained, carefully setting his supplies on a table and resting the easel against it. Unrolling a drop cloth, Maurice stooped and began to smooth it out.

Well aware his knees weren't what they used to be, Belle walked over and helped. Unrolling the other rag and laying his paints atop, the pulling on a corner of the drop cloth and setting up the easel. "Thank you, Dear." Adjusting his glasses, he watched her expression, gears turning behind her eyes. "Anything exciting for the rest of the day?"

"I want to catch up with Mrs. Potts, then I have a few books waiting." She explained, leaning against the table. "I need to keep myself busy."

"Sounds like you have a plan. If you need me you know where to find me."

"Belle!" Mrs. Potts shooed her away from the silverware. "I can't just stand here and do nothing while you work." She told her friend, taking a polishing cloth. Sitting in the servant's quarters, the royal silver was laid out in neat rows, each piece awaiting a thorough polishing to bring out its gorgeous gleam. "I'm not a princess."

"But you will be." She watched the young woman's face fall. "Oh, you've never thought of it? Where this is going? Once we find a work around you won't be hiding from nobility while he's off placating the court. You'll be married and coronated and you'll be the mistress of the house. The Princess, and then the Duchess."

The color left Belle's cheeks. "Oh, I can't see myself so formal." Shaking her head she winced discomfort towards the notion at the very thought of being so constricted both in fashion and in tradition. "Not all the time at least."

Mrs. Potts studied the young woman. Not a royal presence, but a strong one. It was hard to imagine the girl done up like a noble. Silks and wigs and corsets. Her bloomers were showing from her tucked in skirts, and her boots were stained from rain water. "You'll learn, you know. We're all here to help when you're finally a princess. And you'll only have to be formal when the occasion arises. No need to stick you in a silk dress every day."

Belle relaxed in relief with Mrs. Potts' reassurances, having grown accustomed to the idea that she and Ansell would never inherit the title. Picking up a fork, she carefully worked in a dollop of polish. "Your father told me you'd like to teach." Changing the subject tactfully, she watched the young woman brighten immediately.

Chin tilted down to the silverware, her eyes fluttered up as a wide smile spread from ear to ear. "Yes, I'd love to."

"You do a fine job with the children here, why don't you start something in the library?"

"That's certainly been suggested, but I'd like to stay in town." Carefully buffing out the polish she set a serving spoon to the side. "The children need to be able to walk from their houses and I'd like to be able to stay near home. At the very least our prince can ride back in the afternoon."

Belle didn't catch the suspicion winding across the housekeeper's face. The youngsters were rather fond of escaping the palace and royal trappings for a far less luxurious existence.
"Yes," Mrs. Potts began. "He does seem to fancy going back to your house after a long d-" The sounds of horses coming up the path filtered in through the open windows and drew their attention. Getting up, they both went to the windows, discovering a small procession of horses and wagons headed up the path. "Looks as if our Prince has done a bit of shopping." She exhaled, knowing it would be a considerable amount of unpacking. "I'd suspect there's probably something in there for you."

Belle's lips twitched, missing Ansell, but mildly curious as to what the train brought. "You think he wrote a letter?"

"Well it wouldn't hurt to look now would it?"

The procession stopped near the side of the castle, between the kitchen courtyard and the stables. Servants filtered out to help unpack, John and his workers coming to meet the newest additions to the stables. Skipping down the steps, Belle looked over the caravan as she wandered up to a bright eyed filly, reaching up and giving the horse a curled set of fingers to sniff. She noticed the elegant, fine boned, wild eyed horses from the sultans of Arabia tossing their manes and pawing at the dirt. And there were the thick, heavy Boulonnais draft horses of pure white for the carriages bobbing their necks and snuffling the stable boys for oats.

"I don't think he bought enough." John joked as he was given an envelope. Taking out his reading glasses, he broke the seal and pulled out a letter and a long ledger. "Oh, well this makes things easy." shuffling the papers, he skimmed both. "Belle, it says here you're to take first pick." he spoke up, breaking her concentration. "And not for loan, a horse and saddle for just you."

Belle observed the small, extravagant herd. Flashy and prideful. Feeling a soft snout bump her shoulder, she turned to the sturdy coppery bay she had gravitated to. Out of the entire lot, the filly appeared unremarkable next to all of the equine grandeur. Robust, thick boned enough to pull a cart, yet not too big to ride. "You look friendly." She told the horse. "And sensible." Carefully scratching a cheek before running a palm down the horse's thick neck, watching to check for any temperament issues.

"You want that Norman Cobb?" John asked, knowing the answer for the girl who was more about substance over style.

"I think we'll get along." being the recipient of a soft knicker, she patted the strong neck of the sweet horse that nudged and bothered her for pets and watched as the coachmen and the footmen unloaded crates and bags from the wagon. "This is quite the shopping spree."

"I think all the nobles are encouraged to make purchases when they're in the company of their peers." Mr. Potts explained as he directed his workers to stable the new horses. "Take those over there, James."

"It would show off their wealth." She agreed as she pieced it together.

"There's a saddle for Mademoiselle Belle." One of the footmen noted as they hauled a new rig, tooled with fine roses on the leather, down from the wagon over to the Cobb.

"I think the prince made a guess you'd choose her." John chuckled. "Looks like it's made to be fitted to that filly."

"I suppose he knows my taste." Belle watched the beautiful harness and blanket come down as well. Gently being nosed, she took a carrot from a stable boy and bribed her new companion. "And what's
"Viola," John announced as he read the ledger for the horses. "And there's a note here saying he thought you might find that amusing?"

Smiling and shaking her head, Belle held onto Viola's halter and began to recite to the horse. "Make me a willow cabin at your gate, And call upon my soul within the house. Write loyal cantons of contemnèd love, And sing them loud even in the dead of night-

"What was that, Belle?"

"Nothing, Mr. Potts. The prince is just right, it's amusing." Belle watched the crates upon crates of goods being taken into the house. Tilting her head to the side, she watched as three men came out from one of the carriages, looking around the countryside in wonder. Handing Viola over to be stabled, she dusted the fur off of her fingers and walked towards the gentlemen that Mrs. Potts was bustling over to.

"My goodness! We weren't expecting guests!" The Englishwoman exclaimed as she hurried down the steps. "Oh you poor men, I'm having them set up rooms right now. We'll get you settled in no time at all."

"Thank you, Madame-?" An older gentleman with well-worn hands he laced together prompted.

"Mrs. Potts, please," frazzled she had been given no warning, she quickly snapped her fingers and pointed towards the door, sending her maids scurrying away to prepare rooms and warn the kitchen. "Welcome to the castle. May I ask why you've been sent by His Grace?"

"I am Monsieur Savatier." Giving a small bow, he tipped his cap. "I'm the cobbler from the Villanueve His Grace has sent. I was told the children were to be fitted for boots, and to fit the rest of the house too if they are so inclined. At the Prince's cost."

Mrs. Potts drew her hand to her bosom, eyes in shock. "Oh, that sweet, wonderful boy! You're going to make many parents happy, Monsieur." Turning, she eyed a more severe man who was cautiously eyeing the footmen removing carefully marked crates. "And Monsieur, what do we owe the pleasure?"

Turning, a bit taken aback from being broken away from his concentration, he bowed. "Monsieur Fétique, the optometrist. I was sent from Paris, I'm supposed to examine a Henry Cogsworth and craft him new glasses? And examine and produce eyewear for anyone else that requires it."

A warm, astonished smile pulled at the corners of Belle's lips as Mrs. Potts was in a fit of disbelief. She mused about Ansell's generous heart while being so far away from the people he loved. Wanting to take care of them all, his money not going to beautiful things his heart desired, but gifts to help his family.

"I'm here for a Belle Dujardin?" A graying man said, clutching a leather case.

Staring at him curiously, Belle stepped forward. "That's me?"

"Mademoiselle." He smiled, taking off his hat and dipping. "Jean Martel, professor of literature at Sorbonne. Though I do also dabble in philosophy and history. I was told by Prince Anselme you needed a teacher?"

Brown eyes widening in shock, Belle froze as if she had been struck upside the head.
"I've been instructed to hold classes in the library." He explained, shifting his bag of teaching materials. Watching the young woman, slack-jawed, slowly come around.

A grin broke across her face. "You're really from Sorbonne?" It took everything not to laugh in disbelief.

"One of the newer professors, but yes." He nodded, watching her quietly reel in delight. "I was told you love Shakespeare? I wrote an entire textbook on The Bard. However, I do hope we can discuss other topics."

That dear, sweet, goofy man of hers. She wanted to grab Ansell by the waistcoat and kiss him. Or scream, she truly wanted to scream but it would startle the guests and send Mrs. Potts into a fit. Placing a palm over her mouth she giggled ever so slightly as it was impossible to not let something out before bowing. Monsieur Martel taking her hand and kissing the knuckles. "I look forward to our studies."

"As do I, I heard you're quite well read."

"Probably not as well read as one of your students at the university." She replied. "But I'd love to show you the library later this afternoon."

"More for you- Oh no wait… Oh NO."

Belle furrowed her brows in mild concern as the rest of the staff turned to their stable master's exclamation. "Monsieur Martel, I do hate to be so rude however I think I need to go see if I can be of assistance. Perhaps we can talk later?"

"Of course," he bowed. "I should see where I'm being housed."

"Monsieur!" Cogsworth called out to the professor at the top of the stairs, in a tizzy and unprepared.

Heading over to the carriage of goods, Belle dodged the crates and sacks of things being hauled away and raised a brow to John blustering and arguing with the driver.

"No, you'll have to take it back-"

"Ha! I'm not doing that."

"We're not taking it!"

"I can't simply take something back to the prince. He places things where he sees fit."

Belle stood on her tiptoes to peer over the driver and see what was hiding behind his feet.

Big footed, wet eyed, whimpering from not being cuddled the puppy's ears fell back. Unsure of the angry voices and new surroundings it slunk under the legs of the driver.

"Why can't the castle have a dog?" She asked as the driver scooped the large pup up.

"It's not the castle." Mr. Potts sighed, hanging his head. "The ledger says it's for Chip."

Cocking her head ever so slightly, she waited for the answer.

"Mrs. Potts would crucify me if I gave that to 'im." He lamented, rubbing the bridge of his red nose. "He's brought in all sorts of creatures, and he's terrible at taking care of them. You know how many skinny lizards I've found in jars? Birds with dirty cages? Fish floating in a bowl? He had a mouse"
once, forgot to lock the cage and Capitane got a hold of the poor thing."

Belle grimaced. "Oh."

"We have a deal with him. No pets at least until he's ten, and even then it's something simple."
Sighing heavily, the stable master dragged his hand across his face. "She'll kill me she will. And the prince hates hounds, I have no idea why he'd gift it to Chip. I can't see His Grace choosing to get one."

"His Grace saved the dog." One of the coachmen explained, drawing their attention. "It was to be culled. He took it instead of allowing the kennel master to take care of it."

Belle looked at the pup, squirming and whimpering. Unwanted, unhappy. Belle couldn't stand it staring at the dog beginning to cry. Reaching out, she took the gangly thing and cuddled it to her chest so it settled. "Here, let me see." Dodging a pink tongue she ran her fingers through the wiry black fur, noting how big the feet were. "I can probably find a home somewhere in the village if that's alright with everyone."

The driver baulked. "But the Master wrote-"

"The Master can deal with me." Scratching the flopping ears and listening to a happy grunt Belle adjusted the pink bow around its' neck. "You won't get in trouble, I promise."

The Coachman grumbled as Mr. Potts breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, you just saved my hide."

"I had to do something or else you wouldn't be long for this world." She joked. "Do you need any help? It looks like there's quite a few things to sort out."

"We have it under control, but thank you, Belle." John's eyes wandered over to the castle. "Maybe go see to the Missus? She's gonna be fit to be tied with a group of guests no one told her were coming."

"I can certainly do that." Turning, Belle realized it would be awkward hauling around the pup all day. Reaching over she took a length of thin rope that had been left dangling on a rail and tied it into a slip lead, setting the pup down and securing it. Tousling the floppy ears, she stood and looked back up at the driver. Voice ever hopeful. "You wouldn't happen to have a letter for me would you?"

Pulling a stack of envelopes out of his breast pocket, the driver leaned down and handed her one of the thicker ones. "There you are, Mademoiselle."

"Merci." Belle grinned, tucking it into a pocket on her apron.

"And take this ledger to Mrs. Potts." John told her, handing over the list. "We got what's ours, I suspect she'll need to go through it for the house. But! Make sure she knows about the puppy not being Chip's. I still want to live."

Laughing, she tucked it in the pocket. "Of course." Feeling a net nose press against her calf Belle turned towards the castle. "Come on girl, we're needed elsewhere."

Maurice wandered down the hall in his painting smock, a smudge of umber on his sleeve. The commotion had drawn him away from his still life, and before him was the castle in a state of hustle. Boxes, crates, and bags were being brought into one of the parlors, strangers were being shuffled upstairs, footmen and maids were racing as if Cogsworth had threatened their hides and Mrs. Potts had said the same yet truly meant it. He could hear horses and voices, orders being shouted from outside as the machine that ran the estate churned to life and began to run once more despite its
"Hurry, Giselle!" Mrs. Potts ordered from the parlor where the cargo was being brought. One of the maids darted out, stacks of linens piled in her arms.

Belle raced inside with a large black puppy at her heels.

Maurice furrowed his brows.

She turned and saw how suspicious he was of the sight before him.

Silently he pointed to the dog, eyebrows lifting.

"She's not mine," Belle reassured, the puppy sniffing and straining on its lead.

"Uh, hmmn." He pursed his lips.

She frowned. "It's not like that, I'm going to find her a home."

Scratching his whiskered chin Maurice was wholly, quietly, unconvinced.

Belle ignored her father's expression. "Do you know where Mrs. Potts is?"

"That way." He motioned to the parlor. "You know I'm going to want the entire story as to why you have a small horse on a rope."

"She's not my dog." Walking past him, the hound slipped and hopped across the marble floors, nearly tripping over itself.

"I didn't say a dog, with those feet that thing's clearly going to grow up to be a horse." Maurice didn't know whether to be amused at his daughter's denial or mildly stressed at the thought of the furry invader that was most definitely not going to end up sleeping next to the fireplace at the house.

With a roll of her eyes, Belle slipped into the parlor to go chase down the harried Mrs. Potts.

Chapter End Notes

Ugh, I'm late again. And I wouldn't have been! But work was like... not great. Like, get home at 5 AM when you're ACTUALLY supposed to get home and edit at 11 PM not great.

That said, I feel like I'm hitting the stride again. My last couple of chapters have felt very rough writing wise and editing wise, but I think we're past that. I did an extra pass on this one just to make sure since I wasn't feeling in my usual groove for those others.

Notes:
- Viola: Is the heroine from Shakespeare's Twelfth Night. Belle recites one of her most famous lines to the horse because Ansell was right, he knows her humor.

- Dujardin: I struggled with the proper surname for Maurice and Belle as I knew it would eventually come up. That said Dujardin means "from the garden"

- Sarbonne: Formally known as the University of Paris. Quite the place! Known for
theology and philosophy with many royals, intellectuals, scientists and popes receiving an education there.

And while I've been really off schedule here, I just want to thank everyone for commenting, bookmarking, kudo-ing and everything else. I'm so glad everyone is still reading and I hope I can continue to entertain. If you have thoughts, questions, theories, and any kind of feedback be it positive or negative, just write it in the comments below.

See you next week!
“Thank you.” Taking the tea tray Belle walked over to Mrs. Potts who was eagerly unpacking crates and going through Ansell's ledger. Appearing a bit worn, exhausted from having guests spring on her, tired from having to boss around the staff to tend to the guests, and handling the dinner since Lumiere was gone the Englishwoman soldiered on.

“Oh, Dearie.” She said once she noticed the service. “I can do that.”

“It's for you, not me.” Taking a silver bowl of the finest kitchen scraps off the tray, Belle set it on the floor. The pup skidded over and bolted down her meal, tail whipping back and forth. “Sit, you need a break.”

Not even protesting, Mrs. Potts sunk into a chair and exhaled tiredly. “You didn't need to. You've done so much with helping to unpack.” Looking over towards the dog chewing on a piece of crate wood, she was grateful it wasn't her son's. “Isn't she a gangly thing.”

“I'm not quite sure why she's here.” Setting the tray down, she carefully flipped over the cups. Watching the puppy for a moment before pouring the tea, Belle furrowed her brows in thought over the entire situation. “Or, more specifically, why Ansell was even around her. He only likes Frou-Frou because he's about as harmless as a mop. He doesn't even like to go near anything bigger than a basset hound when he's walking down the street.”

Mrs. Potts took the cup, nodding appreciatively. “Well, regardless of the situation his big heart prevailed yet again. And thank you, Dearie.”

“You're very welcome.” Adding cream to her tea she took a quick sip and headed back to the pile. “Speaking of big heart, let's see what else is in here.” Pulling a trunk over, Belle popped the clasps and opened it up. Bolts of fabrics, all different weights, colors, and patterns, were neatly tucked inside with spoons of thread and a large satchel on top.

"Heavens," leaning forward, she watched as Belle opened the satchel and pulled out a note.

"It's all buttons." Opening the note, she skimmed and words and chuckled. "He noticed the children have grown and wanted to make sure there was good fabric for new clothes."

“Oh, that sweet man.” The Englishwoman cried out happily. “First the cobbler for the children's shoes, and the optometrist for Cogsworth and your professor! My goodness, from the look of it we could clothe them for the next few years.”

Running her fingers across a bolt of wool for winter trousers and dresses, Belle shook her head slowly, smiling at his thoughtfulness.

“He's such a good boy.” Mrs. Potts exclaimed, gleeful at the prospect of the parents not having to worry about good clothes and shoes for the catle's little pack. “Everything he sent is essentially to
care for the staff. He even had Lumiere choose new livery.”

“I feel like this means quite a few sewing projects.”

“Well, we certainly have the time right now. Oh! There were some packages for your father. We'll have to make sure he gets them. Do you two need new shoes or an eye exam? I reckon the Master won't mind. You're both practically family at this point.”

Being considered family made filled her with warmth from the pit of her stomach outward. “You know, Papa could use an eye exam. And both of us need our boots re-soled.”

“We'll just add you to the list.”

One of the workers came in, red faced and glistening from hauling all of the cargo. ”Mrs. Potts,”

“Yes, Gifford?”

“M’am, there's a mattress but it seems the tag has fallen off and it's missing from the ledger. It's too small for the royal chambers and none of the other rooms need a fresh mattress. Also, it's a bit plain.”

The women looked at one another, exchanging the same puzzled expression for a beat. They struggled with the mattress, mouths pursed in thought.

Mrs. Potts shrugged. “I have no idea where that-”

Belle’s head snapped towards Gifford as she realized what Ansell had purchased it for. Beginning to speak, she suddenly stopped and blushed a deep red.

Mrs. Potts stared at the young woman in a prompting fashion.

Clearing her throat, Belle said quietly. “That's for the cottage. So his feet don’t dangle off the bed.”

Highly amused, the Englishwoman's eyebrows shot up as a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth and eyes. “You don’t say. Well then we'll pack it for when you return and install it then.” Bowing, he headed out. Mrs. Potts chortled at Belle’s embarrassment. “You two a bit cramped?”

“Mine isn't made for sharing,” Belle explained, distracting herself by staring at her tea.

“He’s certainly settling in over there. Seems like he prefers it more than the castle.” Mrs. Potts fished "Sends Cogsworth into a fit when he comes in looking like a woodsman and not a prince.

“I think his time as the beast changed him.” Belle hedged. “Ten years without extravagance-”

“Makes you want to live in the village and learn how to work?”

At a loss for words, Belle’s mouth fell open.

Mrs. Potts looked at the young woman, waiting for a response.

She was still incredibly quiet.

“Dearie-”

“He just likes… He- We… We’re never going to have a royal wedding.” Belle finally floundered out an answer. “I’m not naive, I’m a farm girl. Mrs. Potts, we’re well aware my station keeps me from marrying him as the future Duke. It won’t be allowed by his father, by the court, by anyone.” She
huffed, trying to steady herself as it all came out. "No amount of wishful thinking will change that.”
Reaching up she clasped a hand over her eyes. “I’m not a princess and I never will be.” Taking a seat her body tensed at the thought.

“So your solution is to have the Master give up his inheritance?” She asked somberly.

Belle fidgeted her hands into her lap. “It’s what he wants-”

“He’s never worked a day in his life.”

“He’s learning-”

“He’s running away to play house with you, L-”

“He’s trying!” Belle snapped in frustration, face hot. “It’s not just playing house. He’s trying so very hard to learn how to work and to be apart of a family you help support and how to run a house. He’s trying Mrs. Potts. We’re trying.” Shaking her head she looked away so her tears weren't seen. “He’s doing so well.”

The Englishwoman felt a pang of guilt for pushing her. Reaching out, she patted Belle’s hand soothingly. “I didn’t mean to upset you, Love. But I ‘ave to prod a bit. There’s trying to plan for the future and then there are flights of fancy.”

“We’re not taking this idly,” Belle replied firmly. “We know what him leaving means, we’re preparing, we’re looking for a new place to call home, Ansell’s at court right now reading reports because he wants to know what country would be the safest for us. And he’s learning about herbalism because that’s what he loves. I wouldn’t be surprised if he wanted to be an apothecary,”

Studying the dirt under her nails she sighed. “And I can repair things, I get paid for that already. If Papa comes he makes money off of portraits, which means all three of us can support the house.” Pursing her lips she managed. “I know we can do it. I know it’s not what anyone wants. It’s not the happy ending where the prince and the princess rule over the lands. But I think it’s our happy ending.”

Nodding her head in thought, Mrs. Potts wet her lips. The pain was clear on Belle’s face, that look of trying to find hope and to hold onto it. “I must admit, we haven’t known how to handle you two.”

Belle slowly lifted her head.

“As much as we want you to be our princess, and as positive as we’ve tried to stay, we do worry about you two, often.” she confessed, rolling her thumb over the rim of her teacup.

“It’s his father.” The pup padded over and put its front legs on the chair cushion, allowing her to toy with the floppy black ears.

Mrs. Potts sighed heavily. “We worry about your safety with him. If you got married before we found a fix-”

“If we ever get married.” Belle corrected. “Mrs. Potts, we'll never have some lavish ceremony. If we get married while we're still in France it'll be in secret. And it'll be a secret until we leave.”

Watching the young woman carefully, her lips pursed into a thin line. “Life is much harder without the security of wealth.”

Shrugging, she allowed the puppy to lick her fingers. “It's all I've ever known and he's getting used to it.”
“He needs to learn a lot more before he's used to it.” She sighed, shaking her head sadly, tears rushing her eyes at the thought of her Dears leaving.

Belle leaned forward, upset she had hurt her friend. “Mrs. Potts-”

“You two would be such good rulers.” Voice cracking, she fished out a handkerchief and dabbed her eyes. “You’d be kind and generous and I know you, Love. You’d rule just as much as he would. You’d take care of your people.” Huffing, her face turned bright red. “That damn man. His wretched father.”

Dipping her head she swallowed thickly. “Even if we could, I don't know if I'd want to.”

Mrs. Potts waited for an answer.

Shaking her head she reluctantly forced out. “Mrs. Potts, if we have children. If we have a son? An heir.” Belle looked out the window, her mind years away. “From everything Ansell's gone through; from what I've heard and have seen with my own eyes? I'd never want my son to have those expectations placed on him before he was even born. And I'd never want a daughter to be confined either. They'd be trapped in this- this system.”

A tense, sad silence cut through the room. Belle refused to make eye contact, Mrs. Potts staring at the worry canvassing the tired young face.

“I have to be protective.” Belle declared. “It feels like the court and all of this royal… obligation… it wants to take him away and everything we want.”

She admired her ferociousness. So protective of their prince and their future. Reaching over, she patted a hand soothingly. “He's going to be the biggest fool when you have a little one. That boy is the silliest lovestruck thing around you. He’ll melt with a child.

Belle laughed at the relief she was being given. “He is.” Sniffling back her fearful tears she cupped her mouth and laughed with her friend. “He's going to be a mess,” Belle exclaimed, thinking about how high strung her love was. Settling into a quiet beat, she smiled slowly. “And I want that. I want that for us. I want him to be happy, I want him to do something he enjoys, and I want him to be beside himself when we have a family.”

Mrs. Potts took a moment, the gears turning in her head. “We'll have to put him through his paces when he gets back.” She planned. “Mr. Potts can teach him what he knows, he was a fine hunter and man of the forest in his youth. And he'll live with you, be the man of the house so he gets used to being the man of the house.”

Belle's mouth twitched at the thought of Ansell, sweet, dear Ansell, being the man of the house. All she could see was him sitting at the table with her father, greeting her with kisses, and asking if he could help with housework. A far cry from a man hunting all day and demanding she tend to the home; baring his brood while he shot animals, drank after work, and most definitely womanized his way through life.

“Love?”

Pulling herself out of her thoughts she nodded her head. “I agree. Though we should still have Noel and he needs to come up to the castle for his responsibilities.”

“Of course. We want 'im to leave the village better than he found it. I'll have to tell Cogsworth and Lumiere, we'll get right to it.”
Brown eyes ever so earnest she said sincerely, “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Giving the hand a squeeze she fought back tears. “Oh Dearie, we love you two to pieces. We’ll do anything to keep you safe and sound.” looking to the doorway she smiled. “Does your father know?”

Her face fell. “He's dragging his feet on whether or not she should come along.”

“Silly man, how is he supposed to walk you down the aisle and see his grandchildren? Maurice!” The man peering into the parlor jumped a bit. “What in God's name has you keeping from following Belle and the Master?”

Maurice entered, eyeing the piles of supplies and thoughtful gifts. “So we're having this conversation?” Wandering over to the two, he stared at the women suspiciously.

“And why aren't you coming along?” Mrs. Potts asked firmly.

Shifting his supplies in his hands, he frowned. “Because I'm old. I can't just uproot myself so quickly and learn a new language-”

“The Prince knows six languages. Who says you have to learn anything?”

“I know two.” Belle offered. “And I’m learning Italian.”

“Yes? They can help you, and you're a brilliant artist. Why would you want to miss out on these two silly lovelies having a life together?”

Opening his mouth, any attempt to form words was met with a reproachful scowl. Huffing, his brows knit. “I-”

Nearly rising out of her seat, the Englishwoman gave him an expression normally reserved for Chip when she caught him running too close to a vase. “Quit being so stubborn, Maurice. You're not a mule, you're a man.”

“With this castle you're possibly jinxing me.” He quipped, turning to his daughter. “Was this your plan all along? Siccing Mrs. Potts on me?”

Belle sipped her tea, relaxing. “No, but I’m rather happy with it.”

Frowning, he shifted his weight.

“Is it at least working?” Mrs. Potts asked. “Because if it isn’t so help me.”

“I'm being swayed.” He reassured, knowing it was best to preserve his own hide.

“Oh good.” Easing herself, Mrs. Potts rose and shuffled over. “So I can give you your gifts from the Master.”

Doing a double take her father followed the housemaid over. “We're you going to hold out until I changed my mind?”

“You would've gotten it all at Noel.” She reassured, digging through the mountain of crates as Belle followed.

“I think it's safe to assume it's thoughtful,” Belle said, peering in curiously.
“True.” Maurice nodded to the side. “You did get a pony, professor, and puppy.”

Hearing the word puppy, the hound bounced over and let out a whine.

Exasperated by his teasing, she let out a sigh. “She's not my puppy.”

Chuckling, Maurice watched as Mrs. Potts handed him a wooden box.

“I think it’s all packed neatly in there.”

Carefully, he lifted the lid to find the jars of paint and bundles of brushes carefully tucked in straw. Eyes widening and mouth slack, he stared at the bounty in disbelief. “These… These are the best.” Reaching in he picked up a jar of blue oil paint and studied it carefully. “Do you know how expensive this is?” Seeing how confused his daughter was he blurted. “It’s very. I've never been able to afford this. And these brushes!” Setting the jar down he pulled out a handful, all different sizes and shapes. “These are sable. They’re not cheap.”

Belle peered into the box and noticed more jars. “Isn’t that for enamel?”

Maurice dug through the straw. “It is-

“For your music boxes.” She smiled.

“And there’s a roll of new tools in here.” He exclaimed, untying the roll and inspecting the new hardware. “I can do even more delicate work with these. They’re so fine.” Looking up to his daughter, he grinned. “You know, he’s something else.”

“He is.” She agreed, adoring her father’s excitement.

“There's a roll of canvas too.” Mrs. Potts said, hauling the roll out of a crate.

Cupping a hand over his mouth, he turned to Belle in disbelief.

“He loves you, Papa.” She told him. “He certainly wouldn't spend that much on someone he didn't.”

“That boy.” Exhaling in disbelief, Maurice turned to her happily. “That dear boy.”

A tender little smile played on Mrs. Potts’ lips, happy that the Master was affectionately known as the boy.

Carefully closing the box, he sighed. “He's a good one.”

“He's sweet.” Belle agreed. “Let's get your new supplies upstairs. And talk about you getting an eye exam.”

The conversation was wonderful.

The dinner table had been full between Belle and Maurice, Stephane and Gustave, and the men sent by Ansell. The kitchen had served up an elegant seven-course meal, and everyone had been engaging. Belle had some of the best conversations about literature, politics, and fencing of her entire life.

Stuffed, full of expensive wine, and tired from talking Belle sighed heavily. Her thoughts wandered to the letter on the dresser she had placed there when she has changed into her dinner attire.
“I need to retire.” She announced to the table. Turning to Professor Martel, she offered. “Though I would like to show you the library, even if I may have to leave you to your own devices there.”

He dipped his head. “I would be honored.”

Rising, the pair left the table, the other bowing to the Mademoiselle as they departed.

“This library seems to be quite the place,” Martel told her as they climbed the stairs towards the West Wing. “I've heard it's yours?”

“It is.” eyeing the door Belle smiled. “It's very dear to me. My favorite place in the castle.”

“From the sound of it you're quite the reader.”

“I read less than I want to.” She confessed. “I was here for a year and I devoured so many books with Ans- Bea- His Grace. I miss having so much time in the library. I was nearly finished with all the works of Shakespeare.” Opening the doors Belle gestured for him to enter.

Martel gaped at the expansive collection as he took himself to the center of the massive room, glowing from the fireplaces and radiant with leather covers. “Mon Dieu.”

“I think I spend more time in here than any other place.” She admitted. “Please have a look around, if there's anything specific you're looking for I should be able to find it. However, anything within the last ten years won't be in the collection.”

Mouth agape, he slowly nodded his head. “Spectacular.”

“Please borrow whatever you want.” Gesturing to the floor to ceiling collection of books, Belle smiled tiredly.

“And this is where we'll hold our lessons?”

“Yes, unless you want another location.”

“No, no.” Voice wandering off, his eyes widened as he caught the titled on the spines of the books. “This is wonderful.”

Admiring her room Belle grinned sleepily. “It is.” Sinking on her knees she stifled back a yawn. “I must leave, but please do take the time to look around. As I said before you're welcome to borrow whatever books you please.”

Nodding dumbly, the professor’s eyes kept roaming the bookcases upon bookcases. “Thank you.” Realizing the Mademoiselle was leaving, he abruptly turned and bowed. “I wish you a good night.”

“And to you as well.” Carefully shutting the doors, Belle ventured further into the West Wing. Reaching the royal chambers she shut the door and began stripping out of her clothes, donning one of Ansell's shirts. Taking the letter and heading to the enormous bed curling under the covers she broke the seal and pulled the letter out of the envelope.

Blushing as she began to read his passionate words.

Chapter End Notes
As always, thank you for the reads, faves, kudos, comments, and bookmarks. I'm so glad this story entertains you all as much as I enjoy writing it. And there's been some question from a few people about this so I want to clear it up: despite the title being rather negative, there IS a pleasant ending at the end of this enchanted rainbow. Pinky promise and all that.

Want to ask questions? Have thoughts? Opinions? Like bits of the chapter? Want to tell me like it is? Give me what for? Chide me for being so late to post? I'll definitely read it (and most likely respond) in the comments below.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I don't know why anyone would consider Romeo and Juliet an amazing romance. They die! There's no happy ending for them, Shakespeare has so many comedy romances that end on a brighter note."

"See! That's what I'm saying." Ansell slapped his knee, taking a sip of his tea as he sat at on the couch across from the harlots. "Tatienne, I keep telling her that poisoning yourself in the name of true love isn't a great ending. But she's frustratingly opinionated."

Ygraine rolled her eyes as she swallowed her bite of pastry from the lavish breakfast spread the prince had ordered up for the three of them. "You like the fact that she's opinionated."

Eyes darting sheepishly to the side, he fiddled with the handle of his teacup. "You have me there."

"You should tell her our opinions, you know." The other teased, tugging up her slouching robe. "Oh yes." He sighed dryly. "Darling, the prostitutes who come to my apartment once a day agree with me regarding Shakespeare's romances. Here's why we're right and you're wrong." Leaning back the blue eyes gazed out through the spotless window and at the immaculate gardens. "I'll have you know she may be petite but she's a lot stronger than she looks."

"She can't be that bad."

"You've never seen her handle a sword."

Lumiere quietly slipped through the door, watching his master in his robe tossing a few grapes into his mouth while the harlots sat on the couch opposite from him also in casual attire. "Sire, the Marquise and Sir Francis are outside."

Ansell rose, the women following suit. He glanced over to the bed; messy, used, hinting at a wild night. Walking over to his desk he opened the drawer and took out his purse.

Tatienne pulled a stocking down, wriggling her toes free from it and dropped it errantly on the floor as further evidence. "You know, you don't have to sleep on the couch when we spend the night. We won't bite-"

"You pay us not to." The second prostitute finished, taking a fold of bills from the prince. "You pay us not to."

Ansell smiled tightly. "I'll pass. But it's lovely doing busi-"

Grabbing him by his robe she pulled him in and kissed him, then his neck, leaving a trail of rouge as she reached down and grabbed him by the breeches.

Stumbling back, he nearly snapped in a burst of outrage at being groped.

"Realism." Ygraine reminded, tucking her money into her decolletage and sauntering towards the door.

"See you tomorrow, Your Grace." Plucking her money from his hands the other kissed him as well and raked her fingers through his hair to muss it. "You owe me a game of cards."
Clearing his throat as the pair traipsed off, he tied his robe and began to gather his hair, nodding to Lumiere.

Lucette came in, eyeing the room curiously. "Well, glad to see you're relaxing."

"About time." Francis cleared his throat.

"Still a good deal of tension in me, I assure you." He announced tightly. "And what do I owe the honor? May I offer breakfast?"

"I'll take coffee." She said, walking to his sitting area.

Francis waved the offer away. "I'm fine. And we come to offer an olive branch."

"For what?" He asked, gently easing himself back into his chair.

"Things have been tense with us since our talk about finances." She said, smoothing her skirt. "I love you terribly and I don't wish to keep dancing around the subject."

"And I concede as well." Francis draped himself onto a chaise. "it's your money, father just used all of these years to distribute it elsewhere."

Carefully pouring his aunt a cup, he glanced over to the two. "Thank you. And I apologize for being so terse."

"Are you going on the hunt this morning?" She asked.

His brother snickered. "Has no choice, Auntie."

Ansell's face dropped and he bristled. "Yes. Not that I'll be any good at it."

"You don't have to be." She reminded him. "You just have to look gallant, be friendly, and flirt at the mademoiselles."

"Drinking helps. Makes it more fun."

"Ever since my foray into the furred I have a new outlook on hunting." Drumming his fingers on the velvet arm of the chair, his eyes blazed at the thought. He had successfully avoided so many hunts while at court, however, the Duke was finally putting his foot down. "As for the women, I thought he would be pleased with my current company. They're certainly enjoying themselves."

Her mouth twitched, and she stared at him as if he were daft. "You may be bedding your fille de joie but at the end of the day you aren't exactly sniffing around for someone who could be your wife."

The blue eyes rolled. "This again-"

Francis scowled, his voice chastizing. "You make it sound so painful."

"You can't just soothe that prickly man by ravaging a prostitute." She reminded him. "It's been over a week, Nephew. He wants a woman of noble birth and a stable of grandchildren to inherit his fortune."

Slinging his knee over his leg, Francis sighed. His brother so unreasonable and stubborn over some farm girl anyone else would have shown the door to the morning after. "And if you don't find the former he'll find one for you. I can say that from personal experience."
Curling his lip in disdain, Ansell huffed.

Lucette gave him a look of a mother scolding a child. "I know this isn't the conversation you wanted over breakfast-"

"It's not the conversation I want any part of the day."

There was a long, heavy silence as Ansell lamented over the pressure of finding a suitable woman. She watched him shrewdly. Such a proud yet lovesick young man. "You know, that Saxon girl, when you manage to lurk outside of your cave she does brighten at the sight of you."

"As one does when they see a meal ticket." He bristled.

"You make it sound like she has the looks of a sea creature that lives in a cave and you bust go on a treacherous quest."

"It doesn't matter, you two. I got home in a week. I've played nice, I certainly have kept my temper in check, and I've done everything that horrid man has wanted just shy of taking a Comtesse as a bride. I need an adjustment period before I jump headlong into marriage, I'm just barely human." He lied, knowing he needed to be home. Wrapped up in Belle, planning for the future with her.

Belle entered the house in a huff, face red, hair wild, knees scraped.

The pup bounced over from her blanket next to the fireplace.

Maurice looked up from his commission. "Fencing lesson go alright?"

"I'm not picking this up as quickly as I thought." She winced, puppy sniffing her all over. The fact she had not progressed quickly stung. Everything in her self-education came so naturally, it was hard to come to terms with lacking the coordination required. And it certainly didn't help when Stephane loved to add some flourish, the showman that he was.

"One can't be good at everything, even you." He reminded her. "I know you have your lesson with Professor Martel this afternoon, while you're at the castle could you go pick up my new glasses? I was told they'd be done today."

"New boots should be in too." She added, going to the laundry basket by the hearth and digging through to find a fresh dress and apron. "I have some errands beforehand, but I'll make sure I bring everything home."

Snuffling the clean laundry, the pup grabbed a stocking and yanked it out of the basket.

Belle grabbed the other end before she could take off.

Maurice watched the pair, the corner of his mouth pulling up as the two had been a consistent source of amusement. "And I believe Pere Robert was looking for you?"

Distracted momentarily, her voice became deep and sharp. "No, drop-"

The pup growled.

"No, no growl-"

Thrashing her head from side to side she snarled.
Belle scowled. "Drop. It."

Ears drooping, the puppy released the stocking and slunk over with her tail between her legs, licking an ankle apologetically.

"Troublemaker." She sighed, picking up the pup with a grunt. The puppy was a welcome, soft friend, yet also one that had a habit of eating anything she could get to. "Oh, you're getting too large for this. And we just brought you back, baby." Grimacing to the tongue bath, she heard her father chuckle.

"That baby's getting awfully big. Sooner or later she's going to knock you down."

"She's getting a new home today." She reassured, setting the pup down and grabbing the clean dress. "One of my many errands before heading to the castle."

The pup padded over to him and he slipped her a little scrap of ham that had come from a breakfast plate. "Anyone, in particular, taking our big-footed friend?"

"She's a wolfhound, I'm sure there's a hunter who'd love her."

As Belle ran upstairs to change he looked down at the young dog, ruffling its ears. "You know, I took your more for a lover than a fighter."

Gazing up at him expectantly, she licked her chops and put an asking paw on his leg.

"Good show!" Francis grinned, swinging down off of his brilliant gold horse.

"Except for Ansell here," slapping his brother's back as the horses were led away, Leon laughed. "You're terrible with a musket, Old Boy."

Shrugging the slimy paw off of his shoulder, Ansell kept his back as straight as a ramrod. Their father was schmoozing nearby, keeping a watchful eye on them no doubt, however, he was so tightly wound he didn't care. "Yes, well the last time I did any hunting it wasn't with a gun." The dogs wound around them, baying and snuffling with their big, wet noses as the other nobles dismounted. It all made him tense up, jaw tightening as a snarl was threatening to surface.

"Lunch?" His older brother asked. "I feel as if I've hardly seen you. We've gone off to other parts of the palace."

The boar was carted away, tongue lolling out the side of its dead mouth. The sight made Ansell's stomach lurch as his palms were slick with sweat. All of the blood crusting around its neck mightly, thick shoulders, and heavy haunches. Deep wounds from the dogs dragging it to the ground for the kill. The squealing still fresh in his ears.

It had died so slow. His jaws had always been so swift.

"Or, you've been avoiding me." Leon quipped.

"Oh, I have " he exhaled gruffly, overwhelmed and barely hanging on. The sounds, the dogs, the smells, the dreadful people crashing through nature for their bloody sport. Turning he found them all laughing, taking little crystal flutes of champagne off silver trays, popping little rounds of toasted bread coated in caviar into their mouths as the women descended upon the men. Their dresses bright, their fans fluttering, the whole lot of them like shimmering butterflies. Shoving Leon aside he stormed off.
The Duke raised a brow.

Scowling, his brother watched his storm off while Francis wandered over. "Ungrateful brat."

Elke slipped towards him, demure and radiant in peach. A worried fix in her brow formed as she reached out. "My Grace are you-"

"Mademoiselle you must excuse me." He huffed.

"Prince Anselme-" she followed.

Darting towards the palace, a sliver of the pack broke off and followed him, barking and trotting along, mouths tinged red with the blood of the boar they had so gleefully torn to shreds.

Whirling around, Ansell, unable to contain himself any longer, bared his teeth and let out a low, inhuman growl.

Drawing their ears back, the canines froze. Several humans did as well.

Elke's eyes widened.

Walking as briskly as possible Ansell made his way to his quarters, ignoring anyone attempting to make pleasantries. Throwing the doors open he charged in, throwing his coat to the floor as Chapeau and Lumiere rushed in an attempt to contain the forthcoming damage. "I'm never doing that AGAIN."

Lumiere gathering up the coat as Chapaeu helped the prince out of his hunting habit. "Your Grace, we're glad to see you managed to get through the h-"

"Those vile, greedy, stupid cretans!" He huffed, tearing off his cravat. "Those damned dogs! I'll be happy if I never have to see a dog ever again."

"A hot bath, Master?" The valet offered.

"With a glass of liquor?" the maitre'd finished. "A generous one."

Ansell's head nodded as he tore off his stifling hot hunting attire. "We'll be home soon." He breathed raggedly, senses firing from the hunt. "We'll be home soon."

The dogs bayed outside and he jumped.

Going about her errands, Belle finally made her way to the fur trader, pelts hanging from the rafters and awnings of his little shed.

Gazing over at the unfamiliar figure in the blue dress, the fur trader strolled over, wiping his thick, scarred hands on a rag. "Mademoiselle?"

"Hello?" She felt claustrophobic surrounded by so many eyeless strips of fur. Tugging the rope serving as collar and leash while the hound was caught up with sniffing all of the wondrous new smells, Belle watched the barrel-chested man lumber over.

"And what brings you here?" He asked, wiping a knife on his apron.

"I... um..." mouth slack at the trade, she glanced down at the puppy. Innocent, untrained to the ways of the hunter. Thinking about how she'd be baited, conditioned, taught to follow the animals of the
forest tirelessly. To run the beasts down. The hound would be enormous. Big enough to battle a wolf.

So big she could have taken on… No.

"Nothing." Belle stammered, shaking her head, trying to act casual yet failing. "I just… got lost?" Backing out of the stall, she pulled the pup along.

His eyes widened when the noticed the house and gasped. "That dog-"

"Oh, she-"

"How much do you want for it?" He slavered, knowing the breed.

"No, she's not for sale. She's mine." Belle told him.

The man scoffed. "And what would a girl do with a hound like that?" Quickly, he came over to the duo. "Come on then, you don't have the slightest clue what you've got. You don't need a handful like that, you need something easy. A little poodle or something." He scoffed, speaking quickly. "Seriously, what do you do with a pup of that pedigree?"

Temper flaring at being patronized, the brown eyes narrowed. "Whatever. I. Want."

Leaving before he could argue back, Belle cut through a flower vendor's tent and briefly, tensely locked eyes with Clothilde. Turning towards the church she weaved away, black pup trotting alongside her dutifully.

"Belle!" Pere Robert grinned as he stopped sweeping the stoop. "You were gone for a spell, how was your trip?"

"It was nice." She replied, winding her way through the market towards him. "A little more well rested. Read a lot of books." Looking down, she peeled back the towel covering up the basket of goods hooked in the crook of her elbow. "Speaking of which, did you ever finish yours? I'd love to talk to you about it."

"On the last chapter." tilting his head ever so slightly he watched her take out a bundle of dried herbs and flowers wrapped in a cloth and tied in a bundle.

"I found a note with this saying it was for you." She explained, watching his eyes brighten in amusement as reached out. "He squirreled all sorts of plants away in the shed." chuckling in amusement towards her dearest, she continued on. "I'm still finding bits and pieces of his collection."

Pressing his nose gently to the bundle, Pere Robert took an appreciative whiff. "Lovely. It'll make a nice tea. Didn't think we had any of these left, that they'd been over-picked since spring." Curiously watching the puppy licking his boot, he smiled gratefully up at his bookworm. "Please tell him when he returns thank you. As for the book, you'll have to come down when I finish. We can have some tea and trade opinions."

Belle's mouth twitched mischievously "You might not want to suggest that, I have an awful lot of them."

Pere Robert chuckled. "And I'll be excited to hear them all. Also, I hope you haven't forgotten my little hint about the Gagne girls. They still could use a teacher."

Pausing, she twisted her hands tightly around the wicker handle. "I'd love to, but-"
Pere Robert leaned in for an answer.

"I know there are other girls as well," She explained slowly, hesitance creeping into her stomach and forming a knot. "And I've been trying to think of a way of being able to teach them all. I was wondering if you had any space available at the church?" Her reluctance, fear, was harder to manage after being bullied so many times. It had all managed to worm its way in over the years. Belle simply believed in putting on a brave face to hide it all. She told herself though it was the moment, the window to at least try for her dream. She had to try.

Turning, he looked at her promptly.

"I'd love to teach them and a few others." Kicking the cobblestones with the toe of her boot she did her best not to be shy about the idea. "A small classroom for girls- and boys- everyone's welcome." She reassured. "But mostly a space for girls to learn since there isn't one in town. Perhaps in the early morning? Only for a few hours of course, not the whole day." Belle added quickly. "I'd pay the church back in some way. I don't have money but you know I'm good for repairs and gardening."

Taking a moment to think it all over, the seconds ticked away, killing Belle as he took his time to respond. "I don't see why the church should charge for a service to the community." He smiled. Her entire face lit like candles on a chandelier. "Is that a yes?"

"I have a small room in the back that's full of some old junk. It's terribly dusty and needs a good scrubbing, but if you're willing to clean it up it's all yours." Grinning, he watched Belle do her best to keep her excitement at an acceptable level for being in public.

"Thank you." She beamed. "Thank you so much."

"It sounds like you have quite a bit of work to do." He chuckled. "And you're aware you're going to run afoul of our illustrious headmaster and his rather narrow viewpoints?"

"Well aware and not afraid."

"That's the spirit."

"He doesn't sleep when those harlots end up spending the night." Chapeau frowned as he and Lumiere watched the prince. Pink-skinned from a searing hot bath, exhausted, mildly drunk, and dozing atop his bed in the middle of the day.

"Realism, mon ami." Lumiere carefully draped a quilt over Ansell, noting his fretful look even in sleep. The tension in his brow, the uneasiness of his breath. The poor prince hadn't had a deep sleep since they had arrived. Nearly a month in he appeared miserable. "I just wish he hadn't been pushed into hunting."

Gathering the elaborate, exquisitely embroidered dinner suit from the guilded amoire, Chapeau quietly walked out of the bedchambers with his companion. "I wish he could leave such anxieties, the beastly ones, behind."

"It's apart of him now. There are pieces of him that will never be the same." He shrugged, gingerly shutting the door. "I think that goes for us all." Shaking his head slowly, Lumiere sighed.

"Oh, not you too."

"What can I say? I spent ten years being unable to hold ma chérie in my candlesticks." He admitted,
still aching from their decade without intimacy. "I didn't miss the thrill of zee court, Chapeau. And now she's just as far away as before." Sighing once more, he went to tidy up the bundle of discarded clothing from the prince's previous outing. "Thank God we'll be home soon. Perhaps then we can all get some well-deserved rest."

"He'll go back to the village." The valet grumbled as they set the items on a table.

"Chapeau, he's happy there-"

Setting the clothing down forcefully and stewing, he finally huffed. "But I have no use when he's traiptsing around like some unkempt woodsman!" He lamented. "And he comes back smelling and grimy from all his digging around for herbs and roots. Who do you think has to scrub him? And that beard."

Lumiere's mouth twitched in amusement. Chapeau was visibly mortified, and it would never not make him chuckle. "Remember how vain he used to be?"

"He was impeccable! Now he's no better than the Beast." He whined, clutching the silk stockings as if he could protect them.

"Now, now. He's not that bad. According to Belle, he used to smell terrible and his fur was greasy."

"He's a prince, Lumiere, not a commoner. And I need to dress him!"

Maurice heard the door open and the patter of oversized paws hopping into the house. The pup bounced over to him, pink tongue lolling out of her mouth, a fresh pink ribbon around her neck.

Shutting the door and setting her basket on the ground, Belle slouched her back against it, cupping a hand over her mouth in disbelief.

The look immediately made her father stand up. "Dear are you okay?" Walking over, he rested a hand on her shoulder as her eyes welled with tears.

Finally looking up, she grinned excitedly. "I'm going to be a teacher."

Overjoyed he wrapped her up, hugging her tightly, pressing the proudest of kisses to the chestnut hairline. "That's wonderful! I knew you could do it."

"It's happening, Papa." She sniffled into his jacket. "It's really going to happen. I'm going to have students, and a classroom- and- and I get to have it!"

"I knew you could, Sweetheart." Patting her back, he kissed her cheek. Heart feeling full of joy for her. "I love you so much. My little Schoolmistress Dujardin."

"I have to do a lot of work before I can actually teach." She explained, wiping her eyes.

"I'll help, and I'm sure you can conscript your friends." Glancing over to the pup grabbing a stick from a basket of kindling his smile was suddenly much more teasing. "You'll have to tell me all about it. However, in the meantime, I see we still have our friend."

Belle's face immediately fell.

He immediately started chuckling.

"Don't even-" She sighed.
"Well, you should probably figure out a name."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Oh man. it's been too long. I'm so sorry, but life got in the way. I'm doing my best to get back to my regular schedule, however, with so much happening I managed to burn through all of my pre-written chapters (I had 4 chapters worth of material ahead of what I was posting) and things kept happening. I'm going to try to get back to writing ahead and posting on Tuesdays. Fingers crossed.

Thank you so much for sticking with this story, even though it hasn't been on time as of late. Questions, comments, complaints? Let me know down below.
"Well, well, still have our little pup I see."

Belle swung down off of Viola, patted her shoulder, and let a disgruntled frown slip. "Yes, I'm working on it."

Mr. Potts took the horse from her. "It helps any, there's a pack of children that could use a furry playmate. Might tire them all out at the same time, God willing."

Mulling over the prospect of her big footed friend being run ragged, Belle thanked her friend and took off. Sure enough, she found the children and they went tearing off, puppy in tow, to find their next adventure. Free of her charge she caught up with some of the staff, stole a cookie or two from the kitchen, and made sure to have tea with Mrs. Potts before settling into the library for her studying.

Between the daily fencing lessons, working on the castle children’s reading, having tea with Mrs. Potts and the professor, Belle had found herself busy enough and pleasantly challenged to be distracted while Ansell was away. Martel was more than happy to debate her and force her to question her own opinions on subjects. Thankful for his luck of having a student who had a love of learning that could be fostered, he refused to go easy on the farm girl just because of her sex or station.

Martel briefly skimmed the papers she handed over to him, raising a brow. "I told you it was due in a week." He said flatly.

"I got it done a little early." Tilting her head, she watched her teacher raise a brow.

"You wrote the entire paper in three days." He exclaimed, flipping through it, going to the back page. It shouldn't have surprised him, knowing her work ethic, but still. "And, you referenced half a dozen books?"

The brown eyes glanced over to the two thick stacks of books nearby on the edge of the table. "You can always check-"

"No, no. I have a feeling your skills at citation are impeccable," Martell said. "Now what's this about your school?"

"Classroom, Monsieur." Belle corrected, fiddling with the heavy quill pen. It felt odd, saying she was going to teach. Wanting it so much, Belle was hesitant to actually say it out loud, as if it would jinx her dream. "And just for reading and writing in the mornings. Open to any children."

Nodding his head, Martel gently tapped the papers on the desk to straighten the stack. "Improving the literacy rate. A noble cause, and one you're perfectly suited for."

A sheepish smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Thank you, it won't be much. However, I just want there to be a place for everyone to learn."

"Some of the greatest things have started out as not very much." He reminded his pupil. "When does class begin?"
"I have to clean the room and find supplies first." Eyes wandering around the room, Belle wondered what reading materials might be suitable for the class. The library had been the Duchess's and it had an impressive amount of children's literature. Ansell's mother had been a champion of education and had always made sure her son, as well as any of her staff or their children, had access to books for all reading levels. "As well as find my students."

Taking a book from the table, the professor from Sarbonne opened it slowly. "Well, if you need help you know where to find me." He smiled. "My days are rather leisurely here, I work, but not nearly enough. And I certainly don't mind helping advance the progress of education."

Grinning from ear to ear, Belle gently pulled her stack of notes and pot of ink over. "I'll let you know."

"Now, let's begin-"

"It's hard to know where to begin." Ansell sighed, hunched over his desk as Lumiere set another portfolio of papers down. He had requested that the carriages that had taken the goods to the castle bring back the most current financial documents as well as the last ones written before the curse. The stacks before him were harrowing, and the prince had begun to regret his good intentions as Chapeau quietly set a small brandy within arm's reach without it being requested.

"What do you wish to do, Master?" Lumiere asked.

"Well, I certainly can't abolish the tax." Instinctively taking the glass, he sipped without a second thought. "I put a rather masterful amount of red tape around it, I can't lift it." Thrumming his nails on the desk, the blue eyes skimmed the paperwork. "I need to see how much we're bringing in and how what can be lowered."

"How can we assist you, Master?" Chapeau asked, bustling over to tidy something minimally askew. Leaning back, eyes wide at his summit of documents, Ansell nudged a folder over. "If you wouldn't mind."

Lumiere grabbed a portfolio, passing one back to his friend as he sunk into a chair.

"Are you sure you don't want her?"

Gustave let out a huff as he and Stephane set down a small, slightly broken desk. The room had been cleared of junk, and Pere Robert was just outside sorting through it all to see what needed to be kept. "I think it's too early for us to get a pet together. Besides, I think we'd both want a cat."

The hope slid off of her face.

"Sorry." He shrugged. "She seems nice though."

Stephane stretched his back. "Are you sure you don't want a new desk? This one's so rickety, I think it needs a new leg."

Looking up for her mopping, Belle shook her head. "Where would I get the money for that?"

The two men silently exchanged expressions. "You know who's courting you, right?" Gustave finally asked.
"I'm not having him pay for anything." She said, a stubborn streak in her words. Stopping and leaning on her mop, Belle stared at them with blazing determination. "This is on my own. If anything comes from the castle it's being repurposed. And that desk is fine, I can fix the leg and give it a coat of paint."

"So you're saying you need us to show up with the wagon in the morning to help you steal a bunch of stuff from the castle?" His amour said dryly, wandering over and grabbing a rag.

There was a twinkle in the brown eyes. "Well, if you're offering-"

"Come on Gus, let's tackle a window. She's nearly done mopping the back half of the room." As the men took to washing the windows, foggy with dust, they admired their handiwork. Belle had roped them into the job as soon as she had returned in the late afternoon. Having plied them with dinner and drinks at the local inn they had readily followed her to help tackle the cluttered space that needed to be transformed. "So what are we pilfering?"

"I already spoke to Cogsworth, there's a blackboard in storage, and a second one that was cracked, so I talked to one of the maintenance men and he's going to help me cut them down into small slates for the children." She explained. "Finally, Monsieur Martel and I looked around the library I'm pulling some books." Smiling at her luck, Belle said pleasantly.

"This is starting to sound like quite the heist," Gustave exclaimed.

"I'll have Viola and our wagon as well, I know it's quite a haul." Taking her supplies away from the drying section of floor, she went and set the mop outside.

"Not to burst your bubble," Gustave took to drying as his Stephane washed. "But, you need a place for your students to sit."

"Oh, that's easy. I'm going to build two long tables and some benches." She dismissed, going to her desk with a wet rag and inspecting it. "I think Monsieur Arbre will trade work for lumber. He was complaining about his stove not working properly not too long ago."

"Sorry I'm late," Maurice said as he came through the door, pausing and taking the room in. It was modest and minus the desk, bare. The puppy hopped in at his heels, carrying a stick she had found outside. "Well now, this is quite nice. You've certainly managed to get it spick and span."

"Three instead of one made it go by pretty quickly." Carefully wiping the desk down, she inspected it for any other breaks, cracks, or broken bits.

"So it does." Wandering over to the large, blank white wall, Maurice studied it. His hand coming up and rubbing his chin in thought.

Setting her rag down Belle walked over. "What do you think?"

"I agree with you; I think it looks big, white, boring." he admitted. "What were you thinking?"

"I don't know." She admitted, drying her sudsy fingers on her apron. "But if you're up to it, I think a mural of any kind would look amazing and brighten up the classroom."

Nodding his head, Maurice's mind went to work. "I think I can whip something up. Perhaps something to spark the students' imaginations." Glancing over, he noticed the desk. "Do you want me to paint that too?"

"I mean, if you'd like."
Turning and smiling proudly at his daughter, Maurice looked at her thoughtfully. "You know, I think some roses winding up the legs would look quite nice. Especially if it's blue."

Grinning, she leaned against him as he wrapped an arm around her. Pressing the warmest of kisses to the side of her head. "Thank you, Papa."

"Have I ever told you how proud I am of you?"

"Just a few times."

"Well, you'll hear be hearing it quite a bit."

The door opened and Ansell glanced up from his fairly exhausting project.

"The Madame and the Maestro, Your Grace," Chapeau announced, though he could hardly get the words out before the Madame had swept in, all buxom and brocade, and made her way to the prince.

Ansell rose quickly, his face lifting at the sight of his friends. "Madame-

"My prince! It feels like ages since we have had your ear." Readily taking a hug, she pressed a kiss to his cheek.

"And I apologize. I fear I hide when I'm not needed." He kissed back. "You look stunning, Madame. I do hope Versailles has taken care of you while you've been my artiste en résidence."

"Like the diva she is." The Maestro beamed, Frou Frou contentedly tucked under an arm.

"It's been like a dream." She announced.

"Please, do come and sit with me." He gestured, walking with the pair to his sofas. "Would you care for anything to drink or eat?"

"Oh no," Carefully taking a seat in her voluminous dress, her palm went to her cinched waistline. "Between not eating for so many years and the abundance of the finest cuisine in the world I've found my figure fuller."

"Nonsense." Her husband dismissed quickly, though the twinkle in his eye told Ansell he loved every inch of the Madame no matter what size she was.

"You are simply a vision," Ansell said smoothly, at ease with familiar company. "And I'm glad you're being given the care you deserve."

"The apartment is-" Cadenza kissed his fingertips "Magnifico. And we must thank you for sending the tailor and dressmaker at your cost. That was far too generous-"

Waving his hand away, Ansell shook his head. "The very least I could do. The fashion has changed in ten years, and you two are the most fashionable people I know. Madame's voice demands the brightest spotlight and the most shimmering of Parisian fashion." lacing his fingers together the blue eyes fell to the side. "Do you know where you're going next?" There was a reluctance in his voice as he did not want to face the idea of his friends exiting his life. Flying off to other cities, more stunning venues, and leaving his home and life just a touch less brighter.

"Vienna." He replied, well aware there was heartbreak associated with them parting ways. "I have been asked to conduct a concert, an opera, with the Madame as the Prima Donna. Production begins in a month, then it shall run until spring and from there?" Shrugging, he rubbed Frou Frou's silky
ears. "We'll see. It'll be our adventure."

"Belle and I will have to see you in concert." He told them, watching the befuddlement fill their faces. Leaning in he grinned slyly. "You must remember we have a rather efficient mode of transportation."

"Ah, yes."

"Let's just say there are plans to see many concerts and museums."

"That sounds like our Belle." The Madame cooed. "But remember, Noel. Even if we are just there for the night, we must be with the family."

The family. The thought made his heartache, how they were all so far away from him. Beyond Belle, morning chats with Maurice, long walks to the stables with Chip in tow to see Mr. Potts, being swatted and chastised by Mrs. Potts, and even Cogsworth's bloviating, were all sorely missed. Unbeknownst to Ansell, a wistful sigh escaped from his chest. "We'll love to have you home once more. However, if you find yourselves busy and in demand please don't feel pressured. We understand and love you all the same."

"The plan is Noel at the castle." Cadenza pressed, eyes flitting to the maitre'd. "Though there needs to be a talk about logistics."

"The plan is taking shape," Lumiere reassured. "Some of our decorations and accouterments have already safely arrived at the castle. I can give you an itinerary before you depart."

"Good good." Raising a brow, both he and his wife could not stop looking at the desk. "Your Grace, may I ask what has you reading a dreadful amount of paperwork?"

Sinking deeper into the sofa, the joy on Ansell's face died a slow, painful death. "Would you like to hear about taxes?"

Recoiling, Cadenza grimaced. "Heavens no."

"Would you like to hear about how Zee Master is working to improve the lives of the villagers?" Lumiere piped in, tidying one of the stacks.

"Oh, that sounds much nicer!" The Madame replied.

"A bath sounds so nice." Belle sighed as they finally walked through the front door of the house. She was covered with grime and sweat while she stifled back a yarn. "It's not even that late." Taking off her jacket, she hung it as Maurice took off his cap.

"I think it's safe to say you've had a busy day and you've earned the right to unwind with some reading." Her father suggested.

"I know, but I can't stop thinking about what needs to be done tomorrow."

"What are we doing with your little friend?" Maurice asked, removing his shoes as the little claws clicked up the stairs with her.

"Keeping her, I suppose." His daughter's voice grunted in defeat.

Taking off his coat, he said to no one in particular. "Well, at least we can stop dancing around that."
Leaning back into his chair, Ansell threw his arms up and stretched. Gazing at the piles of papers, he gazed down towards his extensive notes. Pages and pages of his coarse penmanship that were dotted with far too many question marks and the occasional colorful language towards the more frustrating documents. Lumiere yawned from his chair across the desk from him, and Chapeau had sleepily gotten up to draw back the bed. The Madame and the Maestro had a performance for the Dauphin that night and had hurried off hours ago to primp and preen themselves into perfection. It had left the prince and his men back to his project, which he began to loathe the further he sunk into it.

"You two need rest." He told his friends. "I'll carry on in the morning, we put a good dent in it."

"Very well, Master," Lumiere said stiffly. Rising up, he went to assist Chapeau.

"Thank you for your assistance." It took a moment for his sore muscles to work their way out of the chair. "I know this isn't as nearly as glamorous as going to dinner and dancing. However, it is important for the province."

"Of course, Master. Shall I order up a late dinner?" His valet asked, already moving towards the door.

Noticing the corner of an envelope peeking out from a portfolio, he raised a curious brow. "Please." Reaching down he pulled the envelope out, reading his name in all too familiar penmanship that made his heart race. Eyes widening, an eager grin spreading across his face, Ansell opened the envelope. Lumiere and Chapeau, assuming that a letter between two young lovers would be somewhat salacious, quietly disappeared.

She had snuck it in so no one else could find it.

"Beatrice?" Belle suggested out loud, curled on the bench at the window, puppy in lap, allowing the awkward pet to idly chew on her fingers. Her hair was still damp from the bath, and Ansell's shirt, so big it nearly went to her knees, clung to her still drying skin.

Maurice glanced up from his book by the fire. There was a chill in the night air, and his old joints cooperated when he was closer to the hearth. "Isn't that Mrs. Potts' first name?"

"Oh. Hmm."

Tail thwapping on the windowsill and oblivious to her fortune, the dog smiled up at her.

"Perdita?" Maurice suggested the turn of a page.

"I don't know, maybe Cordelia?"

"What about Juli-"

"I feel like that would be tempting fate."

"She's going to fall in love with a dog you don't approve of and meet an untimely end?"

Belle laughed, ruffling the floppy ears, little jaws playfully snapping at her fingers before tugging on the silk sleeve of her robe.

Turning, his eyes met her own. "What about something outside of the Bard?"

"Hmm." She lifted the puppy up, back paws still on her lap, looking into the big wet eyes.
"Myths? Folklore? She's Irish, perhaps something Celtic." Her father offered. "Arthurian? Guinevere is a beautiful name."

Belle's eyes widened in realization. "Isolde?"

Laughing, Maurice didn't even have to look over to know that his response rankled his daughter. "You think Juliet is too ghastly but you like Isolde?"

"It's a nice name, you know." She sounded more childishly defensive than she would have liked as Isolde snuggled into her lap for more attention.

"Did you read the end of that book?"

"It's a good name!"

Chapter End Notes

Wooo. Kinda back to schedule.
“WHAT DO YOU MEAN I HAVE TO STAY?!”

The Duke didn’t bat an eye to his son’s meltdown.

The prince was furious, red-faced with veins bulging out his neck as he stood in his father’s office. “You know, I really shouldn’t be surprised.” Ansell snarled, the air feeling thick, his chest too tight to breathe. Beginning to pant, he unconsciously bared his teeth. “This was never going to just be a month-”

“It would have been if you had actually taken the time to find a wife.” The Duke told him coolly, standing by the window and soaking in the morning sun like a crocodile on the banks in Africa. “However, you seem averse to all advances-”

“The women-”

“Prostitutes are not the solution.” He grunted, ignoring the rage on his son’s face. “I've watched you for near a month, Anselme. And while I believe you do have a right to reintegrate yourself into the world I've also watched you shun advances at every event, dinner, and dance we've attended while here! I practically had to threaten you ten years ago to find a suitable bride, and here we are with nothing changed.”

The room spun. Belle, he needed Belle. He could fake his way through court yet he desperately needed her curled in his arms. Her lovely mocking mouth, ready to make him laugh, to become embroiled in a debate, or to shower him with gentle kisses. “Let me go home and give me more time.” Ansell managed, steadying himself by leaning against the wall and telling himself he didn't need to be a prince for much longer. It would be over, they'd be married and go far away to be free of the horrid man sharing the room with him. Free from the gilded shackles.

“And what are you going to find there that's eligible for your hand?” He scoffed. “Not that farm girl-”

“Father-”

“Leave her alone, Anselme. Leave her for some sheepherder-”

Pounding his fist on the wall, the painting hung nearby shook. “You know, I don't give a DAMN about what you want.” Snarling, he stood firmly, locking eyes with the Duke when the man finally turned around to face him. “I'm having my men pack up, we'll leave in the morning.”

With a face as cold as stone, and eyes as hollow as a reptile's, his father pursed his lips. “That would be unwise, Anselme, and you know that.”

“It's time for me to leave.” He said, firmly.

“Need I remind you the last time you had a little tantrum?” He growled. “The last time you huffed and puffed? The time before? The one before that? Oh, let's go far back. What was your first girl again?” Striding over, he ran his fingers across a bust of Alexander the Great. “You were so small, just a boy, really. And she was a scullery maid, ah, yes.”
Shutting his eyes, the prince’s fists slowly curled. “This isn't like that-”

“A fifteen-year-old boy, in love with the girl that replaces his piss pot in the morning.” A thin smirk of disdain pulled up one side of his face. “Oh Father! I love her! You don't understand! Father, we've been in love all summer! She's the-”

“Don't.” Ansell snapped, suddenly feeling much smaller. Fifteen again, the Duke looming over him and tearing him down. “Don't you dare-”

“After she was dismissed I thought you had learned your lesson.”

The words were a threat. It didn't have to be explicit, however, after years Ansell knew it was there. “I'm not talking about the farm girl. I'm talking about retreating to the comfort of my own home. I haven't even been human six months and here you are trying to force me to wed! What I want is time, father. Nothing more. Time and the comforts of home.” It stung to call Belle just a farm girl. However, given his father's druthers it was for the best.

“There are plenty of comforts here.”

“Shirking your fencing lessons.”

Belle looked up, covered in sawdust as she was sanding a table leg. Stephane was looming over her, smirking down at her in the shed, tsking as if she needed a scolding. “I’m not losing too much sleep over it. My teacher was terrible.”

Stephane’s face fell.

“He was a real showboat.” She giggled.

“Am I helping you or not?” He frowned.

Setting her tools aside and shaking out her apron, Belle inspected the leg, found it satisfactory, and stook to look over to the table. Ghosting her fingers carefully over the top, she tested the slick surface. “Varnish should be dry.”

"And that leg?"

"It's fine. Doesn't need to be perfect, just needs to hold up."

“Your handiness never ceases to amaze me.” He marveled, walking to the opposite end. Between the two of them, they were able to lift the long, handmade table, carefully walking it out to the wagon Viola was hitched to. “In the span of five days you managed to fix someone's stove in exchange for wood, then take all of that lumber and build your tables and benches.”

“All the while not focusing on anything else save a quick study with Monsieur Martel.” She finished for him, the two awkwardly hoisting and shoving the table into the wagon.

“Well, you can't skip out on all of your classes now can you.”

They heaved and hoed, eventually getting the table in the wagon. Viola pulled readily, and they made their way through the market. Belle had purposefully kept her plans a secret, as to get further
along in the process without certain people sticking their noses into her business and trying to spoil it all.

Isolde barked, bolting from the porch to the wagon, wagging her tail gleefully.

“How’s she faring?” Stephane asked as they walked the horse up the street.

“Learning her manners. Though she’s doesn't need a leash anymore.” Belle reported.

“And when are we opening up your classroom?”

“A few days from now, hopefully.”

Chapeau slowly opened the door.

“Master?” He called out cautiously. The prince had come charging in looking ready to roar. Wild eyed, positively seething, he had screamed to be left alone and had slammed the door so hard it shook on its hinges. His men had spent the better part of the afternoon tip-toeing about their business and shooing people away from the apartment, telling them Prince Anselme was under the weather. There was silence.

Slipping in, Chapeau headed towards the bed cautiously, as one might approach a large, sleeping cat. The Master was sprawled out on the mattress, stripped down to just his shirt and breeches. The closer he got, the valet could see the blue eyes half open, bloodshot, gazing into the middle distance in defeat. There was half a pitcher of wine that had been filled that morning on the nightstand, and the sketch of Belle open and resting near it.

“Oh, Master.” He sighed.

“I was never going to go home, was I.”

“Right here's perfect,” Belle told Stephane, setting the table down. She had built them both to fit the width of the room with a long bench for each so the children could sit facing the blackboard. She had fixed the desk, her father had already painted it, and the slates were stacked neatly atop with a bowl full of broken sticks of chalk. Dusting her fingers and looking over the whole thing, she admired her little classroom. It was coming together nicely, and she could imagine the little faces coming through the door and ready to learn.

“Belle?”

Turning, she found the Gagne girls peering inside along with two others. Smiling she waved them in.

“Come, come. I take it you heard?”

“Pere Robert said you have a class for girls?” Pauline Gagne asked, eyes wide at the classroom. They weren't even allowed in the boy's school, and had never been in a classroom before.
“I will soon.” She watched their curiosity, the girls wandering the space, running their little fingers across the tables. “Just for reading and writing.”

“I want to know how to write.” Anette, the girl she had tried to teach to read so long ago, marveled at Maurice's half-finished mural. “Any girl is allowed?”

“Anyone who wants to learn is welcome.” They giggled excitedly while Isolde hopped over and snuffled their palms for treats. The puppy happily taking pats and giving kisses in return. “It'll be in the morning, eight 'til noon, so you can go home and still do chores.”

The fourth girl ruffled the wiry black ears. “Will your puppy be here too?”

“If she can behave herself.” Chuckling as Isolde literally tripped over herself at all of the attention, she made a note to provide a bowl of water and a blanket near her desk so her dog could lay in class. “Can I count on you for to come?”

Isolde pattered off out the door.

“May we invite other girls?” Anette asked eagerly, a bright smile on her sweet face.

“Of course!” She grinned. “The more the merrier.”

Marie-Jeanne turned to the others in earnest. “We have to tell Sybille and Vivienne.” Suddenly the black hound returned with a ball, dropping it at their feet and gazing up imploringly. All big, wet brown eyes and puppy pouting. The girls all turned to Belle, their little mouths opening.

“Just bring her back when you're done playing.” Watching them all take off, Isolde bounding towards the hillside for a rousing game of fetch, Belle grinned.

The knock at the door found Pere Robert smiling sheepishly. “I hope you don't mind me spilling the beans. The girls came over and pestered me yesterday after I told their father.”

“It's quite all right. It's nice to see that I already have excited pupils.”

The priest looked about the room, pleased at it's transformation. “This looks nearly ready for business. What else do you need?”

“Books, mostly.” Going over she straightened the stack of slates. “I need to go and hunt around the library. Also I think I want a few maps on the walls.” She was so close to her dream, a classroom of her own, with bright little minds and eager eyes awaiting her in the morning. And soon Ansell would be home, back safe and sound, ready to resume his commoner lifestyle. They could settle into their routines, into life, and plan ahead. It tickled her; the thought of Ansell going about his day as an herbalist, and she teaching. The jobs they enjoyed, the life they wanted, it was all slowly coming together. “But, we're almost ready. Just a few more days.”

Just a few more days.

“I can barely last a few more days.” Ansel mumbled.

“We'll manage, Master.” Lumiere reassured. He and Chapeau had carefully extracted all alcohol from the chambers and set the prince in a hot bath. With his muscles finally relaxing their Prince was
slouched in the massive copper tub, appearing ready to slip under the suds and disappear entirely.

Miserable and heartbroken, Ansell slowly rose, Chapeau helping him dry and into a robe. “What am I going to tell her? That I’m never coming home unless I wed another woman? I-I can’t even begin to fathom the letter I need to write.”

“Speak from the heart, Master,” Lumiere told him gently. “She’ll know it's broken.”

“I have to tell her as soon as possible.” He sulked, falling into his desk chair. “She’ll be waiting for me to come home.” Running his fingers through his hair, he reluctantly picked up his pen and dipped it into the ink.

Letter upon letter, he crumpled them and threw them away. Unable to find the words, to tell her it was indefinite. That their life together was on hold until he acquiesced. It was an impossible task that ate him up as it stretched out, consuming minutes, then hours. And after awhile he simple leaned back in his chair and gazed at a blank sheet of parchment with sheer distress flashing in his eyes. Chapeau and Lumiere came to check on him intermittently, finding him in the same spot with piles of shredded and balled up letters growing steady like snow-covered mountains across a landscape.

Rapping his pen on the desktop, he curled his lip, face hardening in rage. Everything ripped out of his reach. Home in their little cottage, waking up to the weight and warmth of her in their bed, his lessons in becoming a commoner, oh, her sweet mocking mouth and bright eyes. Coming home to her, coming home to Maurice, being apart of the family. All of it, stolen.

“I'M SICK OF THIS!” Sweeping the desk clear, sending things clattering to the floor, he roared. Leaping to his feet he tore at his hair, pounding a fist on the desk and leaving a crack. His men came rushing in. “THIS VILE MAN.” Snarling, snapping, he appeared ready to race off on all fours and hunt down the man who did his future harm. “If I was still as big as I used to be I’d kill him, I swear I would!”

“Your Grace!” Chapeau stepped forward. “You’re better than that!”

"Please! Master!"

“Not if I lose everything. And that’s what he wants.” The burst of rage exhausting the already weary prince, he turned away from them, head in his hands. “I can bring myself to write this letter.” He sighed heavily, the ache weighing down his entire body. “I just want to see-”

The silence concerned Chapeau and Lumiere.

"I-I want to see-"

Ansell sat down and grabbed another piece of paper.

*Two Days Later*

Belle had gone to the castle for a late lesson and dinner with the staff.

The classroom was nearly put together, and the word amongst the girls was spreading. It would be a
small first class in the coming days, but an eager one. And she hoped it would grow in time until her room was full. Talking animatedly about it over dinner, she found her joy growing. Ansell would be arriving, class would be starting, fall would bring so much change with the seasonal shift.

Mrs. Potts gave her the letter after chef’s delicious creme brulee was served for dessert.

Slipping into a parlor, she couldn’t wait until later to read it. Hoping it contained a date when he would return to her. Carefully breaking the seal she devoured it, word by word, and the further she read the deeper her heart sank.

It had been awhile since anyone had seen Belle and Mrs. Potts peered into the room, listening to the soft, strangled sobs. “Dearie?”

“He’s not coming back.” Belle managed as everything crumbled around her. Unable to look Mrs. Potts in the eye, she passed the letter over. It contained nothing scandalous for another reader, just unmitigated heartache.

Reading the letter, the Englishwoman drew a hand to her chest. “Oh no.”

“His father’s only going to let him return with a wife.” She whispered, tears streaming down her face.

“Oh, Love.” Sweeping Belle into a hug, she squeezed her tight and pressed a kiss to her hairline. “We’ll work this out. We’ve been in more dire straights. If there’s anyone who can persevere, it’s all of us together my Sweet Girl.”

“I need him home.” She wept into a shoulder, sniffling. “He needs to be home with his family.”

Mrs. Potts’ heart broke at the words while she rubbed the young woman’s back. Their prince had found his family. “There, there. He’ll be home with you. I promise he will.”

Stepping away, Belle wiped away the tears. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t you dare apologize. Like you said, the Master needs to be home.” Sniffling herself, she did her best to stay strong for Belle. “He needs to be home with you in the town, being his silly lovestruck self.”

A weary laugh escaped Belle’s chest. “He’s so dear.” Gingerly taking the letter back, she skimmed over it. “At least he says how much he misses me and wishes I could be in his apart-” Trailing off, she skimmed the paragraph.

Knitting her brows Mrs. Potts stepped in. “What is it now?”

“He described what it looks like.” She breathed in disbelief, everything clicking into place. Turning, she smiled at the confused housemaid. “Mrs. Potts, he described what his room looks like.”

Tilting her head, Mrs. Potts was still confused.

Belle clutched the letter to her chest. “I can imagine it.”

Eyes flying open, she clapped her hand over her mouth. “Oh!”

Belle let out a surprised laugh, turning and grinning brightly at Mrs. Potts.

“You go!” Shooing her out the door, she fought tears. “You go this instant! I'll take care of the rest, we won't expect you home for at least a day!”
Scrambling up the stairs to the library she flung open the doors. Racing over and pulling out the book and opening it, the pages glowed and swirled in invitation. Reading the paragraph once more, Belle pressed her hand to the page and closed her eyes.

Ansel turned, grinning as Belle opened her eyes in his bedroom.

“Darling.”

Chapter End Notes

So here is the dealy-o. I'm going on a much (much) needed vacation next week. Going to Disneyland! However, because I'm going away to the Happiest Place On Earth you're getting a new chapter today for NAHEA, Two Very Small Storms, and, fingers crossed, a second NAHEA chapter tomorrow (working on it right now). That way there's something to tide us all over while I go live the dream and spin around on tea cups whilst wearing my Beast shirt.

As always, thank you for your comments, kudos, and bookmarks. Your readership keeps this ship sailing. As always, please feel free to comment, critique, and ask questions below. I do my best to respond.
Catching Belle in his arms, they kissed passionately. It was full of more words than they could say.

Pressed up against Ansell's chest, hands holding his hips and roaming up his sides, desperate to feel him, Belle finally came up for air. She felt drunk on him and she wanted more. Finding his eyes, his stuporous, smiling cerulean eyes, she grinned, forehead resting on his own. Oh, her Ansell; her dear, sweet man. She could melt into his arms for days. "That was a very detailed letter."

"Glad I could be so descriptive." The prince laughed cheerily, gathering her face in his hands and kissing her once more.

Breathing out a barely audible "I love you." Belle let out a whimper, smiling against his mouth as his hands wandered down her back and to her skirts. Tugging at the hem of his breeches with a finger, a hungry growl releasing from the pocket of his throat that made her warm all over.

"Have I told you how much I missed you?" Ansell breathed huskily against her neck, nipping the silky skin and grinning as she grabbed him by the waistcoat and walked backward toward the bed. "How much I love you?"

"I think you should remind me." She began to frantically get him out of said waistcoat and pull his shirt out of his breeches, her hands running up and down his skin before making a go for the laces keeping his pants up. All the while, keeping her lips on his.

"Wait." He grunted, hoisting her up, feeling her arms wrap around his neck as he carried her to the bed. Legs hooked around his strong waist as he kissed her neck and heard her gasp. Setting her on the edge of the bed, nuzzling and panting as she tore off his shirt, grinned wolfishly and ran a palm up between the gap were were skirts were tucked.

She smiled wickedly into his chest, yanking his breeches down and grabbing him by the hips to bring him in. He began to rush and fumble with all of the laces keeping her in, and Belle quickly became frustrated. "Come here."

"Your dress."

"Come here now." Belle grabbed her amour by the thigh and hauled him forward, getting a husky, hungry laugh as a response to her demands.

Belle padded out of the bathroom in his shirt, watching as Lumiere brought in a silver cart that filled the room with delicious scents. Bashfully, she tucked a lock of hair behind an ear as Ansell sat up in bed, linens pooled in his lap. He glanced over at her, serene and relaxed. After taking her in a pleasantly rough fashion and making good use of the headboard, he had ordered up a ludicrous amount of food before they dozed and awoke to more sex.

"Thank you, Lumiere." He said appreciatively as the cart was rolled right up to the bed. The glistening lids were removed to display the rich foods. Filet, lobster, butter-soaked oysters, a heap of glistening strawberries topped with creme chantilly. Hot rolls and a thick, oozing chocolate cake, bright vegetables with the smells curling into thick, aromatic ropes of steam.
"You could feed a dozen people with this." Belle marveled as Lumiere popped the cork on a bottle of champagne that was worth more than her cottage and the horses combined. She had become used to a certain amount of decadence at the castle, however, the indulgences of Versailles were something else.

Eating an oyster fresh out of the shell, Ansell took a fizzling flute of champagne. Looking absolutely cheeky, he took a swill. "What can I say? I need my strength."

Lumiere held back a chuckle, glad his prince had his verve for life back. Though he was unable to force down a small, knowing smile.

Belle blushed, curling back into bed. "Hello, Lumiere."

"Ma Cherie, it is so good to have you visit." He said, hoping to put her at ease as the prince dropped a cream covered strawberry into his mouth. Heading to the hearth, he stoked the fire and added several logs to keep the young lovers warm during their night together. "We miss the castle so dearly, you're like a little piece of home."

Having an idea, Belle sat at the edge of the bed. "Why don't you take the book and see Plumette tonight? You can come back in the morning. I'm sure she misses you."

"Excellent idea." Taking a sip of his champagne, the prince gestured to the book sitting on the table. "Please, go see her. You deserve it, old friend."

Taking a bow, Lumiere brightened at the prospect. "Why thank you so much! I shall."

As soon as the maitrê de walked out with the book, Belle scooted closer to Ansell and took a forkful of lobster. "This is all so decadent."

"I want to be decadent with you." Reaching, he pulled a sliver of hot steak off of a platter. "I want us to eat, and then once we're rested I do believe I need to have you wrapped around me."

"Is that so." She raised a brow at him, laughing and taking a flute of champagne.

"I'd have some more if I were you, I plan to have a very long night."

Belle had been famished, and after quelling her appetite had found some creative uses for the crème chantilly. With another round of extremely passionate sex, she slept peacefully. Her belly full, mind a little drunk, body relaxed and satisfied. Ansell pushed the dishes away and threw an arm around her, snoozing drunkenly. Both were far more exhausted than they cared to admit.

Slowly rousing, Ansell looked up from his spot to find Belle seated and flipping through his book of pressed flowers.

Catching him out of the corner of her eye, Belle smiled coyly. "Sorry, I don't mean to pry."

"Oh yes, snooping through my book of roses and posies. I'm so offended." He yawned, smiling against a pillow. "Do you use your toolbelt?"

"I do, quite often." Admiring a page her fingers ran across his script. "You've logged quite a few herbs while you've been here and your hand writing's improved."

"I find it hard to partake in court activities." He admitted, sitting up and pulling her into his lap. "I hike and ride quite a bit, pick what I find and add it to my collection." Gingerly taking the journal
from her, he placed it back on the table. Wrapping his arms around her and kissing her tenderly. "Thank you for nurturing my curiosities." He said against her mouth before brushing her lips with his own. Eyes sinking into sadness, he held her close. Who else would encourage him so? To allow him to be something other than bound to duty? To let him try his hand at something considered women's work and not tease nor taunt?

Gathering the handsome face in her hands, she kissed him sorrowfully. The two melted against one another, holding each other close. "Thank you for my professor."

"It never seemed fair I could have an education when the brightest person I know was denied." Cradling her head against his chest, he couldn't talk about his gilded jail, about how desperate he had been. Not yet. "I hope your love of learning is being fostered."

Belle grinned against his skin. "Can I tell you something?"

"Anything, Darling."

"I'm going to teach a reading class for girls."

Heart rushing with pride, he laughed happily into her hair. "Really?"

"Well, everyone's invited to come and learn. However, it was started for girls since they're not allowed to go to school." She said joyously, sitting up and gazing into the clear eyes. "It's just a small class in the mornings, but Père Robert gave me a room in the church for a classroom and we've been fixing it up." She giggled as he hugged her tighter. "I know I never talked about it, but it's what I've always wanted to try to teach."

Mouth pulling into an excited smile towards how remarkable she was he said. "Belle, it's been clear ever since you started teaching teacups how to read that you love giving others the gift of education." Pressing his lips to her forehead, he asked. "Is this what you really want?"

"Only second to you." Watching his face light like a candle, she grinned until her cheeks hurt at how supportive he was. "Though it doesn't mean I don't like building and fixing."

"I believe those are both a type of learning and problem-solving." She nuzzled against him and it was divine. He easily imagined her running a school, teaching eager little minds. "I'm so incredibly proud of you, Darling."

"Thank you." The words came out far more pained than she would have liked. Who else would love her and encourage her so? To let her be herself, away from the expectations of society. To not think she was just a woman. He was with her that moment, but for how long and then when again?

"Thank you for believing in my dreams." A small sob escaped as it all felt so helpless. She needed him, his boost of encouragement to be herself, no matter how odd other felt about her.

Her cry was too much. Ansell's hot, burning tears flowed freely as he held her tight. "God I want to go home." He gasped.

"Oh, Ansell,"

"I want to be home," kissing the top of her head, he leaned back against the headboard, holding her close. Eyes shutting tightly as he couldn't bear to look at her.

"We'll get you home." She promised. "We'll get you home one way or another."

"I'm so tired of being here." Feeling her forehead press against his own, she slipped off of him, his
shirt rustling on the sheets. Belle pulled him over and gingerly guided him back down, drawing his head to her lap. Exhausted from heartache, he curled there, feeling her attentive fingers wipe away his tears and work through his hair.

Her heart broke into a million pieces, seeing him so defeated. Belle could feel her own tears slide down her face. "What do you need?" Belle asked, the words not sexual, simply warm and comforting.

"Just you." Rolling over onto his back, head in her lap, Ansell stared up at Belle. A hand, fingers splayed, soothingly ran from his chest to his belly. The pressure pushing away the tenseness of his muscles, helping him relax. The same hand gathered up the side of his face, rubbing his jaw. "I want to be home, in our bed. I want to wake up and start the house and talk to your father and kiss you good morning when you come down the stairs. I want to see you to class and watch you teach. I want it all so desperately."

Aching, she massaged his jaw, then his shoulders, her love so weary. "I want you to do that too. I love you so much, Ansell."

"I love you. Belle. You're the best thing in my world." Reaching up, he caressed a smooth cheek. "I wouldn't be alive without you love."

"We're going to find a way to get you home. We just need to think."

Sinking, he mumbled. "Do we have to think right now?"

Giggling, she shook her head. "No, we can think later."

"Good," Ansell sighed. "I'm so tired. I don't sleep with your side of the bed empty."

"Funny, me neither."

Tugging on a sleeve and getting out of her lap, as soon as Belle was lying down and turned away Ansell pressed against her back. Tangling his legs up in her own and wrapping her up, he heard a pleased sigh escape her.

"How long can I stay?" She asked softly, petting one of the strong arms holding her. Immediately her eyes felt heavy.

"I can go missing for a day, I think." He said, voice weary. She smelled so good, so intoxicating, it began to soothe him to sleep.

It wasn't enough, but it would do. "We'll plan later."

They talked softly until they fell into a deep slumber.

Belle wasn't quite sure how they had ended up like they had, nonetheless, she slowly opened her eyes to a pressure on her stomach to discover Ansell had fallen asleep on her. Between her legs, head on her stomach, hair mussed wildly about, one hand loosely wrapped around a thigh, the other around her waist. His head was the weight, leaden in sleep, yet the prince appeared breathtakingly content on her body. Face slack and angelic in the pink of the early morning, nuzzling every so often, and his breath warm on her skin. Belle let him dream for a while before gently combing her fingers through the golden mane and tucking it away from the handsome face. They had awoken twice the night before, both times finding an easy rhythm of gentle sex before falling back into a heavy, healing sleep.
Ansell slowly, tiredly, smacked his lips. Mumbling happily to himself as Belle gave him the time to rouse and discover where exactly he had dozed off. He seemed pleasantly surprised at his spot, smiling dreamily and tightening the arm around her waist. A noise between a hum and a purr elicited from his throat as he kissed the spot above her naked navel. The happiness her body brought him made Belle's morning all the sweeter.

"Good morning." She whispered. "Seems you had quite the night."

"Grm." He nuzzled in, not quite ready to leave his spot. Legs retracting as a hand was taken off of the mattress. Turning his head, the blue eyes bobbed.

His drowsy greediness was too much."You need to wake up, lazy prince." Kissing his knuckles, then his palm she felt Ansell stir faster.

"I don't like that title." He yawned like a great lion next to its lioness. "It's dreadful."

"Do I need to call you something else?"

"Anything else," he grumbled against the soft skin.

"Be-

"Anything but that," he saw how playful the smart chocolate eyes were and saucily nipped at the palm rubbing his cheek. Letting out a happy groan when that same palm had its heel across his shoulders and down his back.

"Well, fine. My big, lazy, silly Dearest." she felt him chuckle. "You can't just lay on me all day." She laughed at the dramatic, disappointed whine that was the response.

Having other ideas, he ran a hand down the length of her leg. "Hmmn. How long have you been up?"

"Long enough to watch you dream." she drew a breath in, leg hitching up.

"They were very good dreams. Lots of you." Grip finding a better position on her leg, he rubbed the pad of his thumb along her knee. "Mmn. You're so cozy."

"I'm glad you made yourself at home so quickly." She teased. "But I'll need to get up." He was all lazy smooches and curious hands. Rumbling sleepily as he kissed and sucked and stroked the topography he adored so much. "Hmmn."

"Just let me say good morning, Darling."

"You're very good at saying goo-" Feeling Belle arch a bit and let out a soft moan he smiled in accomplishment against her hip. "The great question of the morning, now that we're both awake, is-" Ansell dipped his head low, leaving an agonizingly promising trail of kisses from her hip to the lowest part of her stomach, taking her knee and kissing inward, grazing the meat of her thigh with his teeth. "Do I start the day down below." He purred nibbling on the spot and listening to a little gasp. "Or-" hoisting himself up onto his arms he climbed over her until they were face to face. Kissing her passionately, rocking her hips closer to his own. Feeling her hands run down his torso. "Do I start it up above?"

Belle laughed huskily against his mouth. "You're such a dirty tease."
"That answer doesn't help me with this conundrum now does it?" He impishly captured her lips once more, dropping a hand between her legs and exploring. Touching all of the right places.

"You brat." Shivering, she watched the mischievous grin as he caressed and pressed.

"Nonsense, I'm giving you options." he grinned against her mouth. "I'm going to get my fill one way or another, Darling."

"You're a brat and you're greedy."

"I want what I want lest you want me to grouse about it." Hungry for her, happy to see she was too, he rumbled. "Now am I having breakfast or am I taking you against this headb-" Laughing as his shoulder was pushed down, he growled playfully as her fingers scratched his scalp and eagerly guided him below. "Good choice." he stroked the inside of her thighs and began his trail of kisses southward. Grinning wolfishly as she heaved and began to grab the fitted sheet.

"You are the most delicious thing." He kissed the soft belly, glad to see her satisfied. "Every inch."

Relaxed and in a pleasantly warm daze, Belle basked against the satin pillows. Unsurprisingly to her, he had accomplished both of his options before lazing with her. "Are you pleased with yourself?"

Ansell had resumed his spot on her torso, and she didn't mind at all as she leaned against the mountain of down pillows. Her prince was smiling, loving when she hooked a leg around his waist to keep him between her legs and covering her up. The possessiveness of his position made her feel good and greedy. Having him all to herself, draped over her and content with all of the contact. He was hers, France be damned.

"Very. I've been positively ravenous, just craving you for weeks."

"What do you want to do other than the obvious?" Carding her fingers through his hair she knew that if it was up to him they wouldn't leave the bed for days.

Sighing, Ansell resigned to the fact that they needed to get up. "Well, we have the book. I suppose we could leave the room."

"You'd have to be good." She teased.

Slumping against her, he gave a mock groan. "That sounds dreadful."

Belle laughed. "I agree, however, we have the day. We should make the most of it." bringing a hand up and kissing the knuckles, she watched him pout. "I'll spend the night one more time. We'll have plenty of time in here tonight."

"I'd like to go home and see everyone." His brows furrowed in thought. "Actually, I'd also love to see your classroom. Something tells me I'll be immensely proud."

"It's just a little room."

"Nonetheless, it's your little room, Headmistress Dujardin." She beamed at the title and his heart fluttered like a cloud of butterflies. "And you're doing what you've always wanted to do." Ghosting his lips against the patch above her navel he said into her skin. "And I'm so happy for you."

"Alright, we'll go home."

"Then, we should go to Verona."
Eyes widening, Belle froze.

Reveling in the pause he lifted his head and raised a brow. "You don't want to go to Verona? An early birthday trip? Well, that's a pity, I was looking forward to wandering about the city and spoiling you. I suppose we could find something-" a hand pushed on his face and he laughed. "Alright, so home and Verona it is then."

Chapter End Notes

Back from Disneyland and on schedule! I think a two-parter is in order, to make up for some lost time. So one today (they really missed one another and had a lot of making up to do) and in a day or so. Too much reunion-ing for just one chapter, as it were.

Again, thank you so much for reading this story. And double thanks if you've interacted/bookmarked/kudo'd in some way. Love it, hate it, bothered by it? Let me know below. I may not respond to all of your comments, but I read each and every one and certainly take critique into consideration.
Belle fastened a fresh apron around her waist and turned to Ansell who was rummaging around for his clothes. After Lumiere had returned and she had coerced him out of bed, they had traveled to her bedroom in the cottage. "There should be a package atop of everything."

Opening the trunk where he kept his possessions, he pulled out the bundle wrapped in brown paper and ripped it open to find a crisp white shirt and a blue waistcoat with navy and red florals curling around the fabric. Face lighting up, he turned to Belle.

"You only had a few for the village. And the tailor owed me a favor." She explained. "I was a little unnerved at how precise and thorough Cogsworth's measurements he had of you on hand."

Smiling playfully as he unbuttoned his far more garish clothes for court, he arched a brow. "Buying me clothes? How domestic of you."

Shaking her head at him, Belle slipped out the door. "Get dressed."

"You're not going to h-"

"No one will be dressed if I help." She responded knowingly, closing the door and heading down the stairs. And the house suddenly felt lighter as she caught her father's attention. Everything just a bit brighter, a touch joyful.

Maurice paused as he had been walking in with a basket. "Belle?"

Isolde came over and Belle stooped to ruffle her puppy's pricked ears. "Hi, Papa. Mrs. Potts, did she?"

"She did, and I wasn't expecting you until tonight at the earliest." He explained, looking at her curiously.

Blushing, it was agonizing to hint at anything with him. Surely she couldn't explain why one of her dresses had been suddenly no longer modest and in need of repair. "I needed a change of clothes and someone wanted to pop in for a visit."

Brows raising, a smile played on his lips. "He's-?" Pointing upstairs, the smile widened as his daughter nodded her head.

Going over she took the basket from him. "He's changing, he looks like a peacock."

"I'm sure. Have you two had breakfast? I wasn't going to eat much myself, however, I could always go to the kitchen."

Hesitating bashfully, she certainly wasn't going to tell him about their order of fruit, champagne, and crème chantilly for breakfast. "You know, if you make a pot of coffee we'll go to the bakery and pick up some pastries." It was early in the village. Lumiere had returned right after sunrise in case she had needed to make an escape. Thankfully it hadn't been needed, however, it meant Villeneuve was just stirring to life when they arrived.
"Sounds like a plan." He said, shuffling towards the kitchen.

Taking a moment to enjoy the normalcy, Belle brought the basket of eggs to the kitchen to clean and inspect them.

A beat passed while Maurice carefully gathered his words before speaking. He was, naturally, a little worried as her father. It had been a month after all. "May I ask how you two are?"

"Better." Belle said tactfully. "However, we need to really talk. We've kind of avoided it."

"I'm sure your reunion was emotional." Completely missing the look of affirmation Belle had, Maurice continued. "It's hard to talk about the heavier topics when everything feels so raw. But it is important."

Before she could answer, the door to her room opened and shut. Ansell came trotting down, looking rather splendid in his new floral waistcoat, shirt, and grin. "Mauriiiiiiiccccccc-" His cheery mood died and his eyes widened in horror to the large, friendly black wolfhound puppy that hopped over to him.

Belle grimaced. In the moment she had completely forgotten about her new friend. "Oooohhh. Yes."

Snuffling his boots and breeches, Isolde gazed up at him in happy obliviousness.

"Whyyyyyyyy, is the dog here?" Freezing as if he had a pistol to his head, Ansell slowly turned to stare at Belle in disbelief.

Maurice's eyes swept between the two. Snapping his fingers, Isolde quickly loped over to him. "Good girl, Isolde. Now sit."

"You gave her a name?!!" He bleated, completely ignoring the puppy sitting dutifully at Maurice's feet. "Belle, it was meant for Chip!"

Turning towards him, Belle wasn't about to take his tone. "Mrs. Potts was not about to let Chip have a dog."

"So why is she here?" Opening his arms wide he gestured to the door. "You know I hate dogs! There are a million other places for a dog to be!"

"If you hate her so much then why did you save her?!"

Both father and dog watched the two cross the floor heatedly.

"Because it was trying to do the right thing!"

"By passing her off onto Chip?!"

"It's not like that!"

"It's exactly like that." Crossing her arms over her chest she glared at Ansell so harshly he opened his mouth and suddenly stopped before anything could come out. "You sent her back, and there wasn't a suitable home for her. You can't just assume someone will take an animal. She's here now, and she's a part of the family."

Slowly, the blue eyes went to the side, watching the big-footed pup slouching against Maurice's leg. Head tilted to one side, then cocking to the other. "How can there not be a more suitable home-"
"Ansell-

"She's a hunting dog, Belle!" He snapped, extending a hand towards the forest nearby and curling his lip to unwittingly flash a bit of canine. "She's built to sniff and stalk and maul what her master sees fit!"

They began to circle one another, slowly. "Would you rather she go to a home where she's taught that or stay in one where it's never nurtured?"

The words made the prince's face sink. Her tone was low, somber, smoldering. He knew that tone, yet his temper still flared.

"Would you rather she be yet another hunting hound or just a family dog?" Belle scowled.

"But why is it this home-"

"Because that's the decision that was made because you weren't here!" Belle didn't mean for the words to come out so accusingly, however, they did. And she could see they cut deep as his face flashed a twinge of pain. It hurt her heart.

Taking a deep breath, Ansell steadied himself. "You know I had no choice as to being away."

"I didn't mean it that way." She quickly backtracked, though it was clear it was too late.

Shutting his eyes, his fists clenched and loosened. Of all the things to set them off, the damned pup. "Are you going to tell me I need to just get over this?"

Taking a step in, she had to breathe steadily. She didn't know why, but it was too easy to want to spar with him. "No, I'm going to ask you to give her a chance."

Turning away ever so slightly, he saw the dog again and bristled.

"She's good, Ansell. Papa and I work with her every day. She's not being taught to be a hunter, just a companion." Letting out a deep breath, Belle rocked on her heels before taking a step back and away from him. It felt like a chasm had suddenly broken between them, their happy, stuporous morning meaningless. The sweetness spoiling to vinegar. "Listen, this was the best option, and I knew you wouldn't be fond of her-"

"Then why did you do it?"

His voice was wounded, quiet. "Because I couldn't bear the guilt of handing her over to a hunter. I'd rather keep her than have her turned into a killer."

It was a struggle, it tore him to pieces inside. One of his greatest fears, his most loathed enemies, staring at him dumbly. The pup was no longer small enough to be tucked under an arm as he had done when he had rescued the little beast. She was long and gangly, well on her way to becoming a giant. And as his eyes moved to Maurice, it was clear the old man was attached to the creature, as was Belle.

It killed him he hadn't been apart of it. Even if he hadn't won, he still would have been a participant, apart of the family discussion, instead of stumbling into it after the fact.

Belle and Maurice observed him carefully. Isolde flopped over Maurice's boot and grumbled, thumping her tail.
Letting out a deep breath and running his fingers through his hair, the prince slouched. "I suppose I should be the last one to make a snap judgment on anything based on looks and preconceived notions." Ansell did his best not to growl and to allow the tension to roll out of the room with his words. Looking around the cottage, he managed to reply. "Maurice, have you had breakfast yet? Belle and I could always get pastries."

Maurice's eyes swept between the bull-headed couple. "That would be lovely if it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all." He replied stiffly, turning to Belle and trying his best not to be testy. "Mademoiselle?"

Belle headed towards the door while Isolde noticed it was time for their morning walk and trotted over with her tail wagging.

Ansell paused, watching the invader.

"She comes along," Belle told him, waiting for him to catch up.

Letting out a huff of air, he followed the girl and the dog.

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Heading into the market, the tension slowly dissipated with the hum of the village. It was a pleasant breakfast with Ansell and Maurice both enjoying catching up with one another and falling into their old rhythm. The old man was delighted to hear about the prince's expanding knowledge on herbs and wild stories about court while the prince wanted to know everything about the artist's projects. Eventually, the trio headed out, dog following, and wandered up towards the church.

Ansell's eyes brightened as he stepped into the little classroom. It was luminous in the morning light, townsfolk bustling on the other side of the windows. Mouth falling into an open smile of wonder, he wandered in further. Running loose fingers across a tabletop, he stopped at the wall. Knights, princesses, dragons, and monsters filled the once blank space, all of the stupendous images pouring out of open books.

"Maurice," Turning, he found Maurice and Belle look lingering in the doorway and flashed a wide grin. "This is marvelous."

"Thank you. It should all be done by tonight. Just a few touches left." Watching the prince go up to the teacher's desk painted a stunning blue with bright flowers winding up the legs and desktop, Maurice stepped to the side. Allowing for Père Robert to look into the room with Belle, their friend noticed their royal guest inspecting the new classroom.

"Your Grace!" The priest beamed. "I didn't know you had returned."

"Père Robert," he greeted "Just for the day, unfortunately. However, I heard about a new classroom opening up in the village and I just had to come and take a look."

"It's lovely, isn't it?" He said. "I have little girls running into mass asking me when school starts."

Raising a brow he asked. "How many?"

"Four so far with other curious parents." Belle took a step in.
Carefully, he picked up a small slate, trimmed to the perfect size for wee hands to use. The bowl of chalk had broken stubs and bits that had clearly been collected discards. "We'll have to have the castle donate new boxes of chalk. Not to mention some paper, quills, and ink." Suddenly confused by his Darling's shaking head, he looked at her promptly.

"The castle isn't paying for anything." She declared firmly, walking in further, owning her space. "Cogsworth and Mrs. Potts have had the castle donate things the house no longer needs to be repurposed but you're not buying anything new I'm doing this on my own."

Letting out a puff of air Ansel became more rankled than he had planned for when he noticed a folded quilt, bowl of water, and bone placed next to the desk. Where had the giddiness and drunken love from the morning gone? He began to regret getting out of bed. She was so bloody stubborn as an eye roll slipped from him.

Belle saw it and frowned. "I don't want anyone to accuse me of using my relationship with the prince of the province to get ahead."

"Hrm." He grunted unconvincingly.

"I'm not going to let it happen." She pressed. "I'm working with what I have around."

It was hard for him to conceive why she wouldn't want help. The gesture wasn't about being self-sufficient, merely making sure the class had the best tools available. "Alright," he conceded. Turning back to the tables and benches he noted their sturdy design. "Where did you find these?"

"I traded for the lumber and made them myself." She said, smiling with pride when a grin burst across his handsome face. "Like I said, your tool belt came in handy."

"You never ceases to amaze me." He exclaimed.

"Always full of surprises, our Headmistress." Père Robert agreed.

"No negative reactions?"

Worrying the corner of her apron and slowly circling the room Belle replied tightly. "Not yet," Unwilling to talk about the Headmaster, Clothilde, and the looks they gave her she carried on. "I'm not holding my breath though. But I can see to that myself."

"Well, when you cross that bridge I suppose." It was crystal clear she wouldn't let him get involved in any of it. Ansell told himself he needed to stop arguing and just let it all be. Even though he didn't want to. He wished to meddle after a month of being removed from their affairs. "Père Robert, I have to thank you for handling the service."

"I'm glad I could help." The priest bowed ever so slightly. "I know that part of the past is very difficult for Your Grace and his household. I applaud you for funding the services."

"He was an important member of the community, regardless of his deeds." It was obvious the prince was over the subject as he adjusted his shoulders and straightened his back.

A chorus of little shoes pounded on the church floors, filling the air. "Père Robert!" Eva and the other girls breathlessly entered the room. "Do you know if-oh! Belle!" The girls found their teacher-to-be and pounced on her. "Belle, do you know when school starts?"

Turning, hands laced behind his back, Ansell grinned cheekily. "Yes, when does class start, Headmistress?"
Arching a brow at him, Belle looked down at her bright minds. "Well, girls, we're nearly set. I just need to go see if we have any books in the castle library we can use as textbooks." The little faces, so eager to learn, sank just a bit. "I promise, we're so close, and you're doing a wonderful job of being patient."

Perking, Ansell turned to her. "Is that all? Books?"

"It's hard to rummage around in the library with a full schedule every day." She explained. "Plus, while I have a good lay of the land I don't know every inch of the library."

"But that's it?" he asked once more.

"That's it." She shrugged.

"Would you care to start class tomorrow?"

Befuddled and furrowing her brows, Belle stared at him, saying slowly, "If it's possible. Why?"

"Ah." Pulling the faded trunk out of the piles of dusty items tucked away in storage, Ansell let out a cough.

"Master!" Cogsworth appeared on the verge of a conniption. "You should allow the footmen to take care of such matters."

Stooping, Ansell unlatched the clasps. "Oh, there's no need, Cogsworth. I'm perfectly capable."

Belle watched her prince curiously, the trunk opening with a reluctant groan. Inside were rows of little books neatly stacked to the top and a musty, pleasant smell emanated from them. Aged ink, paper, and leather. One of her favorite perfumes.

"They're old, back from when I was just a boy." he shrugged, handing her one of the books.

Gently running her fingers across the worn hardcover, Belle read the title. "These are all children's readers?"

"My mother bought so many copies because she had my tutor also teach the children at the castle before she passed." He explained from his crouched spot on the floor. "She bought too many, actually.Preferred to have an excess in case more children showed up." Gazing up at her for an answer he cocked his head to the side, bits of golden hair tumbling into his face. "Do you think these will work for your girls?"

Mouth opening, yet unable to speak, the brown eyes shimmered down at him, ecstatic with the discovery. "Yes." She managed, a grin spreading across her lovely features. "Yes, these are perfect."

"Good," he said warmly. "We'll have the men load them into a wagon and drop the trunk off this afternoon." Watching her open the book up, keenly flipping through and reading some of the passages, all of the stresses from their morning spats disappeared. "I know they're a bit out of date-"

"It's fine. I can work with this, what matters is we have readers for the children." letting out a lovely, happy giggle towards her good fortune, Belle held the reader close to her chest as if it were one of the most precious things in the world. "Thank you, Ansell."

"I'm glad I could contribute in some way, Darling." Dusting off his fingers, he rose and wrapped an
arm around her, pressing his lips to her forehead. "I'm so excited for you to be able to teach." Turning, he looked to Cogsworth.

"They'll be delivered, Master." He told them both, bowing and leaving them to the storage.

Belle gently tugged her prince's wrist, tucking the small book into a pocket on her apron as they wandered down the hall. "Well, that was a pleasant surprise. Class starts tomorrow, the girls will be pleased."

"They were so ready to learn." He grinned, his mood mellowing and becoming more sincere. "D

"MASTER!" Mrs. Potts cried, shoving a stack of linens into the arms of a startled maid and charging over. "Oh my dear boy!"

Belle wisely stepped out of the way as Ansell was nearly bowled over by the small Englishwoman. "Mrs. P." The wind was knocked out of him as she squeezed his ribs. Clumsily, he managed to free his arms and hug her back.

She kissed his cheek. "Oh we missed you." Kissing his cheeks several times, her face was hot with tears. "Are they feeding you?"

"Mrs. Potts it's Versailles." He reminded her. "And I'm well, I miss home but I'm well." Patting her back, he had missed her constant, loving badgering. "Are you well?"

"We're getting on, Master. But the castle's not the same without you." She refused to let go. They couldn't take him. "I do hope we can get you home."

"Me too." He sighed, his father's edict looming over like a black thundercloud. "However, Belle and I will be here for a spell before we go on an outing."

"We'll stay for tea at the very least." Belle reassured.

"And we'll have to dress for Verona." Ansell added. "Not too formal, however, it is an occasion." Smiling as his darling blushed with excitement, Mrs. Potts finally let go. While she stepped away, he watched her cup her palm over her mouth. "Is everything alright?"

"Your gifts." Mrs. Potts gasped. "They were so thoughtful. All of the children have shoes and clothes and I don't have to yell at Cogsworth because he's as blind as a bat."

Smiling, Ansell rocked on his heels. "I'm so glad everything has helped. Those little teacups of ours are growing like weeds now that they can grow. I can't have them shivering when they want to go outside and play in the snow."

"Well, we all appreciate the gesture."

"And they're all well?" He asked as they all headed down the hall to catch up. "Please, I want to know everything."

"Well then." Ansell drew in a deep breath as he looked about the lovely Piazza. After a long visit with the staff, Belle and Ansell had been washed, dressed, and sent off via the book. Straightening his waistcoat, not as nearly as garish as his court attire yet not as plain as his clothes for the village, he turned to Belle. A wide, toothy grin spreading across his handsome features as his love was bright
with excitement. Belle's mouth had fallen ever so slightly open, and the brown eyes were wide with awe.

Slowly turning around, the Roman cobblestones under her feet, the sights, and sounds, the hum of Verona, filled her.

Gazing up at the enormous colosseum they found themselves in front of, Ansell carefully tucked the book into the leather satchel he had brought along to keep it safe. "Ah, the Arena di Verona."

Glancing over to her, he nodded towards it. "Seems there's a concert. Shall we-" before he could suggest attending, Belle gave his wrist a pull before letting go and taking off down the street. "Or… not- Belle!"

Ansell had to break into a jog to catch up with Belle. Dodging people and animals along the way who were non too pleased to have a man run towards them who was not as easily avoided as a slight brunette woman, he found himself apologizing profusely. As he struggled to catch up, Belle slipping into the street, Ansell was amazed. It was if she had lived in Verona her entire life. Her steps determined, purposeful. She knew where she wanted to go, god help him.

Turning back, she found the prince struggling to keep up.

"Where on Earth are we going?" He asked, mildly amused at her determination, yet fearful he'd lose sight of her.

Somewhat perturbed he was slowing her down, Belle caught his wrist. "You'll see, come on."

Ansell followed obediently, he had no other choice. It was her birthday outing and while any other mademoiselle would want to be showered with gifts or taken to expensive shops his Belle had other plans. She most certainly had her bearings, and he assumed she had at one point looked at a map or two, for they were quickly at her desired destination.

Catching her breath and turning to him with an excited grin, Belle gazed at him as if he was in on her little adventure to the worn down stone house on the street.

Taking a deep breath and stretching his legs, Ansell tilted his head and let out a chuckle. "Darling, I haven't the foggiest. Where did you end up taking us?"

Grinning, her heart skipping in her chest, Belle jogged off around the corner and into a courtyard.

Ansell's face fell as he trailed behind. "Wait- Belle-" Being glared at by a woman carrying a basket of laundry he blushed and excused himself in Italian as he slipped by. "I think people live here. And where on earth is here?"

She frozen in her tracks, letting out a small laugh of disbelief. "It does exist."

Wandering over, he stared at the small, narrow balcony she was gawking at like a treasure. A hand came up, cupping over her mouth, as she let out an excited squeak.

"It really does exist."

Conceding that she was too caught up in her discovery, Ansell wandered the small courtyard, reading the signs, putting together the information himself. It was not a remarkable building, and was in fact, in rather poor condition as he carefully sidestepped all manner of livestock waste. "Via Cappello," He read, looking up to note the coat of arms above the archway. "Cappelletti… the Cappelletts." Turning back to Belle he realized why she was so excited.
"It's her balcony." She breathed. "Just like in the book. She might not have been real but the families were."

"And this was their home." Ansell marveled.

"But soft! What light through yonder window breaks." She recited.

"It is the east and Juliet is the sun." He continued, grinning with her. His darling looked fit to cry.

"Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon," She carried on easily, the words etched onto her heart. A heart which burst at the sight of a house she had always dreamed of. "Who is already sick and pale with grief, That thou, her maid, art far more fair than she."

Gently, Ansell placed his hand on the small of her back. "I didn't know it was real."

"I had heard during a trip to Paris, through friends who worked in a theatre." She whispered, in awe of the crumbling home while chickens scratched around her feet. Turning, she smiled gratefully up at him. "Thank you, I've always wanted to see it."

"And so you did, Darling." Not giving a damn and reaching out, he lovely cupped her chin.

"I'd like to find a copy of the book in Italian while we're here." She said, softly, still lost in the wonder of her favorite romance in the flesh. "I know the play so well I can use it to learn the language, it's how I picked up English."

"As you wish." Seeing her so happy did him good, it melted away the spats of the morning. He had yearned for a month for her joy, and it was like an elixir. "But, we have a whole afternoon ahead of ourselves and I doubt you want to recite the entire play right here. So where shall we go next? When you're ready of course."

Mulling over the question, a slow, knowing smile pulled at the corners of her mouth.

"Do you think this is enough for Noel?" Ansell asked in a concerned tone while the shopkeep at the toy store was whisking away an armful of dollies and wooden boxes full of sets of toy soldiers.

Belle looked up at him, amused at his genuine struggle with how much was in fact too much. The shop was large, brimming with colorful toys and intricate knick knacks all made by hand. A child's paradise, containing gifts some could never even imagine. Full of possible gifts for their favorite pack of children.

"Should we get them marionettes?" He asked, wandering off to another corner, looking at a display "Or puppets?"

Belle went over to a table full of plush toys, staring at one rather unique looking stuffed animal.

"They have a Punch and Judy set, perhaps-" Turning, he came face to face with a small plush toy. The clothes a royal blue, the face a lion's with little felted horns. Little felted tusks and claws, a fluffy tail of rabbit's fur.

"I think our story is getting around." She told him as he carefully took the toy.

Inspecting it, his face fell. "Well for starters, my nose was never pink."
"It's shaped like a little heart." She noted, watching him frown to the notion. A peeved scoff was served to the little felted beast, and it amused her to no end at the bit of canine that was flashed at it.

"Ridiculous. It certainly wasn't heart shaped."

"It was a little." She watched him, ruffled at the thought of being a toy. "It was a very cute nose. It twitched when we sat down to eat."

"You thought my nose was cute?" He turned, slowly, looking a bit amazed that she had liked something about the other him.

"You were only really ugly when you were mean." Stealing a glance at him, giving a wistful little smile, she told him gently. "And you've always had the most beautiful eyes."

Ansell dipped his head, cheeks blushing to the answer. It was easy to forget, and perhaps he never wanted to remember, that she had also loved the side of him he hated. "Well, as cute as that is, I don't think the castle's children would want to be reminded of the years were they were all serveware."

"No, of course not. But," Belle drew the little beast to her chest and looked at him sheepishly. Watching her, eventually he rolled his eyes. "I thought I saw a book, why don't you get the whole set for yourself? And we can see how absurd the story is compared to what we know."

Tucking the book and the beast into their pile, she resumed hunting for toys. "I can't wait to spoil all of them." Belle mused. "They deserve a nice Noel, after all they've been through."

"They've been teacups for years, I think that justifies a mountain of presents." Ansell agreed.

"They should all get some kind of story book-" Belle told him as she wandered off towards a bookshelf. "Just a small one for their stockings."

Pausing, Ansell followed, a dolly dressed in lace absently held in his hand. As he watched Belle rummage through the books for stocking stuffers, the prince held up the toy and inspected it, becoming lost in thought.

Slowly turning with a stack of books, Belle tilted her head and sidled up to him. His concentration drawing her away from her task. "That's a very nice doll, though we're already buying seven."

Drawn from his thoughts, the clear blue eyes darted to the side. "Just thinking about how we might be doing this a few Christmases down the road for a little girl or boy."

"Ah." She nodded knowingly. "A little blond boy."

"A little brunette." He offered with a smirk. "She's very bright, likes it when her parents read to her."

"What's this might, Ansell?"

Shrugging, his eyes were suddenly so empty. "Maybe we should just run away now, so he can't take it away from us."

Quietly, discreetly, she balanced her stack of child-sized books onto one hand and slipped the other's fingers between his own; giving them a squeeze. "Would you be comfortable right now? You have a lot left to learn and we have a lot we haven't planned or talked about."

"Maybe I should just propose to one of the noblewomen." He sighed, glancing back down at the dolly. How could she feel so far away from him when she was in the same room? "There's a girl
from Saxony who keeps sniffing around. By the time we're actually supposed to be married it'll be a year or more and you and I will be long gone."

Grimacing, she slipped her hand out of his own. Taken back by his suggestion. "That's rather cruel towards her, don't you think?"

"It would give us time, Belle." Setting the toy down the prince shifted uncomfortably. Seeing her after a month was supposed to have been easy. He hadn't anticipated having a day with everything normal being so difficult. "He won't be content until I'm betrothed, and I'm running out of options. We're running out of options."

"There has to be a better way." Thinking for a beat, Belle passed the books over to him, letting out a heavy breath. "Let's not talk about this on my birthday trip." She told him somberly. "Hold those, we need a few more."

Chapter End Notes

Now that we're past the night together; time apart always brings some tension. And book trips! And reminders that deep conversations lie ahead. Because we can't just fool around in bed, we have to talk too.

Note: There IS in fact a house in Verona called Casa di Giulietta. Like how I used The Globe in a previous chapter, there's some hand-wavy truth-stretching here. The house was owned by the Capulets in Verona, and was a rundown hotel during the 18th century and not famous at all. It only really became a tourist attraction in the 1900s. The balcony was installed around then when it was repaired and remodeled a bit. BUT for the sake of our story it existed and because Belle is such a nerd for the Bard, of course, she knew about it.

Thank you, for reading this story. Thank you for reading, bookmarking, kudo-ing, and commenting. Do you like the story? Don't like it? Something bothering you? Have a theory? Quality took a nose dive? Let me know below in the comments. I always read and try my best to respond.
“Of all the places and all the sights in Verona.”

Belle looked up from the book to watch Ansell playfully slide around the long bookcase to watch her, the blue eyes sparkling and making her heart skip a beat.

Grinning toothily he came forward and leaned against the mighty oaken wall of books. Carefully, the prince kept his hands behind his back. “You take to the library for respite.”

“You knew who you were falling in love with.” She exclaimed with a raised brow. The two had bought an exorbitant amount of toys with the royal purse, used the book to hide them carefully in the castle away from prying little eyes before resuming their outing. Belle had enjoyed dragging Ansell along to the sites she so desperately wanted to see from her years of reading and after a while she had slowed her pace and found a familiar, soothing space. “And what on earth have you been up to?”

“Well, while you’ve been enjoying your books in la Biblioteca Capitolare, I went for a stroll outside.” He explained.

“You’ve missed out. Some of the oldest books in the world are here.” She exclaimed, still in awe. “And the man who cares for the books isn’t against women reading them. Even ones who can’t speak Italian.”

“What a novel notion.” He quipped. “It seems only the French countryside is backward. We ought to do something about that.”

“I’m on it, I assure you.” Narrowing her eyes, she focused on the hands still hiding from sight. “And what has you so pleased with yourself?”

Attempting to give a straight face, he failed miserably. “Whoever said I was pleased with myself?”

“That stupid look on your face that says so.”

The noble face fell.

She giggled, gesturing him to show his hands. “Come on, let’s see.”

Smoothly he presented a bottle of Veronese wine.

Belle raised a brow at him and eyed the second, still hidden hand.

He with a flourish he unveiled a new leather-bound copy of *Romeo e Guilietta*. The title embossed in gold shimmered in the sunlight. “For your lingual pursuits, Mademoiselle.”

“You know how to woo me, Monsieur.” She smiled, carefully cracking the rich red cover and flipping through the crisp pages.

“I can certainly try.” He tucked the bottle of wine into his satchel.

Belle flashed a mischievous smile. “Are we to wander the streets drinking straight from the bottle?”
“Some of us aren’t always troublemakers. Some of us like to buy gifts.” He replied in a matter of fact manner as she put the library’s book back on its shelf. Offering her a chivalrously upturned palm, he escorted her down the stairs and to the entrance. “Like a nice bottle of wine for a dear artist who manages to somehow put up with both of us.”

“Your Grace, are you implying I’m a troublemaker and people have to put up with me?” Belle asked wryly as he opened the massive oak door to the outside world. The sun was hanging low and the sky was warming with a hint of pink as it threatened to set.

Smirking, Ansell guided her around the corner. “Ahb-sol-lutely.” Chuckling when he was checked with a hip, they continued to stroll down the street. “But only in the best ways-”

“Liar.”

“Well, we both are troublemakers. It's why we're so good together. We’re quite the pair when we get into it, you know.” He reminded her.

“The funny girl and her growling prince.” She laughed and was pleased when he followed suit. The sound of his laughter, genuine laughter, was divine. For most of the day he had such a melancholy about him. Even when he had tried to stuff it deep down inside she had caught it. Hiding behind his eyes, making her stomach twist. That sad look of the Beast. But oh, the laughter in the moment was pure.

“Speaking of getting into it, I'd like to apologize.” Pausing on the street, he turned to face her “I didn't mean to become upset about the dog or become difficult regarding supplying the school.”

“I should apologize too.” Belle gazed into the blue eyes that sparkled less again. “You’ve been gone for a month and there’ve been so many changes.”

“I can't help but feel like I've missed so much and I just want to be home.” he lamented.

“We'll figure out a way to get you back home.” Squeezing his hand she wanted to kiss her prince and spirit him away from all of his woes. “I don't like you missing so much of our life either.”

Mouth twitching, Ansell couldn't hide an amused smile.

Slowly she tilted her head to the side.

“I like the idea of our life,” Ansell explained in a soft tone.

Belle blushed “Me too. It'll be a good life when you're back. We can fill it with more of these book trips abroad.”

“Yes. And next time we’re in Verona, we’ll plan ahead for a concert.” Ansell said while they headed back through the winding row of artisan stalls and shops. “I’ll go ahead and procure tickets, somehow we’ll manage a coach and dinner, it’ll be splendid.”

Her lips twitched. “I like it when you talk about our future.” She told him.

“As down as I can get, I do like thinking about it in a good way, you know.” Looking around, not liking how awkward their day had been, he soldiered on with her. Why did it have to be so? They had been having a wonderful time in his apartment. Amazing, with very minimal talking of all of the terrible things befalling them. Not to mention so much passion. “Anything suit you?” He asked, pausing to admire a hand painted tea set. “We’ve spent most of our time shopping for others, I’ve hardly bought you a thing.”
“You got me books. I love books.” She reassured.

He pursed his lips and raised a brow. Any other woman would coo over jewels and silk, any other woman would eagerly accept expensive baubles and trinkets. Yet before him was his Darling.

She scoffed at his expression. “I like what I like, some of us don't need all of the frivolous trappings.”

Rolling his eyes playfully, he snorted. “Which is why you're impossible to spoil. And you’re sure that’s it? Your two books and silly plush beast?”

“I’m certain. Though I’d really like to do something you want.”

“We did what I wanted, practically all night.”

She gave him a playfully scandalized look as he flashed a toothy grin. “Besides that.”

“I'm open to doing it all over again-”

“Something that doesn’t involve a bed-”

“I can think of several ways that don't involve a bed.”

“Something in public.”

“I think we would get arrested?” He laughed as she bumped into him once and shook her head.

“I’m serious. It's not too late, we can have dinner and then do something else.” She encouraged.

“Spending time with you is all I want. So this has been marvelous.”

Looking at his face, she noted a faraway expression. “I sense something else?”

Hesitating, he sighed.

“Ansell.”

“I suppose I was just imagining what I've wanted since this nightmare has started; to be able to take you to court with me and show you Versailles. Take you to the gardens, bring you to a ball, to the salons, to the dinners.” The words were wistful, the gaze far away. “I would have gone willingly if he had just acknowledged us and allowed you to come. Truly.”

Her stomach churned. “Do you think we would belong there?”

Shrugging, he looked around helplessly. “I don’t know, maybe? We haven’t a choice at this juncture.” Sighing heavily, he gazed sincerely into the deep brown eyes and his chest felt too tight. “Not that I think it's what’s- It just bothers me, the stratification. The difference between court and the village.” Snorting as his brows fixed, he became more and more rankled at his own words. “There's a horrid way those above treat the rest below. It's this space they want to keep between us, Belle. He wants me to know your place and move on.” Ansell curled his lip, his patience quickly fraying again. “But your place is with me. Even if I'm at court. Especially when I'm at court.”

The goodness of the day faded into the distance. “I'm sorry you have to live amongst that.”

“It's alright.” Lips pursing, it most certainly did not feel right. Furtively gazing over Verona, his shoulders sunk. “I just wish there was some way to take you, you should at least be able to experience it once.”
Belle’s big brown eyes ached.

“I’m ruining the day again.” He grumbled to himself. “Belle, I’m so s-”

“Don't apologize.” She said softly. “I’m flattered at you wanting to take me to court, but I really just want to be able to take you hom-”

The princes watched her, gears turning in his head. “You know-”

“What?”

“I think I know what I want to do.” He said, turning to look around.

When Maurice opened the front door the marvelous sound of laughter and the mouth-watering smell of food came cascading out and over him.

“I'm not going to burn it! She told me to cook it this way.”

“Please don’t set the house on fire!” Belle laughed.

“You wound me! No faith in me and my skill.” Ansell teased.

“You have no skill, you've never cooked before-”

“How do you know whether or not you have talent unless you try? Where's your sense of adventure?”

“I prefer adventures to not have- oh, Papa.” turning to the doorway as Isolde loped in his daughter's face was a cheerful, bright red. The pair stood in the kitchen, Ansell manning the stove and oven, Belle before the cutting board slicing thin strips of a cured meat.

“I wasn't expecting you for dinner,” Maurice said, watching the two curiously as Ansell turned around in a floral half-apron with a lace trim.

“Well, it was a bit if a spur of the moment.” The prince explained. “I wanted to have dinner at the house with you. However, I also wanted to have Italian.”

“And you suddenly became a chef in Verona?” Maurice asked in amusement, taking off his hat and coat.

“I bought a cookbook. Also, I may have paid a woman handsomely for some pasta and instructions on how one would prepare such fair.” He explained, pleased with himself as he used a wooden spoon to push around a pan full of sizzling vegetables. “This has become the greatest test of the strength of our relationship.”

Rolling her eyes, Belle went and took the small stack of plates to the table before returning to the kitchen to grab and onion and knife. “We also picked up a chicken, some bread, vegetables, olive oil, and cheese-”

“And wine!”
“And wine.”

"I may have bought a lot of wine."

Maurice chuckled at the two. “You know, Belle, having a cook in the house would come in handy.”

“See? Thank you, Maurice. It's nice to have someone believe in my culinary pursuits. Maybe I'll like cooking, perhaps I'll be a fabulous cook.” Turning, he gave Belle the wriest of looks. “Would you be alright if you were the breadwinner who went off to work as a teacher? I can stay and home with my herbs and tend to the house and cook you supper.”

Shaking her head at him, Belle finished chopping an onion. “If you think we turn heads now-"

“Who gives a damn, I think this apron is quite fetching.” watching her giggle, lips tight as to keep from laughing too hard, he turned to Maurice. “Would you do the honor and open up a bottle?”

Watching the two, their laughter brightening the house, he went over and retrieved the cups. “So what have you two been up to other than grocery shopping?”

“Belle found herself some books, surprise surprise.” She made a face at him and when Maurice looked away he stuck his tongue out. “There was a lot of walking."

We looked at a lot of architecture.” Belle told her father. “Went shopping-"

“Recited a lot of Shakespeare.”

“It was simply a nice day to ourselves.” Belle finished. “We wandered most of the time, stopped when we wanted to.”

“So how much longer until dinner is served?” Setting cups down, he began to move forward to help but Ansell vigorously shook his head, gesturing to a chair at the table.

“Chicken is nearly done.” He announced. “Cooking some tomatoes in olive oil and garlic. I was told the pasta doesn’t need much time? We’ve been snacking on bread with cheese and soppressata.”

Belle grabbed the wooden cutting board she had the meat and other various foods on and set it on the table next to her father.

“Oh, thank you.” Staring suspiciously at the non-french fare, a foreign cuisine he had never thought of eating, the artist cautiously took some of the spread. “So this grand escape of ours.” Maurice began, picking at the cheese. “When are we leaving again?”

“After the thaw.” Belle sighed, dumping the onions she had chopped into the pan with her prince’s tomatoes.

“Thank you, Darling. Why don’t you sit at the table while I bumble around in here and ruin dinner?” Shooing her over to Maurice, he took a sip. “We have to get me back here first,” Ansell grumbled. “I'm not allowed to leave until there's a betrothal.”

“You're not going to propose to someone though and use them.” She said somberly, mouth a thin, resolute line as she went over to the workbench.

Maurice looked between the two cautiously as there was a sudden tension in the air. Beginning to regret asking the question, his mouth fell to a frown.

Staring far too intensely at his vegetables, the prince did his best to ignore the puppy sniffing at his
boots for scraps. “What if he chooses someone for me?”

“That's different, you're not tricking someone.” Taking a sip, it was painful to think he would have to return in the early morning. “That's being forced, it's not your fault that she's left alone when we run.”

“Regardless, I would like to work more urgently on getting my affairs in order.” Furrowing his brow, his shoulders felt too heavy with responsibility. “I need to learn more, of course, however, I would like to leave the town better off. But this tax-”

“What's wrong with this tax?” Maurice asked keenly as he slipped the pup a sliver of Italian cured meat before serving some to himself. Biting into his hors-d'oeuvre, a look of pleasant surprise swept over his face at the taste.

Shifting his weight, he locked eyes with the old man. So sincere. “It's a tax on spices. In all honesty, originally created it to spend it all on myself. And it's extremely messy, I made sure it couldn't be reversed. I spend half my waking hours just agonizing over these taxes and budgets, seeing what I can cut. The crown already takes too much from the people, and I’m exempt from paying any taxes myself.” Looking down at his hands, he studied the lines on his knuckles. The guilt churning his stomach as his mother's kind, generous face came into view. “When my mother died, her lands went to me and I squandered my power. I want to leave this place better than I inherited it.” Opening the oven and checking his chicken, he thought it looked roughly as those the chef cooked at the castle. Hopefully, he mused, all of his time wandering into the kitchens out of curiosity since the curse had lifted had paid off.

There was a silence between the three, Maurice and Belle both dwelling on the problem.

“Pour the money back into the community,” Maurice suggested, brightening the prince's spirits immediately. “All of those taxes? Budget what you need to run your house. Staff, repairs, whatever else. But put the rest back into Villeneuve.”

“We could use a library,” Belle told him. “And a new school-”

“The church needs repairs, I know Pere Robert would like to build a small kitchen to feed the poor.” Her father added. “What about a medical facility? A doctor and healthcare when needed.”

“Meals for the poor during the winter months.” She said. “I've been talking to some people and the crops didn't yield enough for a lot of them because of the frost.”

“Care for the young men who went to war.” Ansell mused, dropping his pasta into a pot of boiling water. “So many lost their health. And, I could build new housing to rent to villagers and encourage growth. To welcome people to the village.”

Maurice smiled, pleased at the topic as well as the prince. He was a good boy, thoughtful, a touch goofy with his lace aprons and teasing which only made him all the more endearing. “See? Even if you can't save them money by eliminating the tax, you can promote growth and give them a better life in other ways. All of those things? They'd go a long way to keeping families well.”

“I'll have to look into it, but it's a splendid idea.” He agreed, drinking his wine and keeping an eye on his vegetables. “If we’re talking about infrastructure, it’s best to start some sooner rather than later. Like that kitchen for the church, a pantry to distribute goods for the less fortunate during the winter months.”

Maurice spread another dollop of cheese onto a hunk of bread. “Well, then that’s settled. Now, in
other pressing topics, I hear there’s been research on where we’re to land when all this is over.”

“Oh, yes.” Ansell sighed. “That is a pressing topic I suppose. Belle, Darling, I know you’ve been looking more into it.”

“I was thinking the Americas?” Belle supplied “There’s so much land, free land, and it’s an ocean away. Some territories speak French, and a lot of it isn’t even owned by France. We could really disappear.”

“They’re having a revolution though,” Maurice told her. “And it sounds terribly dangerous out in their frontiers. You hear all of those tales of natives.”

“If we stayed near their cities, we could end up in the thick of it,” Ansell said worriedly. “And the wilderness has its own dangers.”

She shrugged.

“Plus, we don’t have to worry about procuring land, I’ve been setting aside a little every month. Not much, just here and there so that it doesn’t show up in the ledger.” He told the two, watching them both tilt their head to the news. “I figured we should be able to purchase a house at the very least.”

“Well, aren’t you being the proactive one.” Maurice smiled. “Good job.”

Being praised by Maurice never ceased to bolster him. “Thank you.”

“On a less extreme note,” Belle recovered the topic, “I also think we should consider Italy. You know the language, I want to pick it up. In fact, you know the language of a lot of countries.”

“I thought of Denmark myself; far, far up north, you know,” Ansell replied. “Might even see some mermaids. I heard a princess was once one? Bit curious to meet other magical folk.”

“But?”

“But I think England or Italy have my votes. My brother is in Italy, and he’s been surprisingly supportive. My Aunt is a Marquis in England and her husband has a considerable amount of land. Several towns worth. She’s also been very positive, not to mention she loathes my father and likes to undermine him at any opportunity. So that’s a bonus.”

Maurice pursed his lips in approval. “I like her already.”

Sipping tentatively, Belle raised a cautious brow. “Supportive enough to trust with helping us disappear?”

“I’m trying to figure that out still. At any rate, it would be nice if we had some people we knew wherever we land.”

“A little family to trust sounds good,” Belle said, her shoulders sinking as the words brought on another thought. “I mean, we’ll be losing so much of it.”

Ansell looked away and into the distance, eyes sad at the notion. “Very true.”

“With either of them, we’d both be able to speak the language. And I think you could pick up either, Papa. We’d help you.”

Maurice nodded his head sadly at the thought of leaving the staff. “Isn’t it cold and wet in England?”
“My brother, Francis, has a castle up in the mountains in Italy so either way we’ll probably be cold and wet.”

Leaning forward, her mind trailed away. “I wonder if either would allow for a female teacher.”

“I wonder what the herbs and plants are like, myself.”

Maurice watched the pair trail off into thought, wistful, perhaps hopeful at the thought of their life. Stretching his legs, he gave Isolde a little more soppressata, ruffling his companion’s ears.

“Well.” Ansell sighed, trying not to get too lost in the seriousness of their plans. “England or Italy.”

“Getting closer to a real plan.” Belle agreed softly, disliking the change in the air of the house due to where the conversation had veered. “But maybe we should switch the subject? Something lighter?”

Ansell checked his food and arched a brown. “Alright, but I do have one serious question left. And you have to be honest.”

“Okay.”

“You named that blasted dog Isolde? Do you only like tragic figures?” He teased, not noticing the pup’s ears perk up to the name.

Belle smiled gamely, mischievously. “I like the name!”

“She died.” He deadpanned. “Her husband wants to burn her at the stake for cheating on him! And while she makes off with Tristan he ends up marrying some jealous woman, then dies, then Isolde returns to him, throws herself on his corpse and just dies of grief. And then she turns into a bush.”

“She turned into a rose tree, and he turned into brambles.” She defended. “It’s very beautiful.”

“That’s still a bush. And who knows if they ever really loved each other. They drank that love potion in the very beginning of it all.” Gesturing to the dog licking its chops he scoffed. “For a doggy you’re saddling her with an awful lot of baggage.”

“It’s a pretty name!”

“If she dies atop a poodle and turns into a bush, it’s all your fault.”

Maurice chuckled as he sipped his wine.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“For a romantic, you sure are dismal when it comes to your favorites, you know.”

“I am not!”

“Lancelot leaves and Guinevere lives her life out in a covenant!”

Tilting her head to the side, Belle raised a brow. “Wait, I thought you liked Guinevere and Lancelot.”

Shrugging, his palms turned upwards. “Sometimes beasts read things so they can talk to pretty girls they give libraries to.”

“And what would you prefer, oh great tender hearted Beast?”
Snorted, his face scrunched up. “I’ll have you know, farm girl of woe, I like Much Ado About Nothing. Happy endings, thank you very much.”

“Did you just call me Farm Girl of Woe?”

“Under the greenwood tree, who loves to lie with me.” He quoted. “And to the tune his merry note, Unto the sweet bird’s throat, Come hither, come hither, come hither.”

“Really.” She said unimpressed.

“Everyone gets married! And no one turns into a stupid bush.”

Giggling into her cup, Belle delighted when he broke into laughter with her. Eventually, it died down. “Mon Dieu, I agreed to run away with you.”

“You know what you’re getting int- Oh dear.” His face went slack as he looked into the pot with the spaghetti.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: OH MY GOD WE’RE BACK.

Sorry, guys. I had a hell of a couple of months, however, it all seems to be going back to normal-ish. Also, I had to split Part 3 into two parts, so two chapters today! the other in the evening.

THANK YOU for putting up with my tardy bullshit and continuing to follow this story. Questions, comments, complaints? Let me know down in the comments.
“Where is that damned boy.” The Duke bristled, standing alongside his eldest at the edge of the dance floor. In a brilliant crimson suit of silk, his Masquerade mask was held down while he skimmed the room for his heir. The court was in their finest, all wearing elaborate, delicate masks that shimmered with jewels for the ball.

“His men said he's taken ill,” Leon told him. “I wasn't able to peer into his chambers, so who knows.”

"That useless son of mine is always taking ill.” He hissed. Leaning on his cane, the Duke spun it so the rubies glistened in the light of the chandeliers. “You'd think he'd learn by now to stop moping and find a bride.”

“As much as I like toying with him, it is a bit quick, don't you think?”

Turning slowly to Leon, his eyes were searing coals. “Are you going soft? He needs a bride before he produces a mongrel with that little peasant.”

Leaning back, Leon winced. “Of course, father. I see your point.”

“Are we talking about the Prince's prospects?” Lucette asked as she moved in like a slinky cat wishing to toy with a rat. With a flick of her wrist, she dismissed the young man who had escorted her over. “Who have you lined up for the poor lad, dear brother?”

His jaw twinged. “There is a list, narrowing it down.” He said coldly.

“I wonder if it's anyone I know.”

“Why? Are you to be the great champion to defend his new love?” He scoffed, gaze burrowing into her. “You know as well as I do not one person in this room married for love, including you.”

Leaning in the Duke inspected the disdain on her face. “Everyone falls in line, Sister. We all have our roles.”

Glowering at her brother, she eyed his gilded demon's mask; the brow a sinister arch, the tusks protruding from the wicked mouth, curling horns encrusted in crystals. “I hear the snakes avoid you in the garden.” She hissed, tilting her head. Francis was walking over, a young debutante a prize on his arm. “Francis-” Lucette called out, wanting someone to distract her.

There was a gasp that rippled through the room that stopped them all.

Prince Anselme glided across the ballroom in a suit of dark gold, bundles of vibrant flowers embroidered and cascading down the front and cuffs. His mask was a lion’s face, gilded and sculpted with filigree, shimmering in jewels, golden feather abundant at the edges to give him the illusion of a mane. And the girl was in a golden ball gown, mysterious, unknown, her face completely covered by a golden mask of butterflies.
“Everyone's staring at us,” Belle whispered as they wound through the other dancers.

“I never dance at these things. Hell, I never even bother to go unless I'm dragged out like a pony in a show.” He told her. “I’m always invited, everyone wanting to gawk at the beast. And there’s always a cluster of women wanting to dance and woo me into marriage, so I tend to keep to my apartment.”

“Ansell,” Belle's voice was tinged with concern. "what happened to playing along?"

"Darling, it's exhausting just being here and amongst them. I do try, truly."

Catching a glimpse of his family, Maestro smiled and nodded his head at the pair.

Grinning, Ansell pulled her a bit closer. “What do you think of court?”

“I think it's over the top, frankly.” Eyeing his brother and father she imagined how tiring it had to be for him. It was easy to believe, he had little patience for such things since the curse broke. “I'm used to the luxury of the castle but this is beyond that. And this masquerade ball, it's beyond anything I could have imagined.”

“I used to enjoy this, sometimes.” Twirling her, Ansell guided Belle to the center of the polished floor. “I could never stand court for long because I had to compete for attention. It was why I preferred throwing parties at the castle. But I did enjoy it.” Suddenly feeling self-conscious, he dipped his head and cast his eyes away.

She knew her prince was blushing under his mask. “It’s the past, Ansell,” Belle reassured. “Literally a decade in the past.”

“Never again.” He reassured. “And I do agree, it's too much now.”

Stepping away and raising her palm up, she circled with him. Her brown eyes wandered the room keenly, searching the elaborate costumes and masks. “I don't see the King.”

“He doesn't come out or entertain. The Dauphin, Louis Ferdinand-”

“The consumption took him last winter,” Belle remembered, her face falling at the thought. “Papa told me.”

“And Madame du Pompadour passed the year before.” He explained. “The Maîtresse-en-titre.”

Belle’s heart sank. How could anyone weather such a personal storm of so much loss? “That poor man. Losing his son and lover just a year apart.”

“Not to mention he lost the war before he lost Pompadour,” Ansell said somberly. “So he doesn't come out much.”

“I can't blame him. That's awful.” Looking around the room she mused. “So I'm not dancing for any royalty? Just a bunch of stuffy nobles?”

Taking her back into his arms and lifting her air for a moment he barked jovially. “Oh, so I'm stuffy now?”

“I never said you were.” She reassured, mischievous smirk flashing from the bottom of her mask.

“Just the funny girl’s growly prince.”
“It's not an insult. Sometimes it's rather fun when you growl… usually when we're alone.” He growled playfully at her and she giggled in delight. “I can't believe I'm dancing at Versailles. I wouldn't have ever imagined there being an occasion.”

“Who is that?” Lucette asked pointedly, lowering her peacock mask as the rest of the family looked on in shock.

“Whoever she is, he's entranced.” Francis marveled.

“This is Versailles, Darling. Every day there's a ball, or a dance, or a party, or some kind of event which money is thrown at. And the aristocracy do love their themes.” Ansell told her.

Belle chuckled. “That sounds exhausting.”

“Now you understand why I hole myself up in my chambers. Reading and drinking and losing so much money to Lumiere at cards. I'm beginning to think I'm a terrible gambler.”

Giggling at him, she shook her head. The sharp blue eyes gazing at her adoringly. “This was quite clever, Your Grace.

“Bless the mask shop in Verona.” He agreed. “And the book, to rush you back to the castle to get the gown. You look breathtaking in butterflies.”

“Why thank you, and you're always so stately as a lion.”

He laughed, blissfully unaware of how much attention they were commanding.

“It's her, isn't it?” Leon asked.

“How.” The Duke seethed, his unpowdered neck giving away how red his face was under the layers of mask and makeup.

Francis and Lucette gawked at the two in disbelief, the latter slowly turning to her brother. “That is the beauty?”

Shaking his head vehemently, Leon licked his lips nervously. “No, no it can't be she's in the village.”

“And how would you know?” His sibling snorted.

“Because I have people watching Villeneuve, Francis.”
As the song slowed, Belle was suddenly more aware of the looks her presence was commanding. Those not dancing were off to the sides of the room whispering amongst themselves about the couple dressed in gold.

Elke von Tessmer's brow furrowed.

“Well, whoever you're paying for information, you’re firing them.” The Duke snarled at Leon.

“She’s in the village, I swear it!”

“Maybe he found someone else?” Francis muttered into a glass of wine. “Auntie, what do you-”

Lucette had left.

“Auntie?”

Dipping Belle, Ansell felt as if he was in a dream. Taking a deep breath as he pulled her up, keenly aware of their popularity, he immediately began to guide her towards the door. “I think it's best we slip out while we can.” looking to the Maestro, they passed the orchestra and Belle pulled him over for a moment. Swallowing thickly, he watched as his family began to work their way across the ballroom. The whole lot of his kin fixated on them, like hounds on a pair of foxes.

“Is that you?!” Cadenza began joyously.

“It is! Could you help us with an exit?” Belle asked, squeezing his arm and kissing his cheek. “I'm not supposed to be here.”

“You heard the Mademoiselle!” The Madame sang, giving Belle a quick hug. “You go, my dear, enjoy the evening with our prince!”

“It will be our pleasure!” With a flick of his wrist Cadenza barked at his musicians and in a flourish had them queued up for another piece. “Go, go!”

“Thank you!” Eying the door, the pair rushed out, bolting down the hall.

“This has been the most fun I've had at court.” Ansell laughed as they rounded a corner to head up a flight of stairs to his apartments.
They nearly ran into Lucette who perfectly pretended to be flustered. “Gracious, Nephew!” She leapt back to avoid being mowed down. With the two off guard, the marquise moved in. “And who is this stunning Mademoiselle that is clearly stolen your heart?”

Ansell’s mouth fell open, his mind briefly seizing up.

Belle looked the woman over, clever and aged like a fine wine. “You must be the Marquise.” She said softly, curtseying.

“And yourself?” She asked, wishing to desperately see what lie underneath the mask. The girl, it had to be her.

“Cinderella.” Ansell covered, glancing over his shoulder while the anxiety of being caught filled his belly. Well aware the Calvary would arrive shortly. “And we must go before the clock strikes twelve.”

Lucette looked the pair over, the love in their eyes. Stepping to the side, she nodded towards the stairs. “I don’t know how you pulled it off but this is the stupidest thing you could have done, Nephew.”

“Aunt-”

“Off you go, before the coach turns into a pumpkin.” She told the pair quickly. “And it was a pleasure meeting you, Cinderella.”

Bowing her head once more, Belle turned and squeezed Ansell's hand. "Come on."

Belle groggily kissed Ansell’s bare chest, deftly tucking hair out of his face. Dawn was breaking over Villeneuve, the light beginning to trickle in. Kissing him again, she exhaled sadly. After their quick stint at the ball, the night had been much quieter than the one before. Instead of a frantic scramble to be with one another, it had been more normal. Changing into their bedclothes, a nightcap by the fire, and then turning in to sleep soundly after a day of adventure. Ansell home and slipping back into their life felt far better than all of the indulging they had done in his apartment at Versailles.

He rolled over and propped his head up on a hand, gazing at her sadly.

“You need to go back.” She said, forlornly.

“You need to get ready for your first day of school.” Smiling sadly, he reached over and rubbed the crest of her hip with the pad of his thumb. “You're going to be marvelous. I just wish that I could be here when you come home. I want to know all about your day.”

“And I don't think we should have another visit. Not for a while.” Scooting closer, he gathered her into his arms and Belle sighed. “We can't draw attention to ourselves.”

“I agree.” Pressing his lips to her hair, the prince shut his eyes and yearned to stay. Ansell was well aware that life amongst the common wouldn't be easier, but it would feel more real, more comfortable, more suited to who he was since the curse breaking. “I like this new bed, by the way.”

She laughed groggily into his chest. “Do you know the looks I received from Mrs. Potts and
Cogsworth when it was loaded onto a cart?!”

“Ohhhh I had a feeling that might happen. How much judgment radiated off of Cogsworth? I’m sure the imprropriety of it all wound him up.” He chuckled as he was given a half-hearted smack on the chest. “I’m sure Mrs. Potts just looked on knowingly. She’s not one to judge when it comes to us.”

“No she’s not, and all of your guesses are correct.”

“You have to admit, it’s a lot more comfortable. My toes don’t hang off and there’s enough space for both of us.” Nuzzling, he smiled into her scalp, purring happily. “It’s for both of us, it’s ours.”

“Our sounds good.”

“Sounds very good. Also, when did you start wearing my shirts to bed?” Tugging at the fabric, he slipped his hand under and up. Smiling wolfishly, he nibbled on an ear.

“Nooo.” Gently she took the hand away. “We’ll never get out of here if you start that.”

Grumbling, he accepted a kiss as she left the bed and went to fetch her clothes.

“And when I realized they smelled like you.”

Ansell looked ready to cry as they stood in his dressing room, Chapeau already laying his clothes out for the day.

Belle gathered the long face in her hands and kissed him passionately. “I love you.” She whispered, leaning against his chest. “I love you so much it hurts.”

“I wish we could just disappear.” He sighed, hugging her and holding her tight.

“We’ll get through this, I promise.”

Nodding his head, fighting back tears, he whispered. “I hope you have the best first day of school.”

“I hope your stay isn’t so hard on you.” Her stomach clenched, desperately wanting him to be there when she came home.

“God, I love you, Belle.”

Belle fastened her apron just as there was a knock at the door. Taking a deep breath, she stared at it forlornly. Her father had taken Phillipe to another town for a job, and after saying goodbye to Ansell it was hard to feel excited again about the class.

Isolde leapt to her feet, bouncing over and scratching at the latch.

“Just a minute.” Muscling past the large, whining puppy, Belle slipped on her boots and opened the
The four little girls grinned up at her eagerly, each in their best dresses and bonnets.

“Does school really start today?” Eva asked, fidgeting against the rail.

Grinning, she leaned in. Suddenly it wasn’t so hard. “Of course, do you want to walk together?”

They were all eager head nods and grins.

“Alright, let’s go then.”

The small group headed out, Isolde trotting along dutifully as the girls were practically hopping down the street at the prospect of class.

“Do you think more people will come?” One of them asked hopefully.

“No, remember? Camille and Francette’s papa doesn’t want them leaving the store. And Headmaster keeps talking to the other parents.” Eva said sadly. “I don’t know why he has to be so mean. We just want to learn.”

Belle felt a flame of anger flicker within her. Looking up, she saw him, the Headmaster, glowering at her group from the school steps. Locking eyes with him, the two both silently voicing their contempt for the other, she glared defiantly before turning to the girls. “It’s okay if it’s just us. All that matters is we enjoy class.”

Eva smiled once more. “Okay, Belle.”

As they reached the school, suddenly the sound of Gustave’s cart clacking up the road filled their ears. “I heard school’s in session?” He called out.

Turning, the group suddenly saw Gustave driving his horse, the back of his cart filled with the castle’s grinning, eager children.

“Belle! We’re coming to school too!” Chip cried from the seat next to their driver.

Laughing in disbelief, a hand went up to cup her mouth.

The cart slowed to a stop and the group of former teacups came clambering down. “Easy, guys!” Catching one, Gustave helped them to the ground.

“What brought this on?” She asked, lifting one of the girls down while the children went over to Eva and her friends to introduce themselves.

“Cogsworth told me that the Prince wanted the children to go to school and wanted to pay me to drive them over in the morning and bring them back every afternoon.” He said. “Something about a proper education?”

She shook her head. “That man.” That sweet, generous, goofy, big-hearted man of hers.

“He’s a pretty nice one if you ask me. Not as nice as mine, of course, but you know.” Turning, he nodded towards the church. “Well, you have your students. You better get started.”

“You’re right. And thank you.”

“Anytime.”
Heading over to the group of boisterous, happy children, Belle rounded the pack up. “Alright, everyone, let’s go inside.”

Charging into the church and towards the classroom, Pere Robert’s eyes widened as he quickly stepped out of the way. “My goodness! Quite the class you have, Madame Dujardin.”

“I know. I have no idea how it’ll go but at least it will be interesting.” Closing the church’s door as the last of the children scampered into the suddenly busy classroom it suddenly felt real. Her dream, happening.

“You’ll do fine.” He reassured warmly.

“So, how was it? Was he tearing down my door?” Ansell asked, words soft and sad as Chapeau fussed over him. The suit was a shimmering pink with silver embroidery and a creamy velvet waistcoat.

“He did, but by that time your friends from the brothel arrived and managed to get him to think you were quite occupied with someone other than your Cinderella,” Lumiere explained.

“I hope you paid them extra.”

“You bought them exquisite necklaces, Master.”

Sighing heavily, Ansell listlessly gazed out the window. The day and nights with Belle had been wonderful, yet he yearned to be back at home. Versailles was nothing but a pit of gossip, greed, and gluttony. “Do I have to make an appearance anywhere-”

The knock on the door made him stop. Gesturing to Lumiere, his man went and opened the door as Chapeau used a brush on his shoulders to clean his crisp silk jacket.

A man in gold, wig piled high, looked past Lumiere and towards the prince. “His Majesty the King requests you in his chambers.”

Ansell paled.

Belle looked around the classroom. The bright, eager faces all looking up at her. Some of the children flipping through their readers and feeling the pages of the books, others chatting amongst themselves. The castle’s little pack had quickly taken to the girls and included them amongst their playful talk. It was good to see Eva and the others with more friends. Friends they made at school, no less.

“All right, everyone.” As soon as she spoke, all eyes were on her. Smiling anxiously, she picked up her chalk and went to the board. Pausing, Belle steadied herself with a deep breath. “Let’s begin.”
Ansell could still hear Chapeau’s gasp in his ear. His valet had been beside himself and suddenly his entire appearance had been deemed unworthy of such a request. He had been thrown in a quick, hot bath, rubbed down with aromatic oils so he smelt like a field of roses, and then thrown into his best, suit, shoes, wig, and finally caked with powder.

He wanted to tear it all off.

Sick to his stomach and dressed in French blue and gold from head to toe, he entered the chambers as soon as he was announced. The King’s apartment was vast; dozens upon dozens of rooms each more resplendent than the last.

The King, Louis XV, stared at him as his own valet slipped out the doors.

“It is an honor, Your Grace.” Ansell bowed deeply, looking up at the King for instruction. He seemed older than would have thought. Melancholy in his eyes, worn from the loss of both war and love. Had he not been The Beloved? Then The Debauched? The news and gossip had made him sound so much more virile and strong. But Ansell mused that perhaps those days were over. For all his silks and jewels the great ruler of France appeared worn down; tired.

“The honor is mine, Great Beast of France. Rise.” He said in a commanding yet warm tone, looking the prince over thoughtfully. “You seem terribly uncomfortable.”

“Young Grace, I fear I'm not accustomed to the fashions of the court.” Trying to be demure, submissive, he tilted his chin ever so slightly. Feeling the eyes of the ruler on him, studying every inch. Worry filling him, making him woozy. Did he look too out of place for court? “When I was cursed for all those years, I didn't need much clothing.”

A curious brow was raised. “You wore clothing?”

His palms itched. “Yes, Your Highness. Though not much, I admit.” Watching the old man muse over the notion of a monster in clothing, Ansell remembered to breathe. Feeling on display, as if curiosity in a traveling show, made him bristle with anxiety. The bearded lady, the two-headed headed man, and then the great beast prince.

“Where is the girl?”

His mouth felt thick as his heart raced. It was a struggle not to be defensive when it came to Belle. How could he not? Few people accepted her. The room felt stifling, and he desperately wished he could take the air. “Not here, Your Majesty.”

Head cocking, brow furrowing, Louis XV leaned on his gold and sapphire cane. “That is absurd. Why was she not invited? We all know the curse here. “And earn her love in return.” Was it not love?”

“My King, she is a commoner.” His stomach fell to the bottom of his heels while he waited for some kind of reaction from the man whom many would consider divine.

He appeared unmoved by the information. “That's not a reason as to why she's not at court.”

“It was not my choice, I assure you.”

The King ruminated over the information and slowly agonized the prince. “Who invited you but not the girl?”
Wetting his lips, he took a deep breath. “My father, Your Excellence.”

“Hmn. I see.” Face wearing disapproval, the old man looked Ansell over, lips pursing into a thin line. “For God sakes, you look like an animal shoved into a suit. You may relax, Prince Anselme. Please, take off your wig, it clearly causes you discomfort.”

Slowly, hesitantly, he pulled the itchiest piece of his attire off of his head. Clutching it in both hands and ruining the hours of careful styling Chapeau had put into it, he remembered to breathe. Ansell wasn’t sure if it was pity or an insult, the tone so calm and unaffected. Perhaps the King was giving him leniency due to celebrity status. Or painting him as an exotic creature. “I apologize if my looks are not up to his majesty’s standards.” The apology was ignored and he wet his lips before asking. “May I ask what has brought me such honor, My King?”

Louis XV stiffly sat down in a chair, doing his best not to show his age, eyes still taking in the young man. “You lived as that creature for ten years.” Looking down, he thrummed his fingertips on the golden arm, eyes keen, thoughtful.

“Yes.”

“I wish to hear of it. All of it.” Ignoring the fear creeping across the young noble’s features, he carried on. “I suspect ten years is a lot story, so you’re to come here every day and tell me a bit of it. Starting with now.”

Ansell wanted to run away screaming. Years, years upon years he had tried to forget every day. Steeling himself he straightened his back. “Sire, I don’t know where to begin-”

“Simple, the night of your curse.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And the 4-parter is now done! There was a lot going on in that last bit, so we needed to split it up again. Spaghetti! Homemaker Ansell! The Ball! School! THE KING. Annd there will be another chapter next week! It’s done, it’s there, it’s happening.

Again, thank you so much for reading this story and sticking with it despite the delays. Love it, hate it, have some theories? Let me know in the comments.
“Thank you, Lumiere,” Ansell said quietly as he stood in front of the mirror and allowed Chapeau to fuss over him. Handing the files over to his man, the prince gave a tired smile. “I couldn't have done it without you, you've gotten all of this paperwork together marvelously quick.”

“I'm just glad you found such inspiration during your short trip "abroad".” He replied, taking the files to the enormous desk to tidy up the mass of paperwork that had come out of the project. “I hope the issues with the taxes no longer weigh so heavily on your mind.”

“One less thing, I do admit.” He sighed, looking himself over in the mirror. Dusty rose and silver for his suit of the day. No wig, no makeup, more simple shoes. Small blessings. Doing his best to hide his depression the prince took in a deep breath, though the sadness still showed through the sharp blue eyes. It had resurfaced as soon as he had returned and resumed his tenure without Belle.

"Your deeds will help a great many people, Master." Lumiere said, trying to raise his spirits.

"Hmn."

“It was her, I know it was her.”

Francis watched Lucette fan herself as she walked down the hall with the family. His aunt was visibly enjoying how his father stewed over Anselme's last great upset. Even a week later, all of Versailles was still buzzing with gossip over his brother's moment at the ball. The young beast of France, a man prone to reclusion, dazzling the entire court with an unforgettable turn on the dance floor with a mysterious young woman. The pair had been mesmerizing; the gold lion and the Mademoiselle of butterflies, dancing so perfectly together as if two halves had found their mate. Women were still whispering at how they could see the devotion in the young couple’s eyes; deeply in love. How passionate such a morose man had become at the presence of the woman. And the men couldn’t stop talking about the Mademoiselle who had arrived at the party without a wig or powder in her hair. Clean, simple, stunning; a mysterious beauty they didn’t have a chance to seduce.

“Now, now, brother.” She purred, quite happily at all of the upheaval. “How do you know it was her?”

Belle wound her way through the village towards the church. Her mornings had settled into an easy rhythm; up early enough to have breakfast with her father, do her chores, and fit in a few pages of a book before heading to class. After which she went about her projects, lessons, or odd jobs while Gustave returned the bulk of her students to the castle.
As she turned the corner Isolde bolted away from her side; barking and hopping towards the students. All of the children were playing; some joining in a rousing game of tag while the others raced down the streets with hoops and sticks and the rest were engrossed with hopscotch.

Père Robert stood outside near a wagon and a group of men, reading a letter. Seeing her, he brightened.

Walking over to her friend, she stepped out of the way of Chip charging after a taunting Eva. “Bonjour.”

Nodding to the men unloading tools and supplies, he met the teacher just outside of the area where the children were playing. “Bonjour, Belle. Are you who I have to thank for all this?”

“She was wearing that gold dress the night we arrived at the castle.” Leon supplied. “And she’s a brunette.”

“Really?” Francis piped. “He was always so fond of blondes-”

“He was always so fond of anything with a skirt and two legs that gave him attention.” The elder said icily. “But I can assure you, it was the peasant girl. Plain little thing, hardly worth a turn in bed.”

“That girl can’t be two places at once,” Lucette told them, her lips twitching at Francis who was fully aware of her brief secret meeting. His dear auntie loved to gossip and have an ear to share her secrets with.

“Unless she’s magic, of course.” Francis piped in. Suddenly everyone turned to watch the Duke’s eyes slowly widen at the thought.

Lucette raised a perfect brow, slowly turning to him.

Eyeing the men, Belle furrowed her brow. “I'm not quite sure what that's all about?”

Handing the papers over, the priest pointed at the handwriting. “They arrived this morning with this letter, from the Prince.”

Raising her brows at Ansell’s improved penmanship, a smile tugged at the corners of her lips. “Repairs to the church-”

“And an expansion for a soup kitchen, including a larder.” He told her, voice full of disbelief. “All to be done before winter so families can be fed by the first snow, hiring carpenters and mason workers from the village no less. So even the work brings money to the people.”

“He may have expressed wanting to put the money collected from taxes to good use in the community.” Belle divulged keenly, stomach fluttering with warmth at her sweet love's generosity. “And I may have remembered some of your comments from our discussions.”
“Thank you,” Beside himself with the thought of Villeneuve's poorest being cared for during the harsh winter, Père Robert looked over at the men putting up ladders to fix the roof. “And I'll have to thank our Prince myself. He's also promised to furnish the kitchen.”

“I'm not surprised. I've found he's pretty thoughtful.”

He shrugged genteelly, though it was clear by Francis' face he was joining his aunt in her game. “I mean, he was turned into a monster. I think it’s safe to assume that anything is possible.”

“At any rate, he’s far too busy with the King to be flitting about seducing magic girls.” Jealousy gave Leon’s words a bitter edge as their father’s Mistress did her damndest to soothe the prickly Duke. “I can’t imagine why the King, who’s neglected his presence for over a month, suddenly has any interest in Anselme.”

“Because he’s quite special and you aren’t, my dear Nephew.” The Marquise reminded, reveling in how quickly his face fell and his eyes glowered at her.

Francis wiped a hand down his mouth to hide his snickering.

“You’re too kind, Auntie.”

The clock rung the hour and Belle turned to her students, all of them still laughing and scampering about.

“You better get going, Headmistress.” Père Robert nodded towards the children.

Walking off to round them up, she said over her shoulder. “I'll see you after.”

“I'll hold you to it.”

Francis did his damnedest not to grin as his father and brother’s pace slowed; the pair stewing over the prince. The Duke was suddenly talking firmly about a list of potential women for the prince to wed, and Leon was indulging him with opinions over the whole matter.

“Aren’t they a pair.” His aunt said under her breath.

“Aren’t you enjoying every bit of it.” He smirked at her, chuckling as she feigned a scandalized look.

“Nephew! I'll have you know all of Versailles is enjoying every bit of it.” She corrected him, swatting his shoulder with her fan. “The gears of the court are greased by gossip. Our Prince Anselme has suddenly injected so much of it into the palace that the whole of it is now operating like
“Alright, everyone! Let's go inside.” Herding the children towards the door, Belle skillfully caught a hoop and handed it over to its owner. “Chalk in the basket by the door and toys in the hall, please.” Reaching out, Chip tackled her with a hug. “And how are you? Still tagged it?”

“I'm gonna catch Eva after lunch.” He said with determination.

Rubbing his back Belle nudged the former teacup towards the door. “Good luck with that, she's pretty fast.”

“Mademoiselle Dujardin?”

Turning, Belle found two more girls and a boy coming up the street, their fathers and mothers in tow. “Good morning.”

“Bonjour, Mademoiselle,” one of the men began. “Are you still accepting students? We know you started over a week ago but if you could make an exception for our children-”

Catching a figure over the farmer's shoulder she watched the Headmaster glaring at her as his boys marched in like horrid little soldiers. “There's no need for an exception, anyone can start at any time,” She replied, ignoring her competition. “Marie-Anette started just yesterday. All I ask is you pay attention and want to learn.” Reaching out, one of the girls tentatively came forward. Pausing, she looked at the boy who was waiting as well. “Paschel?”

Francis shook his head at Lucette's antics. Checking to make sure Leon and his father were well out of earshot, he leaned towards her. “I do wish I could have been with you when you ran into Cinderella.”

“As do I.” She agreed. “There was a goodness about her; I liked it.”

“After all my years I believe this family could use a bit of goodness, you know.”

“Paschel, you already go to school.”

Holding his tricorn hat, the boy who was usually marching up the steps and into the schoolhouse shuffled his feet nervously. “I know, but can I attend yours?”

Belle smiled, overwhelmed with a sudden burst of pride. “Certainly. Come on, let's find all of you a spot in the classroom.”
“It’s certainly helped your brother.” Hearing the raised voices behind them, the Duke lamenting about how dreadful the pool of potential mates was to choose from, Lucette chortled from behind her fan.

“And what humors you now?”

“God help the poor bastards your brother was using as informants.”

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN WE’VE BEEN FIRED?” The Headmaster was bright red with rage as he stood outside the door, his boys inside and preparing for the day’s lecture.

“His man said we ain’t even going to be paid for this last week’s worth of information!” Clothilde seethed, arms crossing over her chest as the sounds of happy children pouring into the church still filled the air. Scoffing, the woman sneered at the sight across the way. “A school for boys and girls? The nerve of her.”

“It’s her.” The Headmaster snarled under his breath. “We had a perfectly lucrative deal with the Prince’s brother and somehow she- I know it was her, it had to b-” words dying on his tongue, his face went slack as he saw Paschel walking into the church with his rival.

Clothilde’s eyes narrowed at the site that left her friend as white as a sheet. “Are you really going to let her do that?” she asked meanly. “Steal your boys away-”

“Enough!” He snapped. Brooding for a moment the Headmaster finally hissed “Meet me at the tavern after class.”

Ansell wandered the massive space the royal servant had led him to, admiring the wall of glass that gave a remarkable view of a small, pristine garden hidden from the rest of Versailles by a tall, thick hedge. Tools, pots, and a wheelbarrow of rich, dark earth sat neatly near a bed of pure white damask roses. Clasping his hands behind his back, he slowly made his way over, studying the yard.

It had taken him nearly a week to figure it out that he was never actually being brought to the King’s own chambers. Rather, the near-endless apartments of Maîtresse-en-titre, Madame de Pompadour, were below the King’s and connected by a private staircase. Since his discovery he found the beauty of the rooms to be quite telling; a space specifically designed to entertain and soothe one of the most powerful men in the world. A man known for being curious, thoughtful, and prone to long bouts of melancholy. Each day he wandered the rooms and waited for his audience Ansell imagined Louis the Beloved slowly heading down the stairs with the weight of the world on his shoulders. Immediately enveloped by the loving arms of the Madame who took great pains to quite his demons and provide advice on whatever troubles were plaguing France. From his days as a spoiled brat
forced to come to court he vaguely remembered her; beautiful, poised, smart.

The shoes clicking down the stairs made him pause and turn around.

“I apologize,” Louis grunted, sounding slightly out of breath as he leaned on his cane once he made it to the floor. “I had family matters to attend to, my Grandson, the Dauphin, is to make a trip to the palace. He is new to his appointment as heir and it is an... adjustment for him.”

“There is no need to apologize, Your Majesty.” He bowed, obediently following the King to a small sitting area near the windows. “I hope the prince is finding his schooling in Paris to be a wonderful experience.”

“As do I, apparently he’s taken up locksmithing.” Sliding into the grandest chair in the room; white velvet and gilded wood, he motioned the prince to follow suit. “Did something catch your eye?”

Ansell took a seat in a much smaller, more modest chair. “I was admiring the garden, My King. I couldn’t help but notice that there were plants I wasn’t familiar with.”

“Yes,” He said absently, gazing out into the gardens with a wistfulness from happier times. “The Madame de Pompadour had some imported from the Asias as well as Africa. I do not think they live anywhere else in Europe. So you fancy botany, My Prince?”

“I dabble, mostly in herbs and their applications,” Ansell replied nervously, his mouth feeling dry. No matter how many days they had been meeting, he couldn't shake the nerves from speaking directly with the King. “Dare say I’ve found it rather fascinating; what alchemy plants can have on the body when prepared and mixed correctly.”

“Hmn.” A small smile played on his lips. “Very nice, I must admit I hold similar interests.”

Buoyed by the response, he leaned forward. Thankful the King had shown the “Beast Prince” mercy by granting him permission him to wear less restrictive clothing that allowed him to move about more freely, he rolled his shoulders. Cocking his head to the side in curiosity before asking. “Was the Madame fond of botany?”

“We both were.” The King sank into a warm, familiar memory as he spun the handle of his cane; a golden dolphin covered in sapphires and rubies. “We would spend hours discussing the topic and working out in her gardens. And she was always hunting for new plants from discovered locations to add to our collection. She loved to learn,” He said, the slightest sigh escaping him. “Sciences, literature, the arts; she loved them all.”

“I remember, vaguely.” He said. “The last time I was at court she was incredibly generous; even when I wasn’t. I recall her being bright and interesting, she was the one who introduced me to Voltaire and insisted I read his works.”

Arching a brow, the King muttered wryly. “It’s good to hear a kind word said about her.”

Ansell paused, somewhat taken aback by the announcement.

“Prince Anselme, my cabinet may try to keep me in a bubble, however, I am keenly aware of the words that are said or written regarding any mistress of mine.” He explained solemnly. “It is a coveted position as much as it is a gossiped one that produces an enormous amount of jealousy amongst both of the sexes at court.” Reclining against large, dense cushions Louis XV snapped his fingers to summon a tea service, tiring of talk of his life and wishing to be distracted by the story of another’s. “That is not why we come here to chat though. Now, where were we, Beast Prince?”
Flinching at the name, Ansell wet his lips. “Well, My King, I feel as though you’ve heard of what most of my years consisted of; hunting, battling wolves—”

“The hunter in the red coat.”

“Yes,” The hair on his nape stood on end as he could see that face. Cheering on the dogs, musket in hand, and then years later snarling at him high atop his castle. “There was little else I did for ten years, at least until the Mademoiselle showed up.”

“And there’s nothing more?” He asked in annoyance, hoping to get several weeks worth of stories out of the boy. “No one came to see you for ten years? What of your father? Your brothers? We’ve all known about you this entire time. Your father was the one who told us of you; he said an enchantress visited him one night and warned him. You can’t tell me he never once tried to see you.”

Face falling, Ansell slumped as the pain washed over him.

“Well, what happened, Prince Anselme?”

Taking a ragged breath, he wet his lips. “He did come and visit me, my father.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Things are afoot.

THANK YOU for your kudos, bookmarks, and comments. They are all fuel to us writer-types, our egos desperate for stoking. As always, if you love it, hate it, don't know how to feel about it, or want to tell me how I should feel about it, drop a line down below. I also answer questions if you've got any.

Anywho, let me know what's what. I'll see you next week.
Chapter 33

*Ten Years Prior*

The doors slowly opened by themselves.

Leon recoiled, rubbing his shoulders as his father was the first to step inside. “How is it winter in July?”

“Her doing no doubt.” Carefully walk in, heels clicking on the marble, he didn't even look over his shoulder at his cowering sons. “Come along you two.”

Francis was the first to follow, blowing warm air into his cupped hands he stepped across the foyer cautiously.

The eldest slowly, reluctantly brought up the rear. His face aghast at how dusty and worn the castle was. “I don't see why we had to come to this run-down hovel with you, Father.”

“Because he's your brother.” Suddenly the candles all lit in a wave, making his sons jump. Yet the Duke stayed steady, drawing the sword from his rubied cane. “ANSELME.”

Leon wandered over to the coat rack, frowning as he pushed on it. “Who bought this ugly thi-”

The coat rack turned around to look at him and scowl.

Yelping, he skidded backward.

“Your Grace!”

Whipping around, his brows furrowed. What was her name again? Hell if he knew, she had been his wife's housemaid. “Mrs… Potts?” Unable to see a woman, a creaking came from the dining room and he squinted at the tea cart that hurried over to him.

“Oh, Your Grace!” The teapot chirped in relief. “We're so glad you've come. Perhaps you can speak to the Master, he's so distraught noth-”

Swinging the sheath, he aimed for the horrifying teapot that was clearly the work of the devil.

“Sacre bleu, Mrs. Potts!” a candelabra came out of nowhere, swinging on a chandelier and taking the hit as the tea cart sped away. It went flying against the banister, clattering down the stairs.

“Your Grace, you can't hit her!” A harpsichord hustled out of the ballroom as quickly as it could, candles bobbing as it spoke. “She's made of porcelain, we've already seen what can happen to the ceramics!”

Grabbing the coat rack, alive or not, Leon swung it at the instrument as Francis ducked to narrowly miss being struck. The coat rack clanged on the keys, causing one to chip and fly through the air and skitter across the floor.

“My tooth!” It cried out.
“You nearly hit me!” Francis cried as the coat rack jumped to its feet and punched his brother square in the mouth.

“My tooth!” The eldest grabbed his face and groaned. "Sonuva bitch!"

Seizing a torch from a hand in the wall, Francis waved it threateningly at the harpsichord. “Get back you horrid thing! You cretin! YOU FREAK!”

Scowling, harpsichord stamped on his foot, making him yowl. “Vaffanculo! Go away, you terrible little man! I may be big but I know how to use all of this new weight!”

Francis raced towards the door to hide behind his brother. Leon, still holding his cheek, scoffed. "You're going to let a harpsicord boss you around? What a coward."

"Oh really? Why don't you try to go fight the bloody thing?!"

"Meistrooое?!!” a voice sang out from a wing.

"Madame!” the instrument cried. “I’ll find a way to come and see you, My Love!”

A shadow rushed across the second story, catching the Duke's attention.

“Your Majesty,” the Candelabra righted itself, lighting it's blown out candles “please don't swing at us, but especially Mrs. Potts, we've already lost a plate to an accident.”

“He was a good man.” A mantle clock wheezed as it waddled over. "Ohhhh, where's that blasted dog when you need it?"

Glaring down at the houseware in disgust, he ignored his cowering sons. “ANSELME.?” eyeing the stairs, he put a foot on one of them, sword clicking into the cane sheath. “Boy if you don't come down I'll make the guards drag you out in a collar and chain. I'll give you to the king as his new pet myself!”

There was a rumble from the shadows.

The all of the houseware quickly left the room in a clattering of movement.

The candles swept themselves out, a chill wound through the winter air.

“Oh, you don't scare me, boy.” He snarled. “I don't give a damn about how big and menacing you are. Show me your face, you simpering little whelp.”

“YOU WANT TO SEE MY FACE?!!”

An animal leaped from the banister onto the floor, staying on all fours, unclothed, hair on its neck bristling on end in a ridge down his back. Claws making deep gouges in the floor, tail lashing, fangs bared as a loud, menacing growl rolled out of the gaping maw.

Francis and Leon bolted out the door, white as sheets.

The Beast pounced, landing in front of the Duke and letting out a lion's roar.

Swinging his cane, it connected on the animal’s jaw, sending it reeling back. “You think you can scare me?!” His son, all hair and teeth, shook off the blow began to circle him. “You may be as big as a bear but you're still my son.”
Snapping his jaws, charging and swiping a paw to startle him.

Yet the Duke barely flinched, keeping up with the creature's winding. “A whiny, selfish, weak little brat.”

Snorting, the Beast prowled away, uninterested in the adversary he couldn't scare.

“Don't you dare leave.” he followed it as it quickly padded up the stairs. “Still a coward I see. Still ready to hide when a tantrum doesn't get him what he wants.”

“Why are you even here?!” Whirling around at the top of the stairs, the Beast tried to force him back down the stairs and out the doors. Horns gleaming in what little light there was filtering in, the massive head lowered and the blue eyes burned with anger. “Why did you even come?! To belittle me?! To stare at the monster your son has become?!”

“To see if it was true. If that horrid witch had destroyed you.” As the creature stood still, he took a moment to study it; every layer of fur, every twist in the thick horns, every crooked tooth and brutish tusk. "Good Lord, you're vile, you're hideous!"

“What did she tell you?” He asked in a low tone, keeping at the landing, looking down at his father and doing his best not to be hurt by the cruel words.

“That you had to learn a lesson; to find love and kindness.” a heavy layer of disgust wound its way from his eyes to his face. There was blood caking the fur around the Beast’s jaws and chest, and he smelled of old meat. “That you were a warning to the nobility of this land. That everyone should learn the treat the common folk better.”

“She said there’s a cure.” shifting his bulky frame, the Beast gazed past his father and to the frozen wasteland outside. A little ray of hope, it was all he had. “There’s a chance.”

“Who would give such a creature as yourself a chance?” He sneered, suddenly enraging his son. “You’re a monster, and it’s clear you’ve started living like one.”

“I have no choice-”

The Duke said in disgust. “Honestly, Anselme, your temper when you were small and lean just made you a snotty little brat. In this body, it makes you a wild brute. What a fool and a disappointment you are.” He hissed, the words cutting deeper than his sword ever could.

“I'm this way because of YOU!” Charging forward, it got the desired effect and his father took several steps down.

“You have no one to blame but yourself, Anselme.” He hissed.

“You taught me to be this way!” He barked, the pain twisting in his chest as his mind felt foggy with anger. "You hate commoners!"

“I taught you to be smarter! Insulting a woman to her face? Forcing her out of your home? There are other ways to deal with rabble!”

“All still cruel, nonetheless. Just hiding the hatred in your heart.”

“At least I’m not stupid and childish enough to wear it on my sleeve.”

Roaring, bits of spittle hit the Duke's face.
Carefully he wiped his cheek with a finger. “Still having a fit to look bigger?”

“Get out.” Raising a paw, the dark claws were poised for a deadly swipe.

He narrowed his eyes, smirking at the paw that could easily fit around his head. “You couldn't.”

The Beast hesitated.

“Do it, go ahead.” He goaded. “Get me by the neck if you're the big monster you say you are.”

Betraying him, the blue eyes were suddenly so conflicted that his paw twitched.

The Duke lunged forward, grabbing the creature by the tuft of hair on its chin. Startling it, watching it cower, the mighty thing easily put in its place by its father. “I only want to hear from you if you ever manage to get yourself out of this mess.” The Beast's teeth were bared at him, but the growl was clearly trying to sound more confident and fearless than his son was at that moment. “Don't you dare leave this castle, the woods, the village. They're yours, the rest is mine. Remember that, Anselme.” letting go of the chin, the beast stumbled back.

Shaking it off, catching it's frightened breath as he turned and coolly walked down the stairs the Beast grimaced. Furious he had been scared, the monster bounded down the stairs and blocked the doors, his roar rattling the windows as he thrashed his tail.

Carefully the Duke took his cane and used the end to push the animal to the side, coolly exiting the castle, the doors closing behind him. “Goodbye, Anselme.”

The houseware slowly crept in from the halls, the candles lighting themselves once more with a low flame.

“Master?” Lumiere was the bravest due to his sturdy craftsmanship. “Master would y-”

Grabbing and clawing at his head, eyes red and welling with emotion, the Beast threw his head back and let out a sound that was part furious roar, part agonized howl. Thrashing onto all fours he broke a table he knew wasn't alive and hurled it out a window. Leaping out of the jagged opening and sliding to a stop. Charging down the path, snow churning in his wake, he caught up with the carriage and snapped at the horses to startle them into a gallop.

The Duke slung himself out of the window and looked backward, unimpressed at the threat as his other two sons held on for their dear lives inside.

The carriage bounced, speeding on wall-eyed, panicked horses. Once the wheels found dirt and grass, the beast stopped abruptly, hitting a snow drift. Watching his family disappear over a hill, he panted, distraught, eyes pained. Letting out a roar; rage, sadness, humiliation all mixed in, he collapsed into an exhausted heap. Gasping sadly, quaking in despair, cheat tight, limbs heavy. Letting the snow fall over him, letting the wounded tears roll down his muzzle.

Taking a deep, ragged breath, the Prince’s eyes couldn’t leave his hands. The fingers looked so blurry under all of the tears he was holding back. Steadying himself, Ansell raised his shoulders and closed his eyes.

“That was the only time anyone bothered to visit the Beast.” He finished with a slight growl to his
words, swallowing thickly.

The King crossed one leg over the other, watching the distraught young man doing his best to keep himself together. “Our time is over.” He said simply. “You may leave, Prince Anselme.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.” He exhaled shakily. Rising to his feet and forcefully straightening out his jacket, Ansell took a deep breath.

“And Prince Anselme,” Louis said, slowly rising himself. “If you wish to tour the apartment’s garden, you may at any time.”

Pausinh, he bowed. “Thank you, Your Majesty. I would take up your offer right now, however, I fear I am not feeling well and must retire to my chambers.”

“Of course, my Prince.”

Quietly, he exited the apartments and found an unused salon to cry in.

Maurice opened the door to two familiar faces. “Gentleman, a pleasure to see you.”

“Bonjour, Maurice.” Gustave peered inside, a book clutched in his hands. “I hope we’re not interrupting you?”

“No, come right in.” Ushering them inside, he walked them further into the cottage. “I was just reading a letter from the Prince that was delivered today, he’s commissioned me for a project.”

“He did?” Stephane said.

“Yes, quite an odd one. Apparently, it’s going to be gifted to the king.”

Gustave caught the mild apprehension in the old artist’s voice. “Well, that’s pretty exciting. Your work being seen by the king of France; that's kind of a huge honor.”

“It is, it’s also a bit daunting the more I think about it.” He said. "Anyways, Belle’s working on something for her tutoring.”

The men found their friend dipping her quill into an ink pot at the kitchen table. “I don’t think you’re busy enough.” Stephane quipped. “Teaching a class and still going to class yourself? Not to mention a dozen other projects and programs.”

“I have to keep myself preoccupied,” Belle replied, finishing her paper and setting her pen down. “I don’t think you’re busy enough.” Stephane quipped. “Teaching a class and still going to class yourself? Not to mention a dozen other projects and programs.”

“I have to keep myself preoccupied,” Belle replied, finishing her paper and setting her pen down. “It's either that or go mad. Besides, the class is only until noon right now, I still have a lot of free time.” Getting up, she smiled. “Like time for reading lessons with Gustave.”

“I'm here and ready.” He grinned excitedly.

“And I’m here to make tea and provide emotional support.” His amour announced.

“Perfect. But I have a new book for us and I accidentally left it in the classroom." She explained, getting up from the table. "It’ll just take a minute to go get it.”

“We don’t mind following,” Gustave said as the three headed out. “Gives us some time to catch up.”

Lumiere opened the door and his mouth fell open. “Master?”
“I’m so tired of reliving my curse, Lumiere.” He mumbled, wandering in and falling into a chair. Letting out a ragged, gasping breath, he drew a hand up to his bloodshot eyes. “I truly am. Things that I’ve buried for years are now apart of some story.” Kicking off his shoes, he gestured to the silver tray with the decanter and glasses.

Seeing the Prince so distraught broke Lumiere’s heart. Months of joy and love, months of Belle had faded to be replaced by such heartache. Before he picked up the tray, Lumiere opened a drawer at the breakfront it rested atop of and pulled out two objects. “You must remember, Master, as painful as it can be it’s keeping you in the King’s good graces, and we can use all the help we can get.”

“I know, doesn’t mean I can’t complain about it.”

“Master, you should eat something. Perhaps I can order some-”

“I’m not hungry.” He slouched pitifully, eyes still threatening to resume weeping.

“That is, unfortunately, a concern I’ve had of late with you, Your Grace,” Lumiere said, pouring a conservative amount of drink and moving the tray towards the prince. “You’ve stopped taking dinner with the other members of the court.”

“Because my father is absolutely insufferable right now.” He scoffed. "An endless conversation regarding women, regarding wives. All their merits ones of monetary or political influence. Oh! And let’s not forget to mention how fertile the women in their familes are. Lumiere, I’m getting tired of being treated like his stud horse.” Reaching for his drink, he noticed that his favorite book and the drawing of Belle were carefully laid next to the glass. Ansell’s eyes smiled appreciatively up at his maitre d’. "Thank you, old friend.”

“But of course, My Prince. We must remember the happiness that awaits us at home.” Watching the young man take the book and set it on the arm of the chair, carefully resting the image of Belle on top so he could see it while sipping, then finally taking the cup, Lumiere took solace in the sight of Ansell visibly relaxing. He just wished it wasn't so temporary. “Perhaps if you continue your storytelling, we may go home sooner rather than later.”

Sipping his brandy, he let out a deep breath. The gears in his head turning as he looked at the portrait. “I’m not a religious man, but I’m praying for that.”

The trio was all smiles and lively conversation as they entered the church. “I still think you two should live together,” Belle told them. “The house near ours is vacant, we could be neighbors. Stephane and I could duel every night I come over for dinner.”

“I don’t want to have to patch either of you up,” Gustave told her semi-seriously. “Also, we might hate each other once we start living together.”

“Or not,” Stephane responded. “You know, we might like each other more. Tends to happen when you court someone.”

“Oh, so you’re courting me now?”

“Have I not? I’ve always tried to be chivalrous with you, Gus. Don’t you remember our firs-”

The trio froze in horror.

The tables and benches in the classroom had been flipped over, the neat stacks of slates shattered and smashed on the ground. Belle’s desk was on its side, a leg missing, her papers strewn about.
Someone had taken a hammer to the wall and tore a chunk of her father's mural out.

And the books were all over the floor. So many with ripped pages and covers, destroyed by hateful hands.

Gasping in horror, a hand flew up to Belle's mouth as tears flooded her eyes.

"Those bastards," Stephane muttered under his breath as they stood in shock. "Those spineless cowards-"

"We can't let the children see this," Gustave swallowed thickly, his head slowly shaking. "They- they can't see that- that people hate the idea of them learning together so much."

“What's wr-” Père Robert's words died on his tongue as he entered the door with the trio. “No, who-” bringing a hand to his mouth he shook his head in sadness. “I was out giving last rights at the Butcher's home... I wasn't- How can people be so cruel?"

She was silent, her friends words a dull noise as she stared at all of her hard work in tatters. Rage built up in Belle and her red eyes were blazingly hot.

“Belle?”

Wiping a sleeve across her crying eyes she caught a breath. “I'm sick of this.”

“Belle, what-”

Without any explanation, she whirled around and stormed out of the church.

Gustave turned to Stephane. “Oh no.” scrambling towards the door, he called out "Belle!!"

Following Gustave, Stephane stopped in the doorway with him and watched Belle walk quickly in the general direction of the tavern. The swordsman’s eyes widened in realization. “Do you really think she would?”

“Do you really think she wouldn't?”

“I mean-”

“Do you remember the castle, at all?” Gustave replied nervously. “Do you remember what she did then? And she started out locked in the back of a wagon!”

“Mon Dieu.”

As they both prepared to run out the door, Gustave turned around grabbed the priest. “Just- stay here and make sure the children don't see this! We'll be back!” Being seize by the collar of his jacket and dragged out the door, he caught up with Stephane.

Running through Villeneuve, dodging women, carts, and children, the pair found Belle purposefully storming towards the tavern.

"Belle!"

She didn't respond as her eyes fixated on the doors of the raucous building, the sounds of drunken men and music humming in the air around it.

Racing to his father’s candle shop, Stephane reached over the half door and grabbed his sword and
frogger hung on the hook. “Come on, Gus!”

Eyes widening at his beloved’s sword, Gustave’s raced to catch up with Stephane as he ran towards the tavern. “No, no, no, that wasn't a hint to grab weapons!”

Chapter End Notes

A/N:
Vaffanculo: Roughly means "fuck you" in Italian.

I'm not saying the next chapter was my favorite to write, but I'm not-not saying that the next chapter was my favorite to write.

THANK SO MUCH for reading, following, commenting, kudo-ing, and bookmarking this story. It's been AGES (in movie years) since the movie came out, and so I'm floored by all of the love still around when fervor tends to die down after awhile. Questions? Comments? Did you hate the flashback? Love that Leon got socked in the face by Chapeau? Let me know.
Chapter 34

Belle marched into the tavern, furious with determination. “HOW DARE YOU.”

The chatter of the bar died down as she reached the bottom of the steps fit to be tied; eyes stinging and bloodshot from her tears in the classroom, fists clenched, shoulders square. In response to her presence, Gaston's cadre of fans all stood up and studied their accuser. Most of them were easily twice her size, as well as several ales in.

“Who among you destroyed my classroom?!” She fumed, the entire tavern hushing to a dead silence at the accusation. Several patrons got up and quietly filed out to remove themselves from a potential scene. “Well?! Who did it!” Some of the lot started smiling at her, sneering knowingly, and it only made her feel more irate. “I know it was you, you're all cowards! Attacking my classroom hurts my students. I hope you're PROUD of that, hurting children.”

The group said nothing.

“I agree!” Stephane said, taking his place beside Belle. “You're all nothing but a bunch of cowards! He's at peace, there was a lovely ceremony, and yet you still have to keep lashing out.”

“If it wasn't for your boyfriend and that stupid girl he'd still be alive!” A burly fisherman exclaimed. Seething, Belle's face felt red hot. “That’s a lie!”

As Gustave came up from behind, he turned to his old friends. “Tomas you can't possibly believe this! And Richaurd, really?”

“I'm with Tom, Le Fou.” Richaurd said. "Stanley, how could you? We used to be inseparable. And now you're always with- with Le Fou and that girl."

"I could because it's what's right, Richaurd." He said, his hand wrapping around Gustave’s back. Surprising his love with such a display of affection. "And I'd rather have friends who do the right thing and help others than ones that just cling to some overrated boor who only cares about being popular."

"Oh, who gives a rat's ass about those two? You're all forgetting that this girl is nothing but trouble!" Clothilde growled. “First she comes into the village with that funny old man, demanding to go to school-”

The Headmaster scoffed.

“Then she scorns our poor Gaston! Capitaine Gaston, back home after years serving the crown as a hero! Looking for a new life-”

Belle rolled her eyes “Not this again.”

“All he wanted was a wife! A family! A place to settle down! He was a man of the community.”

“As long as the community bought him drinks.” Gustave muttered.

“Just because he wanted to marry me gives him no right!” She told them all in exasperation. All of
the men, staring at her as if her opinion wasn't worth the air. “I don't suppose anyone here cares about a woman's consent.”

Tomas looked confused, as did a few others.

Leaning over to her ear, Stephane whispered. “I don't think a lot of them know that word.”

Puzzled, Belle tilted her head to the side. “Really? It doesn't have a lot of syllables.”

“What?” Someone muttered in the back of the tavern.

“You're a traitor, Le Fou!” Tomas declared. “Gaston was your best friend! And now you’re with Stanley, making friends with that girl!”

“My name is Gustave!” He said bitterly. “I hate being called Le Fou but Gaston continued to call me that. A good friend doesn’t do that, Belle doesn’t do that.”

Stepping forward, Belle opened her arms. “Clothilde, what have I ever done to you?” She asked, disbelief in her voice towards all of the ire being sent her way. “I've done nothing but avoid you for years yet every time I have an idea or want to do something that doesn't fit with your worldview you come after me like I'm scheming against you.”

“You upset the balance of things!” she huffed, squinting down from her long nose. “Always wanting to get away from women's work and “broaden your horizons”. You don't broaden nothing here in this village! You do what is expected!” Her lip began to quiver. “You find a nice man after years of losing your last. And he's a funny Englishman…”

Gustave and Belle's eyebrows shot up.

“And he goes off and turns into a clock before he can ask you to marry him! A clock!” She lamented, eyes suddenly full of heartache while the Headmaster and Richaurd patted her shoulder in sympathy. “Then he's gone for years and you're no spring chicken-”

Belle and Gustave exchanged side glances.

“And when he's not a clock, when he's human again, what does he do?”

The farm girl shut her eyes. “Cogsworth.” She growled under her breath.

Sniffling, Clothilde let out a startlingly out of character wail. “Henry breaks up with you! He doesn't want to be your Henry anymore!”

Trying to be as sincere as possible, Belle stepped forward and away from her friends. “And I'm really, truly sorry about your heartache.” Quickly hopping back when Cothilde’s face flashed as if she was about to come over the table Belle stifled back a frightened gasp. The older woman looked fit to tear her apart. “But I had nothing to do with that! Cogsworth is just a friend! A very exasperating friend!”

Jabbing a finger out at Belle she snarled. “Well if YOU hadn't broken the curse then I wouldn't have remembered him and I wouldn't have this heartbreak.”

In the back of her mind, Belle desperately tried to calculate how to get out of the mess she had unwittingly waded into. The feeling of the entire village coming after her, Clothilde and the Headmaster leading the charge, was overwhelming. Mouth dry, stomach in knots, she didn't know what to say to Clothilde that would settle her. “I don't think that-"
“If it weren’t for you Gaston would still be alive!” One of the triplets, though she wasn't sure which one, squealed from the group.

“He was-” the second began.

“Perfect.” The third finished. “And you took him from us!”

“But he was so mean to you,” Belle noted, feeling more confident with the topic back to Gaston. “He always pushed you away and ignored you.”

“He made fun of you all the time,” Stephane added. “He didn't even bother to learn your names.”

Gesturing to the door Belle sighed. She had tried so many times to get through to the triplets, however, they acted as if any sort of intelligence upset their constitutions. “Girls, there are much better, smarter, more respectful men. And there are quite a few of them in the village.”

“Weren’t you three hanging all over the soldiers?” Stephane scoffed.

“Well…” struggling collectively to fight back as words were not their strong suit, one finally piped up. “They all left! As soon as the pr- pruh-” The three all tried to figure out the word amongst themselves like chattering monkeys. “Pruh-sss? Uhn?”

“Procession.” The Headmaster grumbled, hand drawing up to the bridge of his nose.

“That one!” The triplet exclaimed with a clap of her hands. “They're all gone! And we wouldn't have had our hearts broken if you hadn't killed him.”

“You killed him!” Another cried out.

“You killed him!” A man bellowed, slamming his hand on the table.

Belle jumped as the men began to rile themselves up.

“You killed Gaston and he was only doin’ what he thought was right!” Another barked.

“He was just trying to protect the village!”

“Yeah!” The room roused, suddenly full of anxious energy.

“That's a lie!”

Belle and Stephane turned to see Gustave looking positively terrified that he was displaying some kind of courage.

“He didn't want to protect the village.” He told the room. “He was angry that Belle hated him and liked the Beast, so he wanted to kill him! And he knew all he had to do was come up with an excuse and everyone would follow him!”

They all hesitated.

“And- Prince Anselme didn't fight back,” Belle exclaimed. “I was there, I saw them. Gaston was the aggressor, not the Prince.”

“Liar!” Tomas barked

“The Prince wouldn't hurt a fly!” She fired back, clenching her fists. “He could have killed Gaston
but he refused! He let him go! Gaston died because he fell shooting the Prince three times in the back. Like a coward!

“YOU TAKE THAT BACK!”

“I most certainly will not!” She stood her ground. “He was a liar and a coward and he shot the Prince because we were together.” Tears flooded her eyes. That horrible night that haunted their dreams. “The Prince died. Gaston killed him. The only reason he's alive is because of magic.”

Gustave turned to her. “He died?”

Belle gave her friend a pained look. The memory, the feeling of Ansell dying next to her, suffering, hit her in the heart. For just a haunting moment her gentle beast had been stolen from her.

“Well, I refuse to believe that!” The Headmaster bellowed, the crowd grousing and agreeing. “Capitaine Gaston wasn't my best student, but he was still a good man!” Walking over, he glared at the young woman. “And now this- this girl stands here and slanders his good name?”

Ignoring the rowdy Gaston fans she stormed over and met him, glaring up at the man who had done nothing but belittle her over the years. “He. Killed. The. Prince.”

“You take that back, girl.” He hissed.

“What are you going to do? Tell me I belong in the kitchen?” Folding her arms, Belle didn't even flinch while he leaned towards her face. She refused to. Never would she show such a vile man any weakness as her blood boiled. Each memory of the Headmaster refusing her access to an education and trying to make her a living hell struck her all at once. “Tell me I shouldn't teach girls to read?”

“You're upsetting the natural order of things.”

“I don't give a fig about the natural order of things. And I'm certainly not scared of you.” Scowling, she glanced over to see the men creeping over menacingly. Turning back to him she clenched her fists.

“You leave her alone!” Everyone turned to see one of the bystanders rise up from a table in a corner.

“You shut up, Jaques!” Richaurd ordered. “This isn't your fight.”

“He was a bully and you know it!” Jaques cried out as two men charged over and grabbed him by the arms, dragging up up the stairs and out the door while he yelled and kicked.

Belle and the Headmaster both turned back to one another.

“You're a lousy teacher.” She spat, brown eyes shooting daggers at him.

His face turned an impossible shade of red. “You take that back.”

“Any girl I teach could read circles around your boys.” Belle kept an eye on one of the triplets, the girl failing at being stealthy as she picked up a stool and bumbled over. “And that's why you wrecked my classroom. You're scared of me because I'm better and you know it. And my students are better.”

Stephane drew his sword as the group began to close the gap between the tables.

Watching their old friend, Tomas drew his sword as well. Signaling Richaurd, the other drew his
own blade and glowered at Stephane.

“Uh, Steph?” Gustave gulped.

A vein began to pulsate on the headmaster’s thick neck. “Why you little-”

“Half of yours can't spell and you know it!” Dropping to the floor in time, the triplet swung and missed her, clobbering the Headmaster. The whole stool broke, sending legs and wood clattering across the room as the tavern froze. A heavy, nervous silence filling the air as every eye went to the small farm girl and the Headmaster.

Spitting out a tooth, the Headmaster stared at it in his palm before whipping his head up.

Belle’s eyes widened.

“Oh, no.” Gustave exhaled.

“GET THEM!” He barked.

Belle scrambled upright as Stephane rushed forward, blocking Tomas and Richaurd’s swords with his own and forcing them off to the side to duel. A fist arced toward her and Gustave clocked the man attempting to punch Belle across the jaw with a glass mug. Beer sprayed into the air, the shimmering droplets splashing everyone. Grasping her friend by the collar she yanked him back as two other foes charged and collided with one another.

“Thanks.” He huffed, eyes growing as big as saucers while he shoved her out of the way and took a hit.

“Gustave!”

Suddenly Stephane leapt towards them and upended a table, bowling several drunk men over. The trio jumped onto another table, their swordsman keeping the rabble all at bay.

“So what's the plan?!” Gustave said, grabbing another mug and throwing it. The hefty hunk of glass knocked Clothilde on the side of her head; making her crumple to the floor like a sack of flour.

Belle and Stephane exchanged nervous looks.

“There’s no plan?!” He yelled, shoes sliding on the tabletop that was slick with ale. Someone’s sword swung at his knees and he jumped over it. "HEY! We used to be friends!"

“I didn't think we'd actually fight!” Belle’s boot landed on one of their adversary’s heads. The triplets were cowering in a corner, scared to ruin their perfectly coiffed hair yet stupidly cheering the mob on.

“I just thought we'd yell at each other!” His amour exclaimed, shoving someone down. “I was only bringing my sword to look imposing!” Tomas jumped up onto the table and Stephane’s blade clashed with his, steel gleaming by the yellow light of the candles. They danced, back and forth.

Stooping and grabbing a bowl of stew, he smashed the whole meal into the face of the man with the sword. Covered in pot-au-feu, unable to see, and sputtering out broth, it gave Gustave the opportunity to lift the bowl and sock the man right in the nose. Frantically catching the sword as his foe fell onto another man he jumped to his feet, brandishing his prize. “I got another sword!”

“Belle!” Stephane ordered.
"I'm not good with that!" Letting out a shriek as someone grabbed her by the skirt, she fell onto her knees. Reaching desperately she grabbed one of the broken stool legs and twisted around, striking the man on the mouth and freeing herself.

"You've been taking lessons!" Stephane cried.

"That doesn't mean I'm good at it!"

"Then what are you good at?!" Stephane yelped, blocking his opponent. Losing his grip, he slipped.

"Duck!" She yelled. Stephane dropped to his knees and she swung at the Tomas; knocking him clean off the table.

"You're good at that! Do that!" he panted, taking the second sword from Gustave. Whirling around he crossed his blades and caught the opposing blade as Richaurd joined the duel and Tomas groaned on a bench.

Belle shrieked once more, jumping backward as an ax was suddenly embedded in the table, shaking the top violently. "Really? An ax?!" She bleated.

The group below them paused, huffing and scowling as the Headmaster signaled for them to halt.

"I don't mean to be the bearer of bad news-" Gustave mumbled. "But there are a lot more of them than there are of us."

Looking around for a solution, Belle’s eyes glanced up to the chandelier near the door the men were blocking and down at the ax. It hung by a heavy yet somewhat frayed rope. "Stephane, how good are you at throwing?"

Leaning forward, he braced a hand on his knee and took in a lungful of hot air. "Pretty good?"

"Oh." Gustave huffed, noticing what Belle was looking at.

"Now, we don't want to hurt you," the Headmaster began, a large gap in the front of his mouth giving him a slight lisp. "But you need to stop and turn yourself over to the authorities."

With a grunt and more than one pull, Gustave freed the ax out of the table.

"Never." Belle growled stubbornly, panting for air. The entire tavern was stifling from the fight, and there was no place for fresh air to circulate the dim, musty room that began to reek of spilt ale.

"Girl-"

"NEVER!" Stamping her foot, she pointed her makeshift club at him, locking eyes fearlessly. With all of the patron's eyes on her, they missed Gustave slyly passing the ax to Stephane. "You don't scare me anymore and I've had enough of you and your bullying."

The Headmaster turned bright red at the sheer defiance glaring back at him. "Why you filthy little-"

Stephane threw the ax and it sailed through the air, cutting the old rope that hung the iron chandelier in place. It came crashing to the floor near the door, pinning several men and startling the rest away from the entrance.

"RUN!" Belle ordered, leaping as far as she could off of the table while Stephane grabbed Gustave and followed suit. Racing up the stairs at full speed, she looked over her shoulder as Stephane caught up and flung Gustave in front of them. Tripping over a cobblestone jutting up, she tumbled onto her
"Belle!" Stumbling, Gustave grabbed a basket of apples from a cart and, much to the horror of the farmer, threw them on the ground behind him.

"Go!" She shouted, clambering back onto her feet. "Go!"

The Headmaster, hot on her heels, tripped on an apple and went sailing forward. Grabbing Belle’s skirt he pulled her down with him in the process.

Kicking him in the face she frantically bolted upright. Yet he struck her across the mouth, causing her to fall back and face him. Baring her teeth Belle, full of absolute rage that he would dare hurt her for not being scared into line, drew her fist back and punched him across in the nose. Startled that any woman would try to fight back, Belle used his moment of being stunned to push him down onto the street to get the upper hand. Nearly about to pummel him again, two people reached from behind and hooked her under her arms, quickly dragging her backward to safety in a cloud of dust.

The dozen or so Gaston brawlers came tumbling out of the tavern. Freezing in place, eyes wide, half of the mouths dropped open while a handful tripped over apples and fell on their faces.

Weaving and clutching her head Clothilde came up. “We better have that blasted girl!”

Belle looked up, dazed, exhausted, and finding her father and Pere Robert were the ones hauling her to safety. Isolde hurried over and messily licked her face, causing her to grimace as her mouth certainly wasn't closed.

“I must say, I never knew you were that much of a rabble-rouser.” The priest exclaimed, helping her to her feet.

“You're lucky you're too old to ground.” Maurice hooked his arm around her waist to keep her steady.

Panting, confused as to why the other men had stopped dead in their tracks, she turned around to find Jaques.

Jacques took a step forward, nearly all of the town behind him and staring down the Headmaster, Clothilde, and their gang. “This stops right now!”

“How dare you lay a finger on Belle!” A woman cried out.

“All of this over Gaston?!”

“He was a bully!”

“He tricked us!”

“GOOD RIDDANCE HE’S GONE!”

The whole mob shouted at the small group. A farmer threw a tomato from his own wooden crate and smacked one of the men in the eye.

“Yeah! I’m TIRED of pretending he was alright just because he's dead!”

“This girl!” The Headmaster stumbled, holding his bleeding nose. “She's a pest! She won't follow the rules! If she’d just submit.”
“We like her just the way she is.”

Cradling her fist, Belle felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to see a familiar face.

“She fixed my stove during the winter two years ago, even when I told her I didn't have any money or couldn't trade.” The woman next to her exclaimed.

“She helped me when my cart lost a wheel.” A man piped up, stepping up as well. “She didn't even know me, we had just moved to the village.”

“She taught my daughter to read.”

“She taught mine too.”

“And mine!”

“She opened a school, no one asked her to, but she did so any girl or boy who couldn’t go to yours had a place to learn!”

Belle swallowed thickly as the crowd murmured and buzzed with proclamations of her goodness. Gustave and Stephane limped over, each putting a hand on her shoulder.

“And she brought back the Prince!” A stout man said as he came to the front. “He's a good one!”

“Yeah!”

“Yeah, he is!”

“He gave me willow bark when I hurt my foot and couldn't work.” Someone piped up.

“And he went and the herbs in the forest for my baby's colic when I couldn't buy them.”

“When my husband died there were food and clothes left on the doorstep with a letter that had the castle’s seal.”

“He's a little odd, he thinks he can pass as a commoner, but he's good!”

They all nodded in agreement, stunning Belle and her antagonists.

“ Seems your prince has a lousy disguise.” Maurice leaned in and whispered in her ear.

The Headmaster took a step back, his face slipping into an expression of defeat. More and more people came to lay a hand on the girl's shoulders, vouching for her character. Seeing a possible ally, he desperately gestured out to the crowd. “Monsieur Charbonneau! You are the head of the police! This trio came to the tavern looking for a fight! They riled up my party and charged us! I was ASSAULTED by this girl. By- by these ruffians!”

The policeman sauntered forward, looked the dazed young woman up and down. Covered in dirt and reeking of beer, chestnut hair out of its ribbon and tangled all around her bruised face, blood-splattered on her apron while the skirts beneath were in tatters, and grimacing from the pain of a split lip. Slowly turning back towards the tavern he studied the group that had so valiantly bullied and brawled in the name of Gaston.

Stephane and Gustave exchanged anxious glimpses at one another as they gave Belle's shoulder a supportive squeeze.
“Old friend,” the Headmaster smiled nervously, the gap from his missing tooth on full display. “You know me.”

“I do.” He sighed. “And I know her too.” Gesturing forward, his police rushed the group.

“Charbonneau!” The Headmaster cried out as he was roughly seized by the police.

“Oh, cut it out, Daneiu.” Charbonneau said gruffly as he put shackles on him. “I saw you hit her.”

“You wouldn’t jail a woman!” Clothilde shrieked.

“Come off it, Clothilde.” One of the officers grumbled. “You know what you did.”

As they hauled the group off to jail and the triplets scampered off in tears, Belle felt hands patting her shoulders and back. Turning she saw dozens of smiling, reassuring, faces. People came up to thank her and offer their help, others apologizing for ever calling her odd.

Grinning at her victory, Belle promptly winced and drew a hand up to her mouth at the sting of the split lip. “Ow.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I wrote this chapter soooo long ago. Happy to finally publish it.

Thank you for still following me and this story! Comments, questions, theories? Let me know!
“You get just a taste of danger and then look at you; a troublemaker.” Maurice said, helping Belle limp back towards the house. The hubbub was dying down with Gaston’s acolytes being taken to jail. “Getting into fights, punching teachers in the street. I must say, I liked it better when you just curled up with books and insulted people with Shakespeare.”

“I liked it when I just read books and insulted people with Shakespeare.” She mumbled, eyes searching the dispersing crowd. Her friends had been lost in the chaos and she hoped they were alright after all they had done for her. Stepping away from her father, she gently removed his hand. "Papa, I'll be alright."

Spotting Stephane and Gustave, Maurice waved the young men over. Simply wanting every one of the youngsters to be safe in one place after such a row he said in an even tone that warmed his daughter’s heart. “Come along. Everyone's getting cleaned up at our house.”

“We're fine,” Stephane growled, pale and dazed. Taking a deep breath he clenched his teeth and hissed.

Briskly walking over, Pere Robert caught him under the arm and helped him along. “Says the man with the black eye.” He pointed out.

Sidling up to Gustave, Belle gave her friend a sympathetic look. It was impossible to imagine how she could repay them for standing by her side. “Are you okay?”

“I'll live.” He said unconvincingly, his eyes falling on his wounded lover. “It was worth standing up to the Headmaster.”

Belle met his eyes earnestly. “Thank you for being there for me. I couldn't have done it without you two.”

“No problem. But can we not do that ever again?” He asked. “Also, have you seen my shoe-”

Isolde came loping up the street with a boot in her mouth she had found near the tavern.

“Oh.” Glancing at Belle, he asked. “So does your whole body hurt?”

“Yep.” Looking over, she watched Stephane sulk along next to her father and the priest. His eyes were heavy and he looked quite pale. Worrying as Stephane slowed down, struggling to keep up with everyone, she watched Pere Robert continue to assist him.

Taking the young man’s arm and throwing it over his own shoulder to help him walk, the priest's eyes skimmed the young swordsman's slouching frame. “So where did you get stabbed, Stephane?”

“It's not that bad, just a graze.” He muttered under his breath just before he stumbled and Maurice came to his other side. “I've had worse.”

Pushing a stubborn hand aside, Pere Robert pulled back Stephane's frock coat to reveal a dark red stain blossoming across the wool of his waistcoat. “He needs a doctor.” Pere Robert told Maurice quickly.
“Mon Dieu, Steph.” Gustave gulped worriedly.

“No,” Belle breathed, quickly heading over to her other friend.

“He’s staying at my house until he’s well,” Maurice exclaimed, throwing the other arm over his shoulder so both he and the priest shared the heavy load.

“Gustave,” Belle called out. "My ankle is sore, could you run ahead and get the house ready? Stephane can have my bed-"

“Belle-” The injured member of the trip began to complain.

“Shut up, you’re hurt.” She said, feeling guilty as she went over to his side. If it hadn’t been for her need to confront the Headmaster Stephane would have gone through his day unscathed. “And we’ll make sure you’re alright.”

“Père Robert, could you go get the physician?” Maurice asked as Belle took over Père Robert’s duties and they guided the wounded party member along. “We're nearly home and I think I can handle-”

Suddenly one of the royal coaches came tearing up the street. Before anyone could react the horses, proud white beasts, tossed their heads and slowed to a stop in front of the group. One of the footmen opened the door and pulled out the steps, allowing Cogsworth to hobble down. Dressed as formal as possible, he huffed and leaned on his cane. “Ohh, there’s a reason I don’t travel to the village.” Dabbing his face, he looked at the scene in horror. “GRACIOUS.”

“Cogsworth, what are you doing here?” Belle asked, still peeved at him for being the reason she had been the target of Clothilde’s ire for so long.

“One of our men was in the village and raced back!” He blustered, already twisted into knots at the sight of his master’s beloved so scrappy and rough. They were all a horrid sight for him to behold; clothes ripped and covered in dirty, hair every which way, caked in blood, sweat, and god knew what else. “He said you were in a fight! I rushed down as fast as I could-”

Refraining from flying off the handle with him, Belle shook her head. “No, I’m fine. The men who did this are in jail, and there’s no reason to be out of sorts because it’s all over. But, Steph-”

“That stupid boy!” he muttered, fiddling with his cane. “That- I told him- I told the prince you two would be better off at the castle. None of this village business is prop-”

“Can we please not get into a debate about where we’re living while I stand here with a swollen lip?” She groused, watching Gustave fight Isolde for his shoe. “Isolde.”

Ears flying back sheepishly, the pup released the shoe and padded over to her master. Nosing a hand whilst gazing up with wide, wet, apologetic eyes she let out a puppy whine full of feigned innocence.

Shifting his grip on Stephane, Maurice’s eyes went from his daughter to the Englishman. “Cogsworth, I need to get these three home-”

“Nonsense! I won’t stand for it. They’re all going to the castle this instant.” Puffing out his chest the majordomo rapped his cane on the coach’s steps.

“Cogsworth, be reasonable,” Maurice said. “Stephane needs a physician-”
“And he’ll have the royal physician tend to his wounds, Maurice. As will Belle and Gustave.” He explained. “And all of you shall stay at the castle and rest.”

“Whose orders?” Belle asked, unsure of how much longer she could stand with Stephane’s weight bearing down on one side.

“Mine.”

Furrowing her brows as Cogsworth inspected her bruised face, Belle frowned. “I’m not the castle’s princess.”

“I certainly don’t care about that.” He said, a hint of softness in his words. “We’re to watch you and care for you, as the Master would want, my dear. And I cannot abide leaving you here in such a state.” Watching her relax, he gestured to the coach. “Any of you! All three of you need a doctor and rest. And some protection from anyone getting out of jail in the next few days certainly wouldn’t hurt.”

Everyone opened their mouths to protest.

“No, no, no. You are to get in this coach!” Furiously bossy, he rapped his cane on the doorframe of the coach. “This instant!”

Ansell lifted his head up as Lumiere ushered Lucette and Francis into his chambers.

“Brother, you look like quite the prima donna draped on that chaise like so,” Francis told the sullen heir slouched across the pale velvet furniture. Taking a seat across from Ansell he signaled Lumiere for a drink and ignored the silver platter with the mountainous amount of fruit and cheese.

“Must you look so miserable?” Lucette replied. “If I didn't know any better I’d think the King had you on a stretcher.”

“Our talks are harder than you think,” Ansell grunted. Slowly, reluctantly, he sat upright and planted his feet on the floor. Mulling over whether or not he actually wanted company or he wanted them to get out so he could continue brooding over his last story with the king, he finally made up his mind.

“And what do I owe the honor of your badgering?”

Lucette nodded to the pot of tea which was quickly fetched by Chapeau. “Just some familial badgering. A great sign of this family's affection, as you know.”

“Oh yes. It's practically an “I love you.”

“You’re either with the king or moping, we hardly see you anymore. I have no one other than Francis to gossip with.” She chided as if it was all his fault. “And the Swedish Viscount I was keeping as a pet had to leave for his wife.”

Ansell arched a brow as he picked up his half-drunken glass of brandy. “The nerve of him.”

“Indeed.” She sniffed into her porcelain cup. “I don’t know what to do with myself, Nephew.”

Ansell’s head lolled to the side before he replied quite dryly. “I’m so glad you think of me in this time of darkness, Auntie. I pray you find another pliable young man to warm your bed.”

“Hopefully I won't be without for very long. I heard there’s a new Prince coming from Denmark to visit. Quite handsome: dark hair, blue eyes-”
“I hear he’s happily married,” Francis told her, eliciting a frown. “And she’s coming along. A redhead, lovely singing voice. Mysterious lineage; apparently her family is somewhere near the sea.” Rolling his eyes, he exhaled heavily. “All of these princes and princesses from far off places happy with just each other.”

Ansell snickered. “Anything you’d like to tell the room?”

“It’s just an observation.” He said unconvincingly.

“He’s upset that the German princess rejected his advances before she left on Wednesday,” Lucette announced.

“They kept saying she had been with seven men before marrying him!” He bleated sorely. “And I heard they were all short, not even remotely attractive.”

“Poor you, dreadful thing that monogamy business.” Smirking, he ignored their glowering looks.

Belle watched Mrs. Potts raced down the castle steps. Slowly, carefully getting out of the coach as each and every bit of her petite frame ached from the fight, she opened her mouth to alert the staff to Stephane’s injuries. As much as her body protested, she was fine compared to him. He needed a doctor, he needed to be healed. She couldn’t forgive herself if he worsened all because of her need to punch the Headmaster.

“Mrs. Potts is going to run over Belle,” Gustave muttered to his beloved as Isolde leaped from the coach to go sniff out Chip.

"Tell me if it happens." Stephane groaned as he slumped against his beloved, eyes shut from the weakness that had overtaken him. "So when I'm better I can tease her."

“Love!” Encircling the girl covered in dirt and a bit of blood, she drew the head to her shoulder. “You poor girl, you’re safe now. Come, come, let’s get a look at you.”

Belle grimaced as Mrs. Potts stepped back and cupped her cheek.“Mrs. Potts, I’m quite alright, I assure you. But Stephane needs the doctor immediately.”

Eyes flying open, she watched as the footmen held the door open to show Stephane slumped in the coach. “Oh my, Celine!” She called out to one of the maids. “Fetch the doctor and send him to the East Wing! The men will have those rooms! We need one made up immediately! Boys! Fetch the litter!”

Hurrying back Belle went to her friend, pale and breathing raggedly as he had bled all the way to the castle. "Papa, Gustave, help me he's too heavy." Taking his shoulders and lifting him off the coach with the assistance of the others, she lowered him down and into the waiting arms of footmen who came pouring out of the castle to help. “Come on, Stephane, just stay awake.”

“Listen, I’m sure this couple from Denmark has an entourage of young nobles for both of you to shop from,” Ansell reassured, reaching over to the table and plucking a handful of grapes. “Isn’t there also a young Sultan and Queen from the east to come visit near Christmas?”

Lucette traced her thumb around the rim of her cup. “Great gifts of spices and tapestries.”
“See, you two? Not all hope is lost.”

“I hear they’re also in love,” Francis grumbled. “And if you so much as look at the queen the wrong way she has a great tiger that’ll put teeth to your leg.”

“The rumor is he’s of questionable stock and has dabbled in old magik.” Lucette supplied, quite amused by the possible scandal of it all. “True Noel gifts: a mysterious young sultan and his tiger queen.”

“Funny, I only heard of the monkey,” Ansell said as he crushed a grape with his back teeth. Tales of other royal couples brought together by magic found his ears from time to time. Such notions piqued his curiosity; the idea that he and Belle weren’t as special as they had thought tickled him. It was something he wished to tell Belle about when he arrived; that perhaps there were others like them. Yet at the time just seeing his family lust over people rumor told had wielded genies wishes, true love’s kisses, and a sea god’s trident was an endless amount of entertainment. “So how can I entertain you two? Do you wish for my Beastly tales that I tell the King? Or am I merely here as an ear for your sexual boasting and whining? Your pining for handsome royalty who are living their happily-ever-afters.”

“What’s he like?” Francis asked, shifting his shoulders forward. “He hasn’t attended any function since I’ve arrived.”

Munching on more grapes, the prince leaned back against a mountain of pillows. “Old, tired, grieving. He loved the Madame very much.”

Stirring her tea, his aunt scoffed. “He created a brothel of young Parisian virgins and housed them in that chateau while she was still alive—”

“Madame de Pompadour was ill and had no taste for such things. With her blessing, he met his needs elsewhere.” He divulged, thinking of the wistfulness in which the king would speak of his mistress. “They shared the arts and sciences. A love of the minds and the soul. Just not the body.”

Not knowing how to react, Francis grimaced as if he had smelled a sour cheese. “How... unusual.”

“It was their way,” He shrugged, picking up his brandy glass. “Love comes in different forms.”

Gustave hovered next to the door of the chambers Stephane had been brought to. Maids had been bussing in and out of the rooms, leaving with dirtied cloth and water and returning with whatever the physician demanded. Belle had been separated from them; whisked away like the princess she constantly demanded she wasn’t. Being so alone did nothing for Gustave’s nerves. Had Belle not been removed he mused he would at least have someone showering him with reassurances and keeping his mind away from the more terrible what-ifs.

“Sir,” Jumpily turning he found Cogsworth appearing only half as stuffy as he had been in the village.

“I must ask, and I don’t mean to be indelicate, however, where do you wish to stay?” Leaning on his cane he watched the color drain from the young man’s face. “I’ve had the maids make up another room, however, the one Stephane is in is fit for two. Once the doctor is finished we can see that you’re properly settled in with him. If that's what you wish, of course.”

“I-ah…” Gustave began to sweat. ”I mean… Me and Stephane- That's- That's not- well- okay you see it's complicated.”
Cogsworth waved his hand to silence the frazzled man. “Monsieur, if I may?”

“But—”

Shushing Gustave, Cogsworth softened just enough to appear friendly. “My boy, that town might be small minded but I’ll have you know the last King’s brother, Phillipe de Orleans, lived with a man, the Chevalier. And he attended parties with the Chevalier at Versailles in dresses no less.”

Gustave’s eyes brightened.

“You are nothing new to me.” He reassured. “Love comes in different forms, you know.”

Thinking about it, a small nervous smile came over Gustave. “It does?”

"My boy, need I remind you the state of this house mere months ago?"

“Ah yes, different forms.” Lucette clucked. “Like the form of a contract.”

There was an uneasy silence in the room as Francis kicked a foot out in front of himself and Ansell gazed into his glass. “Neither of you wouldn’t happen to have any gossip regarding my impending nuptials… breeding… doom?” Taking a swill, he sucked in air through his teeth and braced himself for whatever had been overheard.

Pursing her lips, Lucette clicked her nails against her teacup. “Your father’s talking about an Austrian.” His aunt told him shrewdly. “Those seem to be all the rage in this country. Big breasted I hear, but long-jawed. You know, from all those cousins marrying cousins like they do over there. Because that’s not strange at all.”

“Wonderful.” He said drolly, Chapeau knowing him so well as to refill his glass without a request. “Anything else of her looks from your whispering sources? Those portraits they send are always lies. I heard a Baron got a portrait of a girl and she looked like an angel in it. Yet when she arrived she didn't have any teeth and a brow that connected from one side to the other.”

“The word is she has a terrible complexion, pimples all over. And a further testament to her refusal of hygiene; apparently she has a peculiarly ripe odor emanating from her southernmost regions.”

Francis shifted uncomfortably. “And you know it’s not me saying that to simply rile you.”

Grimacing, Ansell swallowed thickly. “So… uhm—”

“No, she doesn’t like bathing.”

“Really, Mrs. Potts.” Belle began as she relaxed in the steaming hot bathtub. The staff had rushed to treat Stephane yet she had still been given the welcome of the castle’s crown jewel. Mrs. Potts and Plumette had accosted her up to the West Wing and tended to her fat lip and assorted scrapes before she could so much as try to escape. “I’m quite alright now. Whatever you have in this bath is amazing and helping with all of my aches.”

“Good, because you ruined your dress.” She tutted, going through the wardrobe and looking for a replacement. “Absolutely unsalvageable, tatters! Now am I putting you in another or do you just want a nightgown and robe?”

“Whatever requires the least amount of movement to get into.” Grimacing, she used a sponge on her
bruised leg.

Pulling out a warm flannel gown Mrs. Potts brought it over. “He’s going to be furious, you know. Your Prince Charming will have a conniption we haven’t seen since I was a riding around on a silver cart.”

“I’ll see to him,” Belle said firmly at the thought of Ansell snarling and roaring at the news she had been injured in a bar fight. Oh, she missed him. She missed him at home, and she could dream of sharing a piping hot bath with him in the royal chambers. Her prince would be warm, ravenous, and wickedly playful. Nevertheless, she was keenly aware she would have to set him in his place when he returned.

Chuckling in agreement, the Englishwoman hung the gown on a panel and fusssed over Belle’s dirty boots. While she did Plumette wheeled over all of the beauty products they would be using on their girl to bring her back to her original luster. “I have no doubt about that. And afterward we’ll regale him with tales of your heroics; your knock down, drag out brawl with a teacher.”

Gazing over sheepishly she offered. “That I won?”

Shaking her head in amusement to the soft declaration of victory, Mrs. Potts walked across the room in search of a gown. “Yes, you had quite the victory. Can’t smile out the left side of your face, but you won, Love.” Sighing in half-hearted exasperation, she opened an armoire while the sound of a puppy nosing the door open and trotting into the room filled the air. “Once you’re done soaking we need to get you dressed.”

"I'll need to check on Stephane and Gustave after."

"You can do so once we get a nice hot meal and a spot of tea in 'ya."

"Mrs. Potts, thank you, however, that's really not-

Isolde stopped next to the tub and proudly dropped a stick in the aromatic water.

Belle sighed hopelessly at her intruder. "-necessary."

Eyeing the pup who had spent days frolicking about the town and woods, Mrs. Potts furrowed her brow as the dog flopped down and panted happily. “And you’re next.”

His stomach clenched. “She sounds like a treasure.”

“Your father has boasted she will most likely come with a castle, a carriage full of trunks of gold and silk, and a herd of the finest horses. Her father is quite ready to show his generosity towards the family that takes her as a bride.”

“Well, that explains so much.”

“He won’t be happy in this life until you pump him out an heir and you know it.” She muttered, the whole thing distasteful to her. “With your pimply princess.”

“Then one can only pray he can go to his grave early and woefully miserable.” Grumbling, he poured a generous measure. “Do you know if she’s still in Austria or am I getting kidnapped as soon as the ink dries and dragged to the altar?”

“She’s so far east she’s practically throwing stones at Warsaw.” She whispered. “Plus there’s
paperwork before she even gets her. Negotiations, finalizing the dowry, contracts, her father and your father have to measure one another and have a pissing contest, all that.”

Ansell bit back a laugh, taking a sip.

“The point is, it’ll be at least a year before they toss you two onto white sheets and check them in the morning.” Lucette reassured.

He couldn't look either of them in the eyes as his jaw set.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: No promises we'll see/won't see other *famous* royal couples, but I really love the idea of certain members of the French Court lusting over princes and princesses they had no chance in hell with. Also, arranged marriages were super iffy! One way people would see their betrothed for the first time was in a portrait that came along before the bride or groom arrived. These were often HUGE lies, and where essentially an old-fashioned heavily photoshopped portrait that made that young man or woman look far more attractive than they really were. And a lot of nobility was fairly inbred and eschewed basic hygiene (and wore a lot of perfume to mask the fact they didn't bathe) so what you saw in the portrait versus what showed up for you to marry were often two REALLY different things.

Thank you for enduring my stupidly long space of time between chapters. Did I say I got a new job? I got a new job. Better job. Job that I am learning. Job that takes up time to learn, unfortunately. That said, this was also a weird transitional chapter. Comments, questions, theories? Let me know.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!