Folie à Deux

by squid_in_disguise

Summary

05.14.19 This new chapter is not actually a chapter but posting will resume within the month, just FYI.

The Prince entertains a different woman every night and always sends them away before morning. They are offered a guest room if their rank is high, a carriage if it’s not. Belle would have thought herself lucky to be offered the chance to dress before being shoved out the door and into the hallway, and that was before he had pronounced her performance “perfectly adequate”.

And yet here she is...

(In which the Prince is human but still somewhat beastly, and Belle is a prisoner of circumstance.)

Notes

...Because she is kind enough to beta for me even though she could not possibly care less about "Beauty and the Beast" if she tried. But she likes my story anyway, and puts up with
me, which is an impressive feat. TTTYG, my dear!
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Just FYI, because some people have commented on it, my Prince is not named Adam. There are plenty of reasons for this, such as the name is more fanon than canon, it's not very accurate for an 18th century fils de France, this character is very different from the prince in the 1991 version... But the real reason is that it's my story and I do what I want.

This chapter contains some unpleasant but not nonconsensual sex. Losing your virginity just sucks sometimes, you know?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1

“These sheets are linen and silk!”

It’s all Prince Etienne-Louis can think of to say, incredulous as he looks down on the serving girl so small and beautiful and exquisite beneath him. She’s also rigid and gasping – not in pleasure – painfully tight around him, dark eyes watering. Women bleed the first time, or so he’s been told, and... Well, his sheets. They’re linen and silk. As ruined as she is now, no doubt.

She shifts, trying to get away from him, and he grits his teeth against the mindless, all-encompassing need to move. He wants to slide his hands under her, lift her to him, thrust again and again until it’s all over, but even he feels a twinge of conscience at the thought of hurting her further.

Then again, it is her fault.

How was he to imagine such a creature as an untouched serving girl even existed? If she had but told him, he would have chosen less complicated prey. Or no – he had seen her and wanted her and being a prince could obviously have her – but he could have been more careful, had he known. Although he couldn’t swear he would have been that, either.

She shifts once more, a movement that forces him even deeper, and oh he is at his breaking point.

“How!” he orders. It’s meant to echo with command but instead is desperate and breathy and almost a groan. If she moves the slightest bit one more time, he doesn’t think he can be responsible for his actions, and doesn’t think he’ll feel guilty for it, either. What does she expect him to do? All of this was by her choice.

“I – I just need a moment,” she murmurs in response. “Please.”

He nearly laughs, though amusement is not what he feels. He longs to tell her that she’s already had all the moments he can offer. She is perfect, unbelievably hot and tight around him, and his entire body radiates with an insistent almost-pleasure, something that will easily become pleasure if he could just do the one thing every instinct inside him is screaming at him to do. But he can’t, so it’s driving him mad instead. And she needs a moment. A moment! He can’t do this, he can’t do this.
Finally, just as the slender silken thread of his control is about to snap, she says the most beautiful word he’s ever heard in his life: “Alright.”

Later Etienne will feel grateful for it, will reflect on the fact that if she’d told him to stop instead he almost certainly would not have, will wonder exactly what kind of man that makes him, but now all he can feel is the utter relief of finally doing what needs to be done. He grasps her gently-flared hips hard with hands too desperate to be careful, holds her in place as he embeds himself to the hilt and then withdraws, again and again just the way he wanted to, and it feels even better than he’d imagined.

“Wrap your legs around my waist,” he commands, and it is commanding this time, and she obeys. By the way her breath changes and she stiffens a bit under him some distant part of his mind realizes he’s hurting her more this way, but the functioning part can only revel in the way her sweet body opens for him and takes him deep, so deep, and then deeper.

It can’t last – he can’t last, is surprised he’s lasted this long – and he knows it. Within minutes he’s burying his face in the crook of her neck, growling and sinking his teeth into her collarbone more forcefully than planned, and then he’s coming inside her because that’s one of the benefits of serving girls and anyway his sheets will need washing regardless. And that’s his last thought as everything is engulfed with the searing pleasure of filling her.

He comes back to himself slowly, still gasping for breath, still inhaling the scent of her skin and hair. He’s surrounded by it, surrounded by her in every way, physically and even mentally because he can’t stop thinking about what just happened, what he took from her – no, what he accepted from her. All by her choice. He is almost smiling at the thought at he raises his head to meet her gaze.

She is not looking at him. Her eyes are fixed on the golden brocade canopy of his bed, and yes it’s beautiful and yes she’s probably never imagined such luxury in her life. But he is still on top of her, still half-hard inside of her, and it’s obvious that her thoughts are miles away. As though she didn’t just surrender her virginity to him, as though she does not bear an angry red bruise, a ring exactly mirroring the shape of his mouth, on her collarbone.

He rolls off of her, his anger rising, then rising higher when she gives a little sigh as though relieved to be free of him. Relieved! To be free of him!

“Get up,” he snaps, displeasure clear in his tone.

She sits up quickly, clutches the top sheet to her chest as she tries to crawl out of the bed, and then trips when she manages it – the bed is raised high as befits his status, and the sheet tangles with her legs to almost bring her to her knees (an idea worth exploring later, perhaps). She catches herself just in time and arranges the fabric around her before turning to face him.

“A bit late for modesty, isn’t it?” he sneers.

She doesn’t answer, merely clutches the sheet tighter, looking anywhere but at him, then anywhere but at the few drops of blood staining all that linen and silk he loves so much. The droplets remind him of rose petals scattered there, vital and bright.

He stares at her until she drags her eyes back to his face, until she is pinned by the anger in them. His voice is low and dangerous as he asks “Are you aware that it is a crime to lie to a member of the Royal Family?”

The expression on her face morphs from embarrassment to indignation. “I didn’t lie about anything. You asked if I wanted to go with you and I said yes, that’s all.”
“Well of course you *wanted* to. But did it not occur to you that I had expectations of your experience, your skill?” It’s a perfectly valid reason for his wrath, he tells himself, even if it is not precisely *his* reason. Hell, maybe it is. “Did it not occur to you to mention you’d never actually done this before?”

“No,” she says after a lengthy pause. He doesn’t think that she is lying. “I thought it didn’t matter. Before and after, I thought that.”

“You thought it didn’t matter?”

“I mean – does it? I thought – It seemed you –” She’s stammering and blushing fiercely and it soothes him somewhat. It’s right that she worry she disappointed him.

“You were perfectly adequate,” he says, grudgingly. That isn’t quite accurate but he can’t see any good coming of being more detailed or complimentary.

She relaxes somewhat, relieved. “I understand. Thank you, Your Highness.”

Suddenly, he feels the strangest urge to tell her that considering his seed is dripping down her thighs as they speak, she might be allowed to call him Etienne – just for now – but ignores it. He has conceded enough in this conversation. Instead, he nods regally.

“I’m going to – get cleaned up, if that’s alright,” she continues. “Perhaps you might bring me what we discussed? I promise to be quick. I would never want to waste any more of your time than I have already.”

He can’t decide if he’s more mollified by her apologetic manner, or irritated by her assumption that she’s earned anything he promised her with what just passed. There hadn’t been much for her to do, after all. But then, he did enjoy it. And it is sweet, the way she really does believe she disappointed him. He allows it to quell his anger, the fact that she accepts he’d be perfectly justified in casting her off now in the middle of the night.

That is his wont with most of his bed warmers, to be fair. And yet… Honored as he knows she must be to have gifted her virginity to him, he imagines she also must be sore, and shouldn’t the occasion be a little bit special for her? A night sleeping in his bed can only enhance the experience.

There is also the fact that he’d like to have her again, preferably without the tears this time, but the majority of his motivation is altruistic, truly. Indeed, he feels quite benevolent. He even turns a smile on her, one of his charming ones.

“There is no need for that,” he says. “Prepare for bed, you will stay the night here.”

She looks completely shocked, as well she should. Her mouth drops open in a most interesting way, and oh he will have thoughts about that at some point, yes.

“That is more than kind,” she informs him, as though he doesn’t already know, “but I could never inconvenience you more than I already have.”

“That does you credit, but it is no inconvenience tonight.”

She sinks her teeth into her lower lip, saying nothing, and Etienne sighs to himself. Her reticence, though correct and even charming, is growing tiresome – while also being utterly pointless. He has suddenly decided he has no intention of allowing her to leave tonight, no matter how guilty she might feel.
“If you’d prefer to leave now, of course I will not stop you. But I will be…” he pauses as though searching for the correct word, continuing with just the right emphasis “unable to pay you until morning, you see. With perhaps a little extra, for the wait?”

This works, as he knew it must. Women of every station are this way, even the sweet ones: motivated by money in the end. The only real difference is that as a serving girl she can be had more cheaply.

“Yes, of course,” she says softly. “If you wish it, Your Highness.”

Another regal nod, a gesture of his hand, and she moves behind a dressing screen to prepare for bed. She drags the sheet with her, an annoyance to be sure; he had been too anxious, too impatient, to truly appreciate her nakedness when he had the chance. He’d been so anxious to get her out of her clothes, he hadn’t really bothered to get out of his. That much exertion while wearing a velvet frock coat and elaborate wig was perhaps not the best idea. Not to be repeated, no, but the rest of it…

Oh, the rest of it. He stares at the drops of blood marring his bed without truly seeing them, instead thinking of her face as he pushed inside her for the first time, her rosebud mouth opening with a gasp, her eyes never leaving his even though she must have been in some pain. And then after, his mark at her throat… There is something compelling about knowing he left it while ruining her. Beautiful as she is, it must have taken effort to come to him untouched as she was. Untouched – until he touched her.

This thought works around and around in his mind, this idea of leaving marks, of touching. If such marks were always visible, none of the other women he has known would be anything like unmarked – he having never bothered with virgins, even when he was one. He’d naturally assumed that they’d be even more boring than women with experience. He isn’t entirely certain, now. If such marks were always visible, she’d bear none but his.

It merits thinking on, at any rate.

“I’m finished,” she says as she appears from behind the screen. He glances up to see her dark hair fully down about her shoulders, long and with a gentle wave – though he liked it better in disarray around her face, tousled by his hands. She really is lovely, her features delicate and refined despite her low birth – though her beauty is somewhat marred by the freckles dusting her cheeks. Or it ought to be.

She approaches the side of the bed then halts, looking down at her hands locked in a death grip around his sheet. When she slowly raises her eyes to his, he can almost hear her panicked thoughts, feel her unwillingness to bare herself for him in the candlelight. It’s novel, her modesty.

“Are you going to – ?” She trails off, nodding at him, and he fully understands that she wants him to say yes, wants him to prepare for bed himself, to duck into his dressing room and leave her to crawl into bed unseen.

He is not much inclined to oblige her, enjoying both her discomfort and the thought of her nakedness if he simply waits her out. She can’t stand there like that forever.

In that moment, she shivers slightly, wrapping her arms tighter around herself. It could possibly be cold, though it’s hard for him to tell, wearing so much velvet as he is. But the fact that she remains frozen, too modest to drop the sheet and crawl under the warmth of the furs piled on his bed despite the chill, at least tells him that actually she can stand there for longer than he wants to wait.

Etienne shrugs. “If you prefer.”
She nods hesitantly, eyes following him as he climbs out of bed and walks a little faster than seemly to his dressing room. He attempts to peek at her by angling his mirror just right, but he’s too late – he only sees himself (somehow completely undisheveled, wig firmly in place, maquillage still vibrant, beauty patches undisturbed) and a glimpse of her lying stiffly under a mountain of furs.

He doesn’t quite know why he bothers, but he finds himself reaching for one of his undershirts. It is linen and silk, like his sheets, trimmed in lace, and undoubtedly worth more than everything she has ever owned all put together. But really, it’s nothing to him, and he can’t have her lying stiffly all night, after all. He has plans.

Draping the shirt over his arm, he returns to the room. She watches him with wide eyes as he approaches and tosses the small bundle of fabric at her.

“What – ?”

“Put it on,” he orders, adding a scathing “I won’t look,” when she makes no move to obey.

He turns away, regretting his choice until he realizes he can hear the whisper of the fabric as it settles over her skin, the sound of her slipping small pearl buttons into place. There is something erotic about hearing it, imagining it, but not seeing it.

“I’m finished,” she says.

It is unsettling, how very much he wants to look at her, unsettling enough that he plans to ignore the impulse and simply return to his dressing room. But his body ignores his plans, not the impulse – he is unused to denying them in general, to be fair.

His first thought is that if she had any idea of the fineness of the fabric she wears, she wouldn’t sit up in bed like that, would be huddled under the furs once more. Even in the candlelight the shirt is translucent, falling softly over the lines of her body and concealing just enough to make her seem more revealed than covered. It clings to her breasts, small and high, and shows the deep rose of her nipples, hard in the cold.

He’s hard, too, and very close to joining her there amongst the furs, but she is pulling her hair over her shoulder, braiding it, watching him through half-lidded eyes that show more exhaustion than he’d expected.

She smiles sleepily at him, small and brief. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

“Etienne,” he says, another impulse undenied.

“What?”

“You will call me Etienne, tonight and in the morning. Provided we are alone.”

Her face registers surprise but she accepts the command willingly enough. “Of course, if you wish it.”

He wishes she had actually said it just then, but really it’s of little matter.

“And you have a name, I presume?” he demands, when it becomes clear she won’t think to offer it.

“Belle,” she says.

He almost tells her it suits her.
As of 12.17.17: I have much of this story completed and will be posting every late Monday night/early Tuesday morning.
Thanks so much for your comments and kudos! Let us see what Belle thinks about all of this, shall we?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Belle does not like Prince Etienne-Louis Josephe Christophe Avenant de France. It’s all she can think as she lies next to him in his huge featherbed - so much softer than any surface she’s ever slept on! - tangled in his sheets, feeling the sting of his bite at her throat and the ache of giving herself to him between her legs. Wearing his shirt. Hearing him breathe. He turns to her in his sleep, presses himself against her, throws his arm over her waist and holds, and no, she does not like him at all.

She can’t bring herself to regret what has passed, either. Perhaps she should feel grief or shame for what she has sold and what she has lost, and maybe there is some. Her concerns lie more in the fear that her father will find out what she has done, will realize that she did it for him. He would blame himself, even knowing it was her choice alone – If it was a choice at all.

Perhaps it wasn’t, not really. The facts are simple enough and stark: her father has been in declining health for months, plagued by a sickness that makes his hands shake and saps his strength. He can no longer build his beautiful clocks and music boxes, can no longer paint. Losing his art is harder on him than the sickness itself, she knows. But the lack of income becomes more and more pressing, especially considering the way the man currently imprisoning her in his arms keeps raising the village taxes to astronomical levels – then raising them again.

No, there had been no choice but to take work at the castle, and then a different kind of work when it was offered. For what the Prince has promised her, she can afford to keep her father in some comfort, and care for him through this illness she knows must be his last. She would have sold everything she owned for that chance; what His Highness wanted of her was a petty thing, in the end.

He will want it of her again before she leaves, or so she assumes. Why coerce her into staying, otherwise? She has only held the lowly position of serving girl and scullery maid for a fortnight, yet even she knows that the Prince entertains a different woman (or two) every night, and always sends them away before morning. They are offered a guest room if their rank is high, a carriage if it’s not. Belle would have thought herself lucky to be offered the chance to dress before being shoved out the door and into the hallway, and that was before he had pronounced her performance “perfectly adequate”.

And yet here she is, still, feeling his heat through the fine fabric of the shirt he’s allowed her to sleep in, knowing he must be fully naked against her. Exhaustion had dragged her down before he’d returned to bed, a fact for which she is grateful. If she’d been awake she’s sure he would have taken her again – he’d wanted to when he gave her his shirt, she knew – and while she is perfectly willing to do her duty in the morning, she had still been sore and shaken from the experience at the time.
She’s a farm girl, she has always understood the mechanics, and she’s well-read, so she’d thought she understood the rest of it… But it had been different than she’d imagined.

It had hurt more than she’d thought it would, for one. She hadn’t expected she would bleed. At the time she had wondered if it was something he had done, if he had been rough with her, hurt her accidentally or on purpose, but now she thinks that must just be how it happens. He’d known what it meant immediately, after all. And he had been, if not kind, then at least not as cruel as he might have. He’d given her the time to adjust that she’d asked for, even though it clearly hadn’t been easy for him.

Suddenly, all she can think of is Gaston. What happened with the Prince – that’s what Gaston wants, too. She attempts to imagine exchanging such intimacies with him, but can’t get past her shudder of revulsion at the thought, the same shudder she’s felt every time he’s touched her in any way. It’s hard to explain how or why, but somehow she just knows that Gaston would not have been as almost-kind-not-cruel as His Highness had been. Gaston has never taken her thoughts, words or desires into account before; he would certainly not start under such circumstances…

They’re not exactly cheerful thoughts to fall asleep to, and she doesn’t remember it happening, but the next thing she’s really aware of is the sensation of lips, soft and warm and wet, pressed to the nape of her neck and along the line of her shoulder. Next is a large hand cupping one breast through fine fabric, teasing her suddenly hard nipple in a way that makes Belle gasp – a sound he echoes from behind her, his breath catching as he fits himself against her back. He raises the hem of the shirt she wears and adjusts her somehow, something to do with the angle of her leg, and then there’s a sharp sting as he presses inside.

He gives a strangled curse, pushing deeper and deeper until he’s as deep as he can go, and she feels stretched and full and strange but it doesn’t hurt nearly the way it had the night before. And now as then he doesn’t seem to require much from her in the way of participation, either. It seems to be enough for him to slide his hand down and grip her waist, hold her still and just move in her. She surrenders herself to his rhythm and allows her sleep-hazed thoughts to drift even as he buries his free hand in her hair and tugs to allow him better access to her throat.

He scrapes his teeth over sensitive flesh, sucks at the skin until she can feel it bruise, and she wonders vaguely how on earth she’ll hide either of his marks once this is over – as she thinks it must be soon, based on his breath skimming over her neck and the force and speed behind his thrusts. Just as she’s imagining what excuse she’ll make to her father when she returns, she feels him pull away, easing himself out of her. She doesn’t think he’s finished, although really she only has the one experience to extrapolate from – but no, he isn’t done, he’s simply moving her onto her back and covering her the way he did last night.

She’ll wrap her legs around his waist before he tells her to this time, she decides as he settles between her thighs, burying himself to the hilt in one easy near-painless thrust. He begins to move again and she slowly opens her eyes, looking up at the man on top of her, blinking as she adjusts to the early morning light, and –

Belle screams.

It’s not just that she’s only nominally awake in a strange room, one that looks much different by daylight, although that is disorienting – especially with all the gilding and mirrors. No, the more urgent problem is that she does not recognize the man currently making free with her body.

He freezes, looking down at her in confusion, and she takes the opportunity to grope blindly at the small table beside the bed. Her hands touch something hard and cold – heavy – a candlestick perhaps? She grips it with one hand and brings it up as quickly as she can, swinging towards his
Despite his confusion, his reflexes are quick; he stops the blow easily, dragging her makeshift weapon out of her grasp and tossing it aside before pinning her wrists hard to the mattress. She struggles against him but he’s too strong, too heavy, and he’s literally inside her and her head is spinning and –

“What is the meaning of this?!” the stranger demands, glaring down at her, and there is something familiar in that tone…

“How did you get in here?” she retorts, wondering where the Prince is, what he’ll do to them both if he walks in on this scene. She isn’t entirely certain whether he’d rescue her or punish her.

The stranger stares at her incredulously. “I live here, as you might recall.”

She blinks up at him, disorientation beginning to fade but still uncertain. “You – ? But how – Who are you?”

“Who would you imagine me to be?” His voice is dangerous as he says this, low and full of barely restrained anger, and it’s then that everything clicks into place.

Obviously, obviously he is the Prince. It is the only logical conclusion, and yet gazing into his face she can barely credit it. The night before he had looked like someone else entirely, face painted pink and white like a porcelain shepherdess, dotted with velvet beauty patches – heart shaped! – powdered wig rolled above his ears and curling around his shoulders. He’d looked as ridiculous as any other aristocrat, or even more so because he was so clearly pleased with it all.

The man above her does not look ridiculous. He looks as dangerous as his voice, glaring as he is from under heavy brows, thin lips curved in a derisive sneer that twists more and more the longer she stares. But she just can’t accept what she knows must be true. It is certainly not obvious by his face, which is long and almost soft – no steep angle to his cheekbones, no sharp edge to his jaw as it tapers to a rounded point. It could be a kind face, she thinks, if he were anyone else.

He isn’t. She knows he can’t be, but she still stares, searching, trying to find one single point of similarity between the man from last night and the stranger inside her now. There is something in his eyes, something more than anger, and then she realizes: of course it’s the eyes. He has the bluest eyes she has ever seen, deep-set yet disconcertingly pale and icy – especially now, as she holds them with her own. But she can never forget those eyes, remembers them all too clearly from the night before, the way they bored into hers as he took her.

Without warning, she begins to laugh. Not because it’s funny, but simply because she is so relieved. Much as she doesn’t like this man, she had at least chosen him. She does not like the idea of sharing this much of herself with anyone else, not unknowingly. He, being unable to read her thoughts, is even angrier now, so she does her best to contain herself.

“Forgive me, Your Highness – ”

“Etienne,” he snaps, but she doesn’t correct herself. She really cannot call him something so familiar, not even now.

“ – but I did not recognize you.”

For a moment, the expression on his face grows even darker. “You didn’t recognize me?”

Wary and uncertain, she shakes her head… And then he begins to laugh himself.
It is not a nice laugh. It is not warm and happy but somehow cruel, pointed in that she knows he is laughing at her. He finds her unbelievably rustic, she assumes, but then that is his fault. She is a peasant girl from a poor provincial town. If he’d wanted someone fashionable and sophisticated who would recognize him without his paint and stupid wig, he should have chosen one of the many ladies of the court who would have been only too happy to oblige.

Then the laughter stops and he seems to remember exactly where they are, exactly what they’re doing. He flexes his grip on her wrists but doesn’t let them go, keeps her pinned and helpless beneath him, and Belle can’t help but think that if this is something people do in bed, she is not at all surprised that he is one of them. Despite knowing him as little as she does, it seems exactly the kind of thing he’d enjoy. He holds her perfectly still as he leans close, close enough that his long blond hair falls around them like a curtain, and presses his mouth to her cheek, to her throat.

“Do you recognize this?” he murmurs against her ear, lips brushing softly against it and making her shudder. The words are accompanied by several long, deep thrusts, his whole body growing taut against her as he moves. But she doesn’t answer – she doesn’t really think he wants or expects her to.

Another adjustment has him releasing her bruised wrists and lifting her leg, not to wrap around his waist as before but to drape over his shoulder. This changes the angle, forces him to brace himself away from her but also lets him move deeper, hurts a little more. But his breath catches and he presses deeper still, harder, faster, clearly enjoying it.

“Do you recognize this?” he asks again, breathless now, staring down at her with hunger in those strange, arctic eyes. He can see everything from this new position, she realizes, the shape of her curves outlined by his shirt, the place where they are joined, his own body moving in and out of her and she knows by the way he looks and looks and does not blink that watching what he’s doing to her is as enjoyable to him as doing it to begin with.

It’s… Well, it’s humiliating, really, to be on her back like this, under him, open for him, completely on display. This was all much easier in the mostly-dark. But there’s nothing to be done about the daylight filtering in through the gaps in the curtains, nothing to be done about his gaze on her, so she lies there and watches him while he uses her in whatever way gives him the most pleasure. There are wrinkles near the corners of his eyes, she notes idly. She cannot quite imagine they are from smiling. His teeth dig into his lower lip, very white but ever so slightly crooked in the front.

It seems to take much longer than the night before. His eyes and hands are everywhere, his breathing ragged, and he moves in and out for what feels like forever as though he’ll never get enough of it. But finally his eyes drift shut and his face twists in a way that would be amusing under other circumstances but isn’t especially just now. He groans loudly and digs his fingers into her hips and buries himself completely inside her, stilling, and she feels a warm rush of liquid heat at her core.

He collapses on top of her – again – and she stares up at the brocade canopy – again – and reassures herself that she is very unlikely to conceive at this point in her cycle and anyway there are herbs to help prevent it – again.

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know your thoughts, and I will see you next week, same BatB time, same
BatB channel!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thank you again so much for all your excellent feedback! I'm doing my best to respond to all comments so don't hesitate to ask any questions you might have.

And now, without further ado...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

3

“I trust you'll recognize me in future,” Etienne says when he is finally able to form a coherent sentence. His breathing is still labored, his pulse still pounding, but he feels wonderful, warm and relaxed and really quite pleased with himself. Everything had ended far too soon the night before – it would have been embarrassing, really, if not for the fact that she couldn’t have known any better – but this was certainly a performance he can be proud of.

She glances up at him, almost smiling, and he can’t help but think that her lips are so perfectly shaped. He still hasn’t kissed her, he realizes, but then he doesn’t usually kiss his paramours; god only knows where their mouths have been. Belle on the other hand… Perhaps, in addition to everything else, she’s never been kissed before either.

He’s quite eager to test this theory, eager to duck his head and press his mouth to hers, but then she laughs a little, distracting him.

“Yes, Your Highness, I will certainly recognize you.”

Those words again.

“I believe I told you,” he begins, not bothering to conceal his annoyance, “that you will call me Etienne.”

She sinks her teeth into her lower lip again (just as he’d like to), something he’s starting to recognize as a sign of reluctance for whatever reason. In this case he assumes she must be reluctant to be so familiar with someone so high above her station, which is perfectly reasonable, but she should be more reluctant to disappoint him by failing to follow his orders.

“Of course, if you wish it,” she says, and that’s exactly what she said last night, although apparently she didn’t mean it then – or now, unless he’s missed his guess.

“I do wish it,” he tells her pointedly. “Now would be quite convenient, in fact.”

“Of course, E – Etienne. I will certainly recognize you.”

And oh, he is so glad he told her to call him by name, so glad he pressed her on it. Because his name sounds beautiful with her sweet clear voice all wrapped around it. If he’d known how it would be, he would have urged her to use it as he took her, urged her to plead by name for him to fill her with his
come… But next time, next time, all the time in the world for that…

Thinking such happy thoughts, he disengages from her, noticing again that she sighs with relief. This time, he isn’t angry – now that there’s more light he can see the slight strain on her face, understands that she must still be in some discomfort. Well, it can’t be helped, and there was no crying this time, so he considers it all a great success. She’ll become accustomed to it quite readily, he’s sure, and then she will have no cause for complaint – he is quite skilled, of course, some might say gifted, not to mention well-endowed. Yes, he will have her screaming his name soon enough.

For now she is beautiful in the not-quite-afterglow, the sunlight streaming through the floor-to-soaring-ceiling windows picking out strands of gold in her dark hair, highlighting the freckles he now finds rather charming across the bridge of her nose and the crest of each cheekbone. He lets his eyes roam from her face to her throat, lingering on the marks he left there before moving down and down. His shirt is still sheer, still hiding nothing, and the hem is hiked up around her waist, revealing everything else to him.

There are bruises on her inner thighs, left by his hipbones as she cradled him the night before, and he can’t help remembering the almost unbearable eroticism of watching himself sliding in and out of her as he fucked her mere minutes ago. He wants to tell her to spread her legs, wants her to show him the pink of her cunt and his seed inside of her, but even he knows that is too much for an innocent like her. Perhaps sometime in the future, when he’s had time to more thoroughly corrupt her –

“Oh, god,” she gasps, suddenly realizing exactly what he’s staring at, and she yanks the hem of his shirt down so hard he’s afraid she might rip it. It doesn’t hide much, but then she doesn’t know that. A red flush spreads from her face and over her entire body until she is burning with embarrassment. He can’t help it; he laughs.

“You’re blushing!” he says, delighted, and she glares at him. She grabs for the sheet again and pulls it over herself, cringing.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of, Belle,” he murmurs, pulling the sheet back off of her and reaching for the buttons of the shirt. He will strip her bare, yes, and maybe he will make her show him what he wants to see, if only because he knows it will make her blush even more fiercely. “I’m not ashamed, I’m just – unaccustomed to such – no, don’t – ” and she burrows back under the sheet and the furs. Perhaps he ought to be annoyed, but somehow he is still laughing instead.

“You can look at me if you like,” he offers, rising to stand at the edge of the bed. He is certainly not ashamed of his body, not as hard as he works to keep it sculpted with fencing and riding and other gentlemanly pursuits. But she remains burrowed under the bedding, with nothing but the top of her head poking out, and he is laughing so hard he’s almost crying.

“No thank you,” she says in a small, muffled voice. “You must forgive me for taking so much of your time… If you will go find what I am owed, I will get dressed and be on my way.” Oh, he is not laughing anymore.

“On your way?” he demands. Her face reappears from under the mound of furs, cheeks still stained red, eyes determinedly fixed on his.

“Yes, Your Highn – E – Etienne.” It’s still beautiful, the way she says it, but he finds it doesn’t appease him now. “You have been – more than generous, to spare so much attention for me, but – ”

“Is this my cue, to be ‘more than generous’ again?” His voice is sharp and bitter. It might be nice if
just once the first few words out of her mouth after he’s had her weren’t thinly veiled demands for more money. But then, she is a woman, and women are like this, as he knows and must remember. Something about her makes it too easy to forget.

“What?” she asks, seemingly shocked. “No, that’s not – ”

“A man might take it amiss, Belle, that you are so anxious to escape his hospitality,” he tells her, grasping her chin before she can turn away from him. “A man might be offended, much less a prince.”

“You’re hurting me,” she says quietly, and he releases her, but doesn’t move away. Doesn’t stop glaring. “I have responsibilities at home, Your Highness.” This time she doesn’t correct herself, he notes.

“I fail to see what concern that is of mine.”

“My father will be wondering where I am.” There is fear in her voice, and for a moment he is almost sympathetic. Clearly she doesn’t want to leave, but is afraid of upsetting her father. He knows all about fathers, yes. But then his father is a king. Hers is a peasant who will simply have to fend for himself a few more days, that’s all. A week, yes – at least a week.

“You will send him word,” he informs her. “Tell him you are required here for another week.”

“Another week?”

“Yes,” he says, warming to this idea. “I’ve no pressing engagements. Surely we can keep one another entertained.”

“But –”

“I will pay you twice what has been promised for each day you remain.” It’s an absurd amount of money for a girl like her, especially when he already knows she wants to agree, but he is done discussing this. And the sooner they come to terms, the sooner he can rip his shirt off of her and continue her education in his bed.

When she still doesn’t answer, he tries to soften his face, to rein in his anger. She is already afraid of her father – there is no reason to make her afraid of him, just now.

“Think of how happy your father will be when you bring him so much,” he tells her, toying with a silky strand of hair and tucking it behind her ear.

She closes her eyes, swallows, nods, and he grins.

“Excellent. Now, where were we?” He reaches for the neckline of the shirt, very much looking forward to scattering the priceless pearl buttons everywhere, but she places a small hand on his.

“Must I always allow you to – ?” she asks, and he raises an eyebrow at her.

“I am certainly not paying you to be denied.”

“Of course not,” she says, and her blush deepens. “But I am a little – Physically, you see – ”

She trails off, too embarrassed to complete her thought, but he somehow understands what she means anyway. He even feels a little guilty for it, for forgetting what he was just thinking about, that she must be experiencing some discomfort. After all, he wasn’t particularly gentle the first time (she
didn’t give him the chance to be), and this morning he took her slow and deep, savoring everything
he was too rushed to enjoy the night before.

“I understand,” he tells her, trying to sound comforting. He’s not very good at it, apparently, because
she still looks apprehensive, as though she expects him to push her down and pounce on her. He’d
be offended if not for the fact that he had considered it.

Truthfully he is at something of a loss; his only plan for the day was to take her back to bed and keep
her there. Of course, there are things she could do for him, and he is not unmoved by the thought of
her on her knees, lovely mouth open wide and begging, but it seems rather a lot to expect,
considering. Tonight, perhaps, but not just yet.

“Young chamber is so beautiful,” she says, and he accepts the compliment with a nod because it’s true,
although he’s not sure why she’s mentioning it now. “Perhaps you would be willing to show me the
rest of the palace? I know there is an extensive gallery but have never yet seen it.”

“That could be arranged.” He says it coolly, but really he’s pleased. Of course she is in awe of his
home, impressed by the beautiful objects and works of art he’s collected, sparing no expense, and he
is proud of them. Naturally, he has a passion for beautiful things – as his desire for her makes clear.

Belle smiles at him, small but genuine and so beautiful. “I should like it above all things.”

“All things?” he asks, trying to decide if he ought to be offended.

“Well,” she replies as she looks away. “Perhaps not all.”

She is unexpectedly amusing, he thinks, smirking in return. “Very well. Get dressed and I will meet
you shortly.”

He crosses the room, pausing only once to turn back and see if she is watching him – but she has her
hands over her eyes as though afraid she’ll accidentally open them and see him nude. It still makes
him smile, her modesty. He’ll break her of the habit soon enough, yes.

Though it is his custom to take some care in getting dressed, today he speeds through the process, not
wanting to ring for his valet. He has no obligations to his courtiers until the evening, after all, and no
wish to postpone touring the gallery with her simply in order to have his hair curled. Instead he pulls
it back into a neat queue and keeps the rest of his clothing similarly understated. A pair of plain
breeches, a shirt much like the one he’d given her, and a sturdy waistcoat and coat is about the
minimum of what he can wear in public without thoroughly shaming himself.

With any luck he won’t be wearing it for long. The gallery is full of convenient alcoves, and she will
certainly be impressed by the paintings and furnishings and everything else women love. Between
that and her obvious attraction for him, he imagines she’ll be perfectly willing to ignore whatever
discomfort she is experiencing. Perhaps, if she is, he will even be gentle with her.

These musings turn to horror as soon as he steps out of his dressing room. She is standing by the bed
in her uniform of all things, the serviceable blue dress covered with a white apron. She has left off
the kerchief his female staff all wear – tying it around her neck instead to hide the marks he left her,
he notes with displeasure – but that is the only thing to differentiate her from a common serving girl.
Seeing her here, like this, it’s impossible to ignore the fact that she is a common serving girl – his, in
fact.

“Just what do you think you’re wearing?” he demands, and she looks up at him, confused.

“My dress?”
“Take it off. I can’t be seen with you dressed as a palace maid!” He wonders how it’s possible she
does not realize this. “I do not dally with the help.”

She looks at him unblinkingly, and it’s infuriating because he does have a rule about that and still
can’t explain why he broke it for her – except that he saw her amidst the ladies of the court, all bright
and painted and fluttering around him, and wanted her.

“You are the exception that proves the rule,” he grits out. “Besides, I am not dallying with you. We
have come to terms, it is a very different thing. You will not dress like that anymore.”

She shakes her head at him. “And how will I dress? This is all I have, unless you expect me to wear
your shirt and nothing else.”

This is not something he has a problem with, in theory. In private. But in the halls, where anyone
might see her?

“Certainly not,” he snaps, stalking over the to the ornately carved chest at the foot of his bed. He
wrenches the lid open with barely-controlled violence and digs through what he finds there,
discovering what he’s searching for at the very bottom. It is a silk gown of gray liseré satin, woven
with a pattern of undulating green vines and flowers. Simple, yet fit for a courtier – a princess – a
queen. It occurs to him as he looks at it that the colors will suit her – though he supposes there are
few enough things that wouldn’t.

He stalks back to her and shoves it into her grasp.

“Here,” he says with little grace. “Someone left this, you might as well get some use of it.”

“Someone left this?” She stares at the bundle in her hands. “You expect me to wear something left
behind by some other – ”

“Some other what, exactly?” He finds he is angry and also somewhat hurt. “Do not forget where you
spent the night, mademoiselle. You are in no position to judge.”

Belle laughs, although the sound lacks all joy; he doesn’t like it at all, no.

“I was going to say some other woman who might recognize it if she sees me in it. But I suppose she
will be in no position to judge either.”

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes

Behold! The gown Etienne lends Belle!

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel...
The Prince turns a glare so black on her, Belle nearly cowers in response. She shouldn’t bait him, shouldn’t argue with him, and she knows that, but he makes it very difficult to maintain her equilibrium. The only thing preventing her from saying something more, something truly cutting, is the strange sense that he’s not just angry but also wounded. And as a farm girl she knows never to taunt a wounded animal.

So she presses her lips together into a tight thin line, and holds his gaze. Even angry as he is, his eyes are like chips of ice, so pale and cold.

“Put it on,” he orders, and she nods, turning to dart back behind the dressing screen.

An elegant hand clamps tightly around her upper arm, halting her immediately.

“No,” he says. “Here. Put on the petticoat, I’ll assist with the robe.”

“I’ll come out when I’m finished – ” she protests, but he’s already turning her to face him, already taking the dress from her grasp and reaching for the lacing on the front of her uniform. It reminds her strongly of the night before, of the apprehension and anticipation she’d felt watching his long fingers pull the laces through the eyelets. Watching his face as he watched her.

Of course, he’d looked very different then. Not just because he’d been caked in maquillage and all the rest of it, but because he’d been a little drunk, a little desperate. His eyes had been the same though; she’d shivered then, too. Now he tugs the laces free with ruthless efficiency, almost clinical with the process. This is not a prelude to something more, or at least she doesn’t think so, and thinks she is relieved.

He finally finishes his task and opens her bodice to push the dress off her shoulders and down her hips. The sturdy linen of her chemise is opaque and shapeless, but she feels at a disadvantage anyway. His hands are far warmer than his eyes, after all, and they skim over her ribcage and down her hips so lightly…

“Look at me.” The command in his low voice is inescapable and impossible to disobey. She looks up into his face but cannot read it.

“You will never wear this again,” he tells her. “Do you understand?”
She shakes her head. “No. I don’t understand what you expect me to wear instead, when I go back to scrubbing your floors.”

He smiles then, not a nice one. “I expect that if you’re on your knees it will be for an entirely different reason.”

“I’m only staying for a week,” she reminds him, ignoring the innuendo she knows his words contain but also doesn’t quite understand.

“And surely I’m paying you enough that I won’t have to see you here, dressed like this again, after.” He states it with such certainty, the matter so clearly closed, that she doesn’t bother to argue. She plans to stay away as long as her father needs her; by the time she returns to work, chances are he’ll have forgotten her very existence.

So she nods and shrugs and agrees before stepping out of the uniform puddled around her feet. He offers her the petticoat and she pulls it on, tying the tapes at her waist. It hangs there, shapeless and awkward without the panniers meant to fill it out, but she is glad they’re nowhere to be found. Panniers are baskets worn by beasts of burden, not undergarments – although from a purely technical standpoint she admires the ingenuity of whatever woman decided to replace ten or more layers of stiffened cloth and awkward padding with the comparatively lightweight contraption.

Once the petticoat settles, she reaches for the second half of the silk dress, the robe that fastens in the front to the waist, then opens to show the skirt beneath. She does not really require assistance to don it, as he must know; it is as easy to put on as a coat, or nearly so, aside from the fact that it is so voluminous. The Prince pulls it out of reach anyway.

“Allow me,” he says, and obviously it is not a request. She glares at him but allows him to hold it for her as she shrugs into it, allows him to settle the silk over her, the touch of the fabric much lighter than the feeling of his strange eyes on her. The robe alights gently to hang from her shoulders, almost whispering as it swirls to the floor. Wearing silk is not like wearing anything else, she realizes now.

He moves to stand before her and reaches for the open bodice of the robe. Fool that she is, she assumes he intends to fasten it, but he slips one elegant hand under the fabric to curve around her waist. His palm is very warm, she notes, even through the thick chemise. His free hand cups her chin and urges her to tilt her head; he is tall, but not so much taller than her that it’s awkward to look up at him. She meets his eyes and notes that they are no longer flat, but instead glittering with something beneath the surface, something she can’t quite define.

“Belle,” he murmurs before lowering his head and pressing his mouth to hers.

It’s not her first kiss, or not quite – Gaston had mashed his face against hers a few months ago, a disgusting experience she intends will never be repeated. But this is a very different thing. Etienne’s lips are soft and warm and there is no anger in the kiss, although she supposes it helps that she isn’t struggling desperately to escape him as she had with Gaston. It’s gentle somehow without gentleness, because he is applying pressure and using his tongue to open her mouth under his, is tasting her deeply, is holding her so close, but his lips still move against hers so sweetly. No, nothing like Gaston’s kiss, and nothing like Etienne’s demeanor in bed thus far, either.

She likes this much more than she has liked anything else he’s done to her.

His grip on her waist tightens and he pulls her closer, crushing her to his chest, and she can feel the solid length of his body against hers, his arousal hot and urgent against her stomach. So much for the gallery she thinks to herself as he adjusts his hold, one hand sliding into her hair to hold her still, the other stroking from her ribcage to her breast, cupping it and teasing her nipple with the pad of his
thumb. His kiss becomes harder, more demanding – more than she can keep up with, in truth. He wants things she doesn’t know how to give.

Without warning he pushes her away from him, and she sways where she stands, unbalanced without him to lean into. His eyes are very bright as he looks at her, his breathing heavy. He seems… Surprised, almost as surprised as she is, that it was he who broke their kiss.

“I didn’t mean – Perhaps you ought to fasten it yourself,” he says finally. “I need to – Get my shoes.”

Belle nods as he leaves the room and supposes she ought to be grateful. Still, her fingers shake slightly as she puts hooks into eyelets. She’s confused, her analytical mind attempting to dissect everything that has happened since the night before, but there’s too much really. She needs more time to understand it all, and this is just the most recent thing to add to the list. He stopped, and she knows it wasn’t because he didn’t want her, she has learned enough to realize that much, yet it is impossible to imagine it was for her sake. He is so –

Suddenly, the heavy double doors to the Prince’s chamber open. There is just enough time for Belle to wonder if she can dive under some piece of furniture, but not enough time for her to make a decision and act on it, before a handsome man in gold livery enters the room.

“Forgive me, Your Highness, but – Belle?” Lumiere, the maître d’ stands just as frozen, just as surprised as she is. “What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be below stairs.”

If there is a god, surely he’ll allow her to sink through the floor and disappear. But it doesn’t happen, so either god does not exist or he exists but is laughing at her. To be standing here, after doing what she’s done, wearing what she’s wearing, in front of someone she likes and esteems… It’s too awful. She should be embarrassed, and maybe she is, but not the kind of embarrassment where she can feel herself blushing. No, if she could look in a mirror she’s sure she would be bloodless and pale.

She has no idea what to say; Lumiere is kind enough to save her the trouble by rushing to her and grabbing her by the shoulders.

“What are you wearing, where did you find this? Are you insane? Do you have any idea how much trouble you’ll be in if the master finds you here? And going through his things… Taking something, wearing it – ”

He is more agitated than she has ever seen him. He throws one arm over her shoulder and tries to usher her towards the doors.

“It will be fine, he won’t see us if we leave now, and one of the other maids can bring this back and replace it later,” he says, speaking rapidly in his panic, seemingly trying to convince himself as well as her of this course of action.

“Lumiere, wait – ” she begins, not allowing herself to be moved.

“His Highness is not particularly understanding, Belle, we have to – ”

“No, he isn’t,” Etienne says, stepping out of his dressing room.

Slowly, Belle turns to face the Prince. He is dangerous again, she can tell by the way his eyes are utterly flat and fixed on Lumiere – whose arm is still slung over her shoulder protectively and who ought to be terrified, based on the way the Prince glares. She feels a rush of affection for the maître d’, followed by regret. He is her superior but she’d thought he could also be her friend. She doesn’t imagine that will be true once he knows what she’s done.
“Your Highness, you must forgive Belle, she hasn’t worked here long and isn’t aware of how things are meant to be run,” Lumiere says. “Mrs. Potts and I will take her in hand. She won’t bother you again.”

“You will certainly not take her in hand,” the Prince snaps. “You will unhand her this instant. And you will not address her so informally. She is my guest and will be treated as such.”

Lumiere does as the Prince demands, releasing her, but he doesn’t stand aside. She meets his gaze, blue but not at all like the Prince’s. Darker, warmer – more confused.

“I don’t understand,” he says. “Belle, what is –”

“What did I just say?” The Prince’s voice is quiet again, more terrifying than if he were shouting.

“Forgive me – Mademoiselle Brescond,” he begins, and Belle casts a quick glance at Etienne – whose expression has grown darker even though the maître d’ has done as he was asked.

She looks back to Lumiere and sees that he is staring at the marks on her neck, the bruise on her collarbone. There is grief and anger on his face, but it is not directed at her. Instead, he pins Etienne with a look every bit as sharp as what the Prince is capable of.

“Etienne,” he says. “What have you done?”

“You will not demand answers of me, Lumiere,” the Prince warns him, and Belle is surprised by the fact that he doesn’t correct the maître d’s use of his given name.

Lumiere turns to her, and Belle sees nothing but compassion in his expression – compassion she doesn’t deserve. And Etienne, while unpleasant in almost every way, doesn’t deserve his anger, either.

“He hasn’t done anything,” she assures him, forcing herself to smile despite her anxiety and embarrassment. “At least, not anything I – anything I didn’t want him to.”

“Enough,” Etienne says. “There is no need for you to justify my actions to him. They are none of his concern. You were leaving, Lumiere, were you not?”

Lumiere takes a deep breath, and Belle watches in awe as he tucks all of his emotions away somewhere, leaving his face perfectly blank and pleasant. “Not without you, I’m afraid, Your Highness. There has been a letter from your – well, from Versailles.”

“Burn it.”

The maître d’ shrugs, seemingly at ease again. “I’d set it alight myself but Cogsworth assures me it is of great importance.”

Etienne scowls, apparently conducting an internal debate with himself. He finally comes to a conclusion, though Belle can see it’s not the one he wanted.

“Very well,” he huffs, sulky like a little boy. He reaches out a hand to her, and Belle takes it, allows him to tug her closer. “It seems we must postpone our tour.”

She nods. “I understand. You must have much to attend to.”

“Not so much as one would think,” Lumiere mutters to himself, but if Etienne hears he chooses to ignore it.
“I will return as soon as I am able,” he tells her, as though he thinks she’ll be anxiously awaiting him. He probably does, too.

Then he’s pressing his lips to hers once more in a kiss sweet and soft and very, very thorough. Without intending to she finds she has her arms twined about his shoulders, her fingers buried in his hair, and he is kissing her and kissing her as though he wants to breathe for her and through her. It’s – Well, it’s beautiful, really. She thinks she would even enjoy it immensely if not for the fact that it’s so clearly about showing Lumiere something rather than about her.

Finally he pulls away, and Belle can see his smirk as he turns to Lumiere. For his part the maître d’ is as expressionless as before, but his eyes are hard and angry. There is something going on here, Belle thinks, something she isn’t part of and doesn’t understand. Luckily, she doesn’t care, either. The two men head for the double doors, but Etienne turns back to her briefly.

“You will stay here until I return,” he informs her, and she nods. His eyes run over her body quickly, trailing from the bruise on her collarbone down to the hem of her borrowed dress. She can feel the glance like a caress, intense and possessive and really not for anyone else to see – except that Lumiere is standing there, waiting and disapproving even if his face remains blank.

Etienne gives her a mocking little bow, then follows Lumiere out into the hallway.

The doors close behind them with a solid thunk, and Belle sinks to the floor, her legs suddenly too weak to support her. It has been the strangest morning, following the strangest night. Her body aches in places she didn’t know it could ache. She wants to close her eyes and pretend she is at home in her little cottage, drowsing before the fire, reading another book borrowed from Pere Robert. What she wouldn’t give for a book to take her away from all this now…

How long she sits there, eyes staring but not seeing, Belle doesn’t really know, but at some point there is a soft tap at the doors. She doesn’t respond but the doors open anyway, just enough to admit Mrs. Potts, the head housekeeper. Like Lumiere she is Belle’s superior, the woman who hired her, in fact, and being discovered by her is worse than being discovered by Lumiere – much, much worse. Lumiere is younger and friendly, charming, something like a friend or a brother, but Mrs. Potts… Mrs. Potts is motherly. Belle has never had a mother. Mrs. Potts discovering her here, like this, is horrifying on every level.

Belle scrambles to her feet, casting about for some excuse for being where she is – any reason other than the truth – but can’t think of anything. It’s infuriating, for someone who has always considered herself quick, but to be fair all of these things have been so far outside her experience.

“Hello, dear,” Mrs. Potts says, and there is something sweet and sympathetic in her face. “Lumiere said I would find you here.”

Belle closes her eyes, thinking of Descartes and how if she could simply cease thinking she could also cease being, which would be far preferable to living through the conversation she knows must now take place – although of course thinking of Descartes is enough to prevent her from ceasing to be, a bitter contradiction. And though she can’t see Mrs. Potts, but she can hear her walking across the room, can feel the woman pulling her into a gentle embrace, and knows the conversation must be lived through after all.

“Shhhhh,” she murmurs, stroking Belle’s hair just the way she imagines her own mother would have. “It will all turn out in the end, you’ll see.”

“Will it?”
“Of course. Now,” the housekeeper says, and her voice is still warm but also brisk, almost business-like. She releases Belle from her embrace but clasps her hands, and Belle opens her eyes to meet the woman’s warm gaze. “You told Lumiere you came here of your own free will… Is this true?”

“Does he have a habit of bringing women here… Not of their own free will?” Belle asks, shocked, and Mrs. Potts shakes her head.

“Oh my, of course not. The master’s not as terrible as he appears. But he has never taken an interest in any of his servants. I wasn’t sure what to think.” Mrs. Potts smiles sympathetically. “Was this your first time?”

Belle nods.

“I’m sorry.” There’s pity in Mrs. Potts’s expression, pity in her eyes, and it makes Belle feel like a fraud.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about, truly. His Highness was… Not unkind.”

“Good,” Mrs. Potts says, squeezing her hands. “Why don’t you come with me to the kitchen, poppet? I have found in my experience that most troubles seem less troubling after a bracing cup of tea.”

The thought of sitting with Mrs. Potts and discussing everything over a cup of tea is suddenly her idea of heaven, but Belle hesitates.

“The Prince told me to wait for him here,” she says.

“Not to worry,” Mrs. Potts waves her concerns away. “The master will be closeted with Cogsworth for far longer than he wants to be, mark my words. There will be plenty of time to make arrangements – ”

The housekeeper pauses to eye her, surprise and maybe something more than surprise in her expression. “His Highness lent you that dress?”

Belle nods, and Mrs. Potts raises her eyebrows yet again. Perhaps she knew whichever unlucky lady had left it behind after her tryst with the Prince? Well, there’s no way around it for now, considering he’s forbidden her from wearing the only other item of clothing she has with her. Maybe Mrs. Potts can make sure the original owner gets it back once Belle no longer has need of it.

“I see,” is the only comment the housekeeper makes. “Now, let’s go ahead to the kitchens then.”

Again, Belle hesitates.

“I – could you – It’s just – ” Ah, god, it’s so embarrassing. But Belle forces herself to say it. “The sheets, if you could – ”

Mrs. Potts glances at the bed. “Of course.”

“Are they ruined? He seemed very concerned about them,” Belle says.

She can’t be sure, but she thinks Mrs. Potts might be rolling her eyes as she turns to the bed. “Of course not, we’ll set them to rights. Don’t worry your head about it.”

@>-`--
We will be seeing more of those familiar faces - far more than Etienne would like, the poor croissant.

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel...
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you so much for your comments and kudos! I’m still answering everything because I have no life so please don’t hesitate to ask any questions you might have :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

5

Lumiere is judging him. Etienne can feel it, can feel the maître d’s eyes on him, can feel his disappointment, can almost hear his thoughts - and almost hates himself for wanting to justify his behavior. But no, he is a prince; he will not stoop to making excuses to a servant, not even one who has known him all his life. Especially not then. What Etienne chooses to do in his spare time is none of Lumiere’s concern.

“Will you explain what happened of your own free will, or must I force it out of you?” Lumiere demands finally, and Etienne turns the full power of his glare on the maître d’. Unfortunately, it has never had any effect on the provoking man before and doesn’t now either.

“I’d like to see you try,” Etienne responds.

“No, you wouldn’t. Save yourself the trouble and tell me now.” Lumiere looks at him with narrowed eyes. “How could this possibly have come to pass? You never compel the servants to –”

Etienne comes to an immediate stop, as though slamming into a brick wall, the fury suddenly filling him so disorienting he can no longer put one foot in front of the other.

“Compel her?! How dare you? I would never –”

As with his earlier glare, Lumiere is unimpressed with his rage.

“I cannot imagine how else it might have happened. Belle is –”

The Prince cuts him off with a growl, and Lumiere rolls his eyes. “Forgive me, Mademoiselle Brescond is not the type to offer herself for sale. She is innocent –”

“Was,” Etienne mutters, though Lumiere valiantly ignores him.

“ – and I can more readily believe you compelled her than she made an offer to you.”

“That is unkind,” Etienne says, because it is. How could Lumiere ever think such a thing of him? Surely he knows better. “Perhaps she saw me and wanted me, did you ever consider that?”

Lumiere laughs, most unflatteringly. “No. But perhaps you saw her and wanted her?”

Etienne sighs and closes his eyes, thinking back to the night before, thinking back to the first moment
he saw her. The party in full swing, the ladies of the court all throwing themselves at him as per usual. They were all exquisite and his for the taking but by god how it bored him! He was bored every moment of the entire evening until he glanced up and caught Belle’s dark eyes with his.

He still can’t explain it, even to himself. She is beautiful but the women of the court are all beautiful. She was unadorned but the serving girls were all unadorned. Neither the ladies of the court nor any of his other serving girls – because he did have a rule about it, a rule he’d never been even tempted to break until that night – had ever piqued his interest the way she had. No, there was no reason for it, but he was drawn to her somehow, crossing the room without a word of excuse to the woman he abandoned. There was just something… But he doesn’t know what. In any case, it hardly matters. Lumiere is not wrong.

“Yes. I did,” Etienne murmurs, only continuing when it becomes clear Lumiere will not allow him to leave it at that. “I went to her, spoke to her, asked if she would go with me… And she agreed. At very little cost, I might add. Is this not the way? Serving girls can be had more cheaply than ladies, and she was had more cheaply than most serving girls.”

Lumiere looks at him, and Etienne is almost overwhelmed by the despair in his expression.

“More and more, you remind me of your father;” he says, softly, but it lands like a punch to the gut, driving all the air from Etienne’s lungs with the pain.

Before he can recover enough to respond, Lumiere is walking away, and Etienne realizes he is frozen outside the door to his own study, where Cogsworth undoubtedly awaits – along with a letter from Versailles, from the man he hates above all others. From the man Lumiere is reminded of more and more.

It does not take so long as one might think to deal with. He has not seen his father in more than ten years, since the day he turned 16, and has no intentions of changing that this side of eternity. Still his father writes every few months, attempting new schemes to entice him back to Versailles. Etienne doesn’t bother answering them anymore. If his father hasn’t learned by now that nothing will induce Etienne to be in his presence ever again, chances are he never will. His father may waste his time if he so chooses; Etienne has better things to do.

This letter is more of the same, or so he thinks. His father’s new tack is to claim he is ill, possibly dying, and simply wishes to see his beloved son one last time. Etienne is not stupid enough to believe this. He knows his father must be desperate to finally trap him into an arranged marriage for the good of France, a theme he has written on periodically throughout the years. Luckily for Etienne, his father severely overestimates how much Etienne cares about his kingdom in comparison to himself.

No, there will be no arranged marriage. His parents’ marriage was arranged, and he knows well enough – all too well – how that turned out.

The only difference between this letter and the myriad others Etienne has received and left unanswered is this: Cogsworth, who is not stupid, believes Etienne’s father is telling the truth. Not about wanting to see his beloved son one last time, of course; again, Cogsworth is not stupid. But he does believe His Majesty is ill, possibly dying, and it would be for Etienne’s own good, not to mention the good of the kingdom, for Etienne to give in and see his father at last.

“No” is all Etienne has to say in response. He’d sworn ten years ago never to see or speak to his father again, and he’d meant it. Though it had required uprooting his life and his entire court from Versailles near Paris to the Palais Villeneuve near the middle of absolutely nowhere, and quickly, he’d meant it. And he has remained true to his word. He is certainly not about to betray that now.
If Etienne had thought that would be the end of it – and he rather had – he was mistaken. Cogsworth, perhaps in revenge for Etienne ignoring his advice re: his father, keeps him for hours. Hours. He forces Etienne to go over the household accounts despite the fact that he has more wealth than he knows what to do with now and can always get more from the surrounding villages if he requires it. Cogsworth discusses the stables, and the carriages, and the furniture, and the new artwork Etienne has purchased, and drones on about fiscal responsibility until Etienne is forced to fantasize about Belle simply to retain his sanity.

It does help. He manages to nod and make thoughtful little noises in all the right places as he thinks of her and what he will do to her when he finally escapes his study. He will strip her completely bare in the afternoon light, yes, and stare at her as long as he likes, until she blushes as deeply as she did this morning. He will touch her everywhere, take his time with her, not like this morning when the time he took was simply in fucking her, no, he wants to torture her just a little. It’s just that he still wants her so badly – surely it is only fair that she feel the same.

And then he has to stop fantasizing because it’s making him hard and that is just awkward and very wrong with Cogsworth still droning on and on and on…

Five hours. That’s how long it takes for Etienne to finally free himself from the confines of his own study, and Cogsworth would have kept him longer if he’d thought he could get away with it. Fortunately, Etienne has the excuse of guests arriving soon to justify his escape; unfortunately, it’s not just an excuse. He really does have guests arriving soon, guests he will have to entertain, guests he will have to spend over an hour dressing for. All of which puts paid to his plans for the afternoon with Belle, as the afternoon is nearly gone. Belle must be bored out of her mind, and lonely waiting for him. He hopes she will not attempt to scold him for neglecting her. He has no desire to put her in her place… Not that way at least.

No, the only place he wants her is beneath him, with a mattress at her back – but there is hardly time. Well, that’s not true, there is time enough for something and he will certainly use it wisely, but it will not be what he was dreaming of for those interminable hours closeted with Cogsworth. After dinner, then. Their week has just begun, and perhaps he will extend it. There is no need for such impatience.

He feels it regardless as he finally enters his room, feels impatient to pull her into his arms, hold her, kiss her senseless again. That farewell kiss, earlier… If only Lumiere had enough sense to know when he wasn’t wanted, Etienne could have spent the past five hours simply kissing her instead. He is sure his kisses were her first. She had no idea what to do with her lips or tongue or hands but somehow it didn’t matter, it had been more exciting to show her than to kiss the most skilled courtesan. Not that he would. Courtesans and courtiers are not for kissing. But Belle…

…Is not there. His room is empty.

“Belle?” he calls, thinking she might be in his dressing room – although there is no reason for her to be – but only echoing silence answers. She is not in the bedroom, or the dressing room, or the bathing room, or anywhere she has leave to be at all. She is not even in his private office, where she certainly does not have leave to be. It is impossible to imagine, impossible to believe, but she has defied him. Defied him.

More than that: his bed has been made. He yanks back the coverlet to see that the sheets are new, pristine, no blood marring them – as though last night never occurred at all. It is almost possible, in that moment, to believe that he imagined it. Almost.

He stalks to the doors he’d so recently closed behind him, anticipating he would require privacy, and flings them open.
“Lumiere!” he bellows down the hall. Even if Lumiere himself doesn’t hear him, someone will – and will send the maître d’ with alacrity if they know what’s good for them.

That is exactly what happens, as it should; minutes later, Lumiere is at the door.

“Yes, Your Highness?” he says, bowing, and his manner is as it usually is, as it ever was – just as if he hadn’t given Etienne the setdown of his life hours before.

“Where is she?” Etienne demands.

“She?” Oh, he would like to strangle Lumiere for the bland look of inquiry on his stupid face, along with everything else.

“You know very well who I mean,” Etienne says, voice growing calm in a way that Lumiere will certainly recognize signifies danger.

He does, and apparently errs on the side of self-preservation: “She’s in her bedroom in the east wing, Your Highness. Or at least that is where I would begin any search for her.”

“You gave her a bedroom?!”

It is a long time since Etienne has been this infuriated – or maybe not. Maybe it is only since this morning, since walking in and finding Lumiere with his arm around Belle, calling her by name and looking quite intimate with her. That he did not like at all. Or maybe it is only since a few minutes after, since Lumiere practically accused him of forcing Belle into his bed. As if he would! He is still raw from that wound. It does not escape his notice that all of these recent rage-inducing incidents were instigated by the man in front of him.

“I would be very careful if I were you,” Etienne says. “I would be very careful how you justify this to me.”

“What’s to justify?” Lumiere shrugs. “You say she is your guest, I give her a guest room. It is how such things are done, no?”

“No!”

Another of Lumiere’s shrugs. Etienne is beginning to suspect they are calibrated precisely to push him beyond his breaking point. “Forgive me, Your Highness. I thought she would be pleased to have her own room, and that you would be pleased if she was pleased.”

“Is she?” Etienne asks. He does not want her to be pleased to be away from him. She should be pleased enough to share his bed.

“Of course. She is in the Saint-Cloud Suite. Who would not be pleased?”

Who would not, indeed? The Saint-Cloud Suite is the most opulent in the Palais, second only to his own. Etienne imagines her there, amidst the blue paneling and gilded furniture, imagines her touching everything, admiring everything. She must be overwhelmed by such luxury, and surely she will be grateful. The ornately carved bed with its soft down mattress would be an excellent place to show it…

With a glare and a growl at Lumiere, Etienne pushes past him to the doors, only to find himself blocked by Chapeau, his valet. The fussy man is not actually named Chapeau, or at least Etienne doesn’t think so, but he has always been called that, as long as Etienne has known him, for reasons that have never been clear. He is not particularly strong, not particularly tall, but Etienne knows
immediately there is no hope of escaping him. Of all his servants, Chapeau is the least inclined to view Etienne as his master; no, he views Etienne as a work of art created by him alone. Nothing Etienne does has ever been sufficient to induce the man to be afraid of him. But he is truly an *artiste* and therefore his insolence is tolerated.

“Ah, Chapeau, excellent timing!” Lumiere exclaims, and Etienne knows he is being laughed at. “His Highness was just saying he needed to prepare for dinner.”

Chapeau examines Etienne from head to toe, from the long blond hair pulled back into a simple queue to the unfashionable and worn boots he’d grabbed without thought, and sniffs with disdain. “In only two hours I am expected to rectify this?”

Etienne fights the almost overwhelming desire to explain himself. Chapeau has a way of making him feel like an utter sartorial failure, and in this case he knows the feeling is justified. But it hadn’t seemed to matter this morning, when all he could think of was whisking Belle away to the gallery to find some convenient alcove. He’d had such plans, of pushing her up against a wall, telling her to wrap her legs around his waist once more… She is small and delicate and he is quite strong, he knows he could hold her up and fuck her for hours and never even feel the strain.

No, this day has not gone according to plan, despite starting so well.

There is no point in attempting to send Chapeau away; his valet will not allow it, and anyway two hours is cutting it quite close in terms of preparing himself for the evening. Painting his face alone takes nearly an hour, and there is also his wig and everything else. No, there is no time to find Belle now.

Sighing, he turns to Lumiere. “You will inform Belle that she will join me for dinner – that’s not a request. Send whoever you think most capable to prepare her.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Lumiere smirks and bows and Etienne wants to strangle him all over again, but it’s too late; Lumiere is already dashing down the hall to fulfill his master’s orders, and Etienne is being dragged away by a deeply irritated Chapeau.

Not according to plan at all.

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes

I love Lumiere about as much as Etienne wants to strangle him. SO MUCH!

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel...
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you so much for your kind kudos and comments! My life continues to be nonexistent so you know... Keep 'em coming :) We now return to our regularly scheduled pornography.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mrs. Potts knows what of she speaks, Belle thinks several hours and several cups of tea later. Her troubles do seem less troubling, though that probably has more to do with Mrs. Potts’s kind understanding than the tea itself. She had asked Belle questions, listened to the answers, and never judged for a moment – which Belle had appreciated because she was certainly judging herself.

It had been difficult – more than difficult, maybe impossible – to explain exactly what had happened, how she had ended up in the Prince’s bed. Not because the reasons were complicated but because they were so simple. He had seen her, wanted her she assumed, asked what it would take for her to go with him. She’d asked what he could offer. The number he’d given had been too high to refuse.

At least, that’s what she’d told Mrs. Potts, and it was the truth, the absolute truth. It just… Didn’t fully encompass what she’d felt the first time she’d glimpsed him, or after, when his long, elegant fingers wrapped around her wrist.

*I saw him,* she’d said, as if that were all that had happened. As if she, who had thought her fellow maids’ descriptions of him made him sound like Gaston and had therefore dismissed him, hadn’t understood them far better after seeing him for the first time. Even dressed as he was, even looking as ridiculous as he did, there had been something about him as he lounged on his throne, as he stood and stalked down the stairs to join the throng. He had a presence even a powdered wig and heart-shaped beauty patches couldn’t hide, something quite apart from how he looked. It had drawn her eyes as he’d moved around the room, whether she’d wanted it to or not.

*He saw me,* she’d said, even knowing it was a very pale description of what had happened, of what she’d felt when she’d glanced at him and found herself pinned by his stare. She’d had only a split second to think that his eyes were *so blue* before he was walking towards her, and then only a split second to think that she was about to be sacked before he was taking her ungloved hand in his, pressing the heat of his palm into hers.

So no, she hadn’t lied to Mrs. Potts. It just felt like perhaps she hadn’t told the complete truth. But what did it matter, really? She’d made it very clear that the Prince hadn’t forced her to do anything, made sure the housekeeper understood that he wasn’t a villain any more than she was a victim. That was the complete truth, the only truth that mattered. The rest she could certainly keep to herself.

And so she had, and Mrs. Potts had said again that *it will all turn out, you’ll see,* then sent her to follow her fellow maid Plumette through the halls of the palace and to the east wing. It is not
forbidden to most servants – unlike the west wing, where His Highness’s chambers and private sitting rooms are – yet she has never been to this particular area. It is all guest rooms and parlors, which Belle has not yet worked her way up to cleaning. Strange, knowing that she will be entering one of these rooms now not to clean it but to stay in it.

They finally reach a door which is in no way different from any of the others, but Plumette grins as she grasps the handle.

“I give you, the Saint-Cloud Suite!”

With a flourish, she opens the door wide, and Belle opens her eyes even wider. She stumbles through the door as if in a trance, and she is, in a way: entranced by the most beautiful room she’s ever seen - including His Highness’s. From the delicate robin’s egg blue paneling, to the gilding, to the mirrored walls all reflecting her image back at her a thousand times, the room is perfect in every feature. The bed is large and gold, carved with flowing lines and topped with a brocade canopy to rival the Prince’s. She knows by looking at it that the mattress must be as soft as his, like soap bubbles given form just solid enough to sink into.

“So you like it then?” Plumette is downright gleeful.

“It’s beautiful,” she says, drinking it all in.

“But of course! Master wanted you to have the finest room in the castle!” At the words, Belle turns to see Lumiere standing in the doorway, leaning casually against the doorjamb and smiling at Plumette, Belle, the suite and perhaps life in general.

Belle gives him a skeptical look. He doesn’t even have the grace to look ashamed at the obvious falsehood. “Well, he would have, if he weren’t so busy raging against the fact we’ve given you one.”

She smiles. It shouldn’t be amusing, of course, but somehow just now it is. Not even the thought of the Prince’s displeasure can upset her in this moment. She has her own room, her own space, and it’s not even that it’s beautiful. It’s just that here she can be away from him. It makes the night before, and this morning, and everything else seem more distant, less real.

“Plumette, mon amour, will you be so good as to fetch Madame de Garderobe?” Lumiere asks. “Master has invited Mademoiselle Brescond to join him for dinner in company and she must be dressed for it.”

“Of course – ” Plumette begins, but this is news to Belle – unwelcome news.

“Invited me?”

“Well, he told me to – ”

“To invite me? Or inform me?” Belle asks, even though she already knows the answer.

Lumiere gives a helpless shrug. “He did say it was not a request.”

“You may tell His Highness I will not be joining him for dinner.”

The very thought! It’s bad enough, having all her friends know exactly what she’s done. She refuses to put powder in her hair and hang cages off her waist just to be served by those same people, in front of other, richer people who also know exactly why she’s at the Prince’s side. My god. Is there no one in all of France who will not know by the time this week is over?
My father. Please, god, let my father never know, even if the rest of the world must find out.

Before she can go down that depressing path, Plumette is standing before her, grasping her by the shoulders.

“But you must, Belle. He is expecting you. Besides,” she adds, “you will want to defend your territory, no?”

“Territory?”

Plumette rolls her eyes. “The Prince! You cannot leave him to the wolves like that. The women of the court will pounce on him and you will never see him again.”

Belle imagines the women of the court with deadly fangs set in their painted mouths, all circling the Prince with hunger in their eyes. It’s probably not too far from the truth, either. But she finds she cannot much care. Perhaps it would be for the best, if he were to find someone else to entertain him. Perhaps then he wouldn’t mind her leaving, wouldn’t coerce her to stay.

“No,” is all she says. No, she will not go to dinner. No, she will not defend her territory. He isn’t that anyway.

“But what shall we say?” Plumette asks, genuinely distressed. Lumiere on the other hand looks – pleased, almost amused.

“I’d rather starve than eat with him?” Belle suggests, only half kidding.

Lumiere is still pleased and even more amused. “He’d say ‘be my guest’, mademoiselle. We will tell him something less likely to raise his ire.”

Plumette is not amused. “But Lumiere – ”

“Come, mon amour! Surely you can see our Belle cannot be moved,” he says, threading Plumette’s arm through his own. “We will leave you to rest, mademoiselle.”

“Thank you, Lumiere,” Belle says, suddenly realizing just how tired she is. “Thank you both.”

Plumette darts forward to give her a quick hug, and whispers in her ear: “I will have what we discussed for you tomorrow. It is soon enough.”

“Thank you,” she repeats, looking into her friend’s dark eyes. “Thank you for everything.”

“Oh, you will make it up to me someday!” Plumette laughs, sharing a look Belle doesn’t quite understand with Lumiere. Then they are exiting the room and closing the door quietly behind them, and she is alone.

It’s nice, for approximately 3.5 seconds. The blue hue of the walls is soft and soothing, and the beauty of the room is like a fine painting or other work of art – simply looking at it refreshes the soul. But then she remembers that everything that makes the room what it is, the gilded furniture and silvered mirrors and graceful molding, all of it was procured on the backs of her friends and neighbors and even her father. Her enjoyment of the loveliness surrounding her dims considerably.

She misses her father. She worries for him. She has done her best not to think of him, beyond sending a message to the village informing him she’d be staying at the palace for the week. It hurts too much, knowing he would never approve of the steps she’s taken, knowing there is no choice.
Sighing, Belle drifts to the vanity table, runs her fingers over the hairbrush there and considers tidying her hair. She can’t help but notice that the silk gown the Prince lent her suits her as well as if it had been made for her, yet somehow makes her look nothing at all like Belle Brescond of Villeneuve. And noticing, she can’t help but wish for her sturdy homespun uniform or anything from home. Suddenly she hates the sight of the figured silk, hates the feel of the fine fabric caressing her skin – far more gently than he ever has.

Well, he isn’t here now to tell her what to wear or what not to wear. He’ll be busy at dinner for hours and hours, all night perhaps if Plumette’s dire warnings come to pass. She runs her finger down a seam at the side of the stomacher of the dress, finding the placket with its hooks-and-eyes, and pinches it tighter to loosen the pressure on the hooks themselves. One by one she releases just enough of them to shimmy out of it, and it puddles around her ankles in a graceful heap. It’s freeing to step out of it, to leave it there – though her conscience will smite her soon enough, she knows, she’ll never be able to abandon it there for more than five minutes. But for now it’s enough to stand there in her own plain shift and just feel like herself.

Of course, it’s at that very moment that someone pounds on her closed door. She jumps at the sound, so loud and insistent – as though the door has done the person on the other side of it a personal wrong. Oh, who is she kidding? She knows very well who is on the other side of the door.

“I told you to join me for dinner!” The Prince roars, so loudly the crystal chandeliers high above her rattle.

“And I told you no!” she retorts. She isn’t quite sure why he’s here, why he’s shouting at her – there had barely been enough time to prepare her for a meal with half the court before, there is certainly not time enough now. He’ll be late himself thanks to this detour.

He flings the door open and stalks into the room, fury clear in every line of his body – though not his face, because it’s all painted up again, lips a crimson cupid’s bow, cheeks a delicate blushing pink, two beauty marks beside his eye and his lip. The locations represent passion and whimsy, which is hilarious, but she manages not to laugh. His Highness is clearly not in a mood to appreciate it. He slams the door behind him, as if to underscore that fact.

“Am I paying you to tell me no?” he asks, his deep voice soft in that way she knows signifies danger.

“No,” Belle answers. She isn’t trying to be funny but he glares at her nonetheless. “You’re not paying me to eat with courtiers either.”

He moves towards her slowly, deliberately. “I am paying you for whatever I say I’m paying you for.”

Edging away from him as best she can, she meets his gaze and again, his eyes are just so blue. Too unnerving, the way he stares at her.

“Oh course, Your Highness,” she says, and he steps even closer, raises his eyebrows at her. “Etienne.”

She takes one final step away from him and feels the backs of her knees meet the side of the bed. The Prince – Etienne, she must remember, Etienne – is smirking at her somewhere under all that maquillage.

“I don’t – ” she begins, and her throat is suddenly dry, her lips too, and she licks them. Watches him watch her lick them. “I don’t understand why you’d want me there in any case.”
“No?” he asks, and she thinks he is being funny – or that he thinks he is, anyway.

“No.”

He closes the distance between them, forcing her to look up into his face to avoid staring stupidly at his jabot. If she lets her eyes drift out of focus, she can almost see his true face, the face from this morning, beneath the brightly painted façade. He would not be unhandsome, without all the makeup.

“I had such plans for us, ma Belle,” he murmurs, stroking the back of his ungloved hand down her cheek. “They did not include spending the day apart.”

“Oh.” Her whisper is barely audible to her over the sudden pounding of her heart in her ears.

He rubs the pad of his thumb over her lower lip, smiles when they part in a surprised exhale. Naturally, he takes advantage, nudging the tip of his thumb just inside her mouth, all the while keeping her pinned with his pale, icy stare.

“I had planned to kiss you… Kiss you for hours, here – ” He slowly trails his fingers down to linger at her collarbone before moving them lower, stroking her breast through her thin chemise. Her nipple hardens immediately under the feather-light caress.

“ – and here – ” Again, his hand drifts lower and lower until he’s cupping that place between her legs that he seems so taken with. “ – and especially here – ”

For a moment, everything is driven from her mind except an almost academic question: *is that something people do?* But then he slides his hand over to grip her hip and hold her in place, and she is brought forcefully back to the present.

“ – Unfortunately, my majordomo and my valet’s fine work have both put paid to those plans.”

“Oh.”

He exerts gentle pressure on her hip until she turns away from him, and then his palm is on her back, pushing her flat against the bed. It’s better this way, she can’t help but think. Better when she can imagine him as he was this morning, as he is under all the paint.

“They would ruin my makeup, you see, and then where would we be?” he asks rhetorically. She can feel him gathering the material of her shift in one hand and rucking it up about her waist. Belle burns with humiliation and something she can’t quite define as she imagines exactly what she looks like at this moment, exactly what he’s seeing.

Without warning, his foot comes between both of hers and kicks them apart, spreading her legs wide, and she gasps.

“I was forced to come up with a new plan.” His voice is lower, rougher, his breathing heavier than before – but then so is hers. It’s as though she can’t get enough air into her lungs but somehow is not concerned by it.

Then he’s touching her, stroking down her spine, then lower, squeezing soft flesh before delving between her legs. Belle stiffens as she feels his fingers brushing against a place she is reasonably certain he should not be touching.

“I could take you here,” he murmurs, emphasizing exactly what he means with a purposeful nudge again where there is really no reason – surely people don’t – why would they? “like this, did you know?”
He then laughs breathlessly and answers his own question. “Of course not, how could you? You are still so innocent. I will show you, but not tonight – I will want to take my time with it.”

Abandoning that disconcerting spot, he teases his fingers deeper between her legs, slides one long finger inside of her. It’s easy and painless and he moans at the feel of her.

“You’re still so tight,” he says, and there is something in his voice, something that tells her he is not as controlled as he was. There is the sound of fabric being adjusted and suddenly he is withdrawing his finger from her body and positioning himself at her entrance.

“You will tell me if I’m hurting you,” he murmurs against her ear. “That is certainly not my intent.”

Before she has a chance to react, he’s pushing into her slowly. It doesn’t hurt, or not much, but it’s strange again, the way she can feel herself stretching for him, the way a part of him is actually inside of her. Very strange.

“Still so tight,” he repeats, groaning, moving deeper and deeper until he’s flush against her, until she can feel the satin of his knee breeches on the bare skin of her thighs. Until she’s so full she isn’t sure she can stand it, yet somehow does. He pauses, to collect himself she thinks, breathes deeply.

“So this was my new plan.” He begins to move inside her, thrusting deep and hard, fingers digging into her hips as he holds her in place for him. “To fuck you just like this, almost like this morning, yes, and you liked that didn’t you? Of course you did.”

She’s not quite sure how he got that impression, but she’s not going to contradict him now. And the fact is that she likes this a little, more than the other times at least. His voice, his words, even when she doesn’t quite understand them they do something to her. The fullness of him inside her is also strangely satisfying.

“I had wanted to do this all day, strip you bare and look my fill, touch and kiss and fuck you for hours. But thanks to your rebellion our time is far too short.”

He grips her harder, moves faster, until the obscene sounds of their heavy breathing mingle with the strange muffled thud of his fully clothed body slamming into hers. It feels… She isn’t sure, not good precisely, but somehow enjoyable, especially when she imagines him without all his maquillage, without the wig. Imagines him smiling… She’s making little noises beyond her breathing, soft moans although she can’t quite figure out why – but it’s clear they arouse him further because he moans in response each time.

“I’m going to come inside you again,” he tells her, barely intelligible, barely coherent. His large hand slides around to cover her lower belly. “Here, ah – want you to feel it – I had planned to spill – so deep inside and then sit next to you at dinner – surrounded by courtiers, none of them the wiser – you with my seed dripping down your legs – no one would know, not that – but they’d know you’re mine – Ah, Belle, ma Belle, yes, say my name – ”

“But I don’t bother to consider it, of course. There is only one correct answer.
“Yes,” she tells him. “Yes, Etienne, please –”

He gives a strange broken little cry, almost a sob really, his hands clutching her so hard she knows she will have bruises to match the shape of each finger. And then she can feel the warmth of his release at her core just as he’d promised or threatened, she isn’t quite sure which.

Leaning heavily against her for a moment, he pants, struggling for breath just as she is, though it makes more sense for him. She gasps a little as he disengages from her, the sensation as strange as the rest of it. There is a pause filled with the rustling of fabric, and then he turns her back over to face him.

From the top of his powdered wig to the jeweled buckles on his court shoes, he looks every inch the foolish aristocrat, and not at all like someone who just did such things to her, said such things to her. Though she supposes he has earned that beauty mark by his eye at least – the one for passion.

“And that,” he says, voice perfectly even and normal, “is why I wanted you to join me for dinner.”

She can only blink stupidly at him, breathing far less even than his.

“You’ll not sleep here,” he adds. “You may have escaped dinner tonight, but I will expect you in my chamber after nonetheless.”

Belle nods, unsurprised, and he smiles. Again she can almost see his true face underneath the mask of paint he wears.

“I look forward to it.”

She knows he means it.

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes

I know everyone is anxious for Belle to start seeing stars and all, but considering she just barely lost her virginity and Etienne doesn't have a whole lot of motivation to impress her... She's having more fun than I did immediately after losing mine at least!

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel <3
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Thank you as always for all your comments and kudos! It took me awhile to go through and answer because last week was pretty intense, but I finally did it just before posting. So please keep the feedback coming; I'm happy to answer any questions you might have!

And now, Chapter Seven, in which Etienne is kind of a dick (and helps me maintain that Explicit rating - twice).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

7

The Marquise de Merteuil is sucking his cock – superbly, not that Etienne would have expected anything less. She has been throwing herself cunt-first at him for weeks, after all, always with a knowing smirk and hungry eyes. A certain level of expertise was of course assumed. She exceeds even that with the way she swirls her tongue around his length then swallows him down to the hilt, licking and sucking and even scraping gently with her teeth. Her dull gray eyes remain fixed on his as she pleasures him, something he usually enjoys. All of this is something he usually enjoys. Yet somehow, tonight, it's not at all what he wants. He feels… Bored, really, and anxious to be finished with her and this.

He can’t quite explain, even to himself, how he ended up in this position: back against the door of his study, hands balled into fists at his sides while the beautiful young Marquise kneels before him. The sight of her there neither arouses nor moves him, and he has no desire to bury his hands in her powdered coiffure, to hold her still and fuck her face the way he normally would. Honestly, it's taking all of his concentration just to stay hard while she works on him. It makes no sense, yet he knows he’ll never be able to come like this either.

She had sat beside him during dinner. Perhaps that was where the trouble started. The Marquise is lovely, of course – he would have never invited her to the Palais Villeneuve otherwise. He has admired her appearance in the past. But she looks not even the slightest bit like Belle, whom he had expected to be dining with, which might explain why her company throughout the meal did not suit. He’d been bored by her even then, by her flirtation and flattery.

At one point she’d grabbed his hand under the table and tugged it into her lap. Her skirts had been lifted, apparently, because his palm had come into direct contact with the warm flesh of her thigh, and then she’d slid it higher and higher until he could feel her hot and wet against his fingers. She’d held his gaze even as she’d urged him to press his fingers inside of her, which he’d done only because it would have been somewhat rude not to. He’d withdrawn as soon as he decently could – only to have her bring his fingers to her mouth and lick them clean.

It should have been arousing. Maybe it was arousing, but it had simply left him cold. Now if Belle had done such a thing, well, that would have been a different story... It wouldn’t have happened quite like that, of course – an idea like that would never have occurred to her, innocent that she is.
No, he’d have been the one sliding his hand under her skirt, slipping his fingers inside of her. She’d have been hot and wet not just with her own arousal but with his seed, and he’d have dearly enjoyed nudging his fingers in her mouth and watching her taste herself and him while his courtiers surrounded them…

The thought had distracted him all throughout the game of Mediateur that had sprung up after dinner. He hadn’t intended even to stay for the game, but his friends had teased him mercilessly until he’d agreed. They’d teased him mercilessly throughout, in fact, first about the new whore they assumed he had, and then about the fact that he refused to share said whore – or any details about said whore, even. Which, really, was rather out of character for him, but it’s different with Belle. No other man has ever had her, so it makes very little sense for him to pass her around, obviously. She is not the Marquise de Merteuil.

Speaking of the Marquise de Merteuil, he’d only allowed her to drag him into his study to shut his friends up, really. He is no lovelorn swain as they kept calling him. They would understand, if he’d explained what had happened, but he hadn’t wanted to do that either. Somehow he finds the thought of telling Valmont and de Tourvel and the others the details of his time with Belle distasteful. The way she was so unbearably tight the first time he fucked her, for example, or the way she begged him to come inside her just before he came down to dinner – these things are none of their business, even if he has always shared similar details before. It’s different when any other man might know the same details already. Then it is simply comparing notes. But no one else has any notes to compare about Belle and this is how he prefers it.

So he’d followed the Marquise and watched in resignation as she’d sunk to the floor at his feet. He’d allowed her to unlace his breeches and suck his cock while his friends wait on the other side of the door, their laughter just barely intelligible through it. And she is working hard for him, yes, and it feels fine, but it’s just not… Etienne thinks again that she’ll never make him come, not like this.

He sighs and leans his head back against the door, closes his eyes to blot out the sight of the Marquise, and lets his thoughts drift back to Belle. If she had joined him for dinner as he’d intended, perhaps she’d be on her knees for him now. It is easy to imagine grasping her hand and dragging her in here, easy to imagine placing his palms on her shoulders and encouraging her to kneel for her Prince. He’d have to walk her through step by step of course… Unlace my breeches, he’d say, take out my cock… Open your mouth, ah yes, Belle… He’d slide one hand into her thick hair, cup the back of her head, but he wouldn’t fuck her face, no, not this first time, wouldn’t do to frighten her…

Instead he’d guide her gently with words and his hand, slip the head of his cock between her softly parted lips. Suck it, he’d say, or perhaps use your tongue, or both, why not? She’d be hesitant with it at first, a little afraid but anxious to please, and as her nervousness dissipated he’d urge her to take more and more. She wouldn’t be able to take it all of course, not yet, so he’d show her how to wrap her hand around him, how to stroke him while taking as much as she could. Just like that, yes, look at me, ma Belle… And he’d stare deep into her dark eyes as she jerked him off into her sweet mouth…

I’m going to come, he’d warn her – he is a gentleman, after all, and she won’t know what to expect, no – I want you to taste it, he’d tell her, I want you to swallow every drop –

“Of course, Your Highness,” the Marquise de Merteuil purrs, and his eyes fly open as he realizes he has been speaking aloud. She probably thinks he has been calling her “my beauty”. How repugnant. He is close, very close, but now that the fantasy has been destroyed, now that his eyes are open again… He could still come, probably. He could pull her off his cock and stroke himself to completion, coat her face with his seed perhaps… But the thought holds no real appeal, not when he could be in his own room and his own bed with Belle beneath him in less than five minutes. Why did
he think this was a good idea anyway?

And then he realizes a choice must be made, because the Marquise is leaning close again, opening her mouth to take him back in and finish him off, and he knows that a single flick of her tongue is about all it will take at this point. The question is: should he allow it? He wants to, or wants to come at least, but he doesn’t really want her to be the one to make it happen.

“Enough,” he snarls, tugging her away from him. She looks up at him in shock.

“I don’t understand – ” she begins.

“You’ve wasted enough of my time for one evening, thank you,” he drawls, tucking himself back into his breeches and lacing them up. It isn’t easy, of course. He’s still stiff and throbbing and his breeches are hellishly uncomfortable on his sensitive cock just now, but he doesn’t regret it either. Looking at her there on her knees before him, well… The Marquise might as well be Cogsworth for all the attraction he feels for her. He cannot imagine what he was thinking letting her anywhere near him.

“But Your Highness – ”

He fishes in his pocket and pulls out a handful of Louis d’or, tossing them at her feet.

“Valmont and de Tourvel would be glad of a turn, I think,” he tells her, pulling the door open.

His friends stand there, rowdy and grinning, elbowing one another and him.

“She’s worn her out quite yet, Your Highness? Good of you,” Valmont says, and Etienne nods.

“Please enjoy yourselves at my expense, gentlemen. I find myself anxious for my bed.”

De Tourvel cackles as he follows Valmont into the study. “For the whore in it, more like.”

Etienne does not dignify this with a response, but then his friends are no longer paying attention to him either. The Marquise de Merteuil is glaring past them right at him, of course, but it cannot be helped. He has compensated her fairly, more than fairly, even considering the extra work she’ll have to put in to satisfy Valmont and de Tourvel both. Based on some of the stories he’s heard, she’ll be happy enough to handle them together and save herself some time anyway. It’s all one to him, which is to say – not his problem.

Quickly but not too quickly, he hopes, he makes his way to the west wing, trying to will his arousal away with little success. The brush of the fabric of his drawers on his overheated flesh is painful, but almost not painful, almost pleasurable. More than once he almost decides to stop and finish himself off, but he would so much rather have Belle do it for him – her hands, her mouth, her cunt, so many possibilities, each infinitely preferable to taking care of the issue himself. It’s unfortunate, the fact that he’ll hardly be able to last, a travesty for which he naturally blames Valmont and de Tourvel. Not for the first time, he wonders why he even bothers with those two. He never would have allowed the Marquise to lay a finger on him if not for them and their infernal teasing.

Etienne frowns, surprised by the anger in that thought. But he is out of charity with his closest friends, and yes, it’s just possible that he regrets what he allowed them to goad him into. How novel. He can’t remember ever experiencing this strange heavy weight in his chest before, but somehow he’s sure that’s what it is. Things would have been easier if he’d simply told his friends to go to the devil and then retired early – as he’d wanted to. One full day of his week with Belle is almost over, one full day and he has wasted so much of it. That is what he regrets, of course. What else could there be? There was certainly nothing wrong with the Marquise herself. Perhaps once Belle has gone
he’ll let her try again… Although more and more he thinks a week won’t be quite long enough, that perhaps he will extend it once more.

Finally, he reaches the double doors to his room, but hesitates outside them. He’s feeling that thing again, that heaviness, and a strange reluctance to face Belle quite like this. It doesn’t make sense, really; he has gone from one whore’s embrace to another’s more times than he can count. Except Belle isn’t a whore, and this is different somehow, a little ungentlemanly, when she doesn’t know what he’s been doing and probably wouldn’t understand. Perhaps she’d even be hurt, which would be tiresome. No, it will be better to prepare for bed first, even bathe, before joining her. Luckily, such thoughts have killed his desire for now – perhaps by the time he is ready to meet with her, his stamina too will be restored.

It takes about an hour to remove his wig and maquillage, as well as bathe, though he sends Chapeau off as soon as his tub is filled. Things move faster when he tends to himself, and Etienne has better things to do than lounge in a bath tonight. He does take more pleasure than usual in scrubbing himself clean; it makes him vaguely queasy to note that the Marquise de Merteuil left some crimson paint on him, and downright ill to imagine Belle seeing it. He knows all about the anger of a woman who thinks she has been scorned, yes, more than he would like to. Avoiding such unpleasantness was an inspired idea on his part.

Once clean, he towels his hair somewhat dry before wrapping himself in his favorite sapphire silk dressing gown. He knows well enough how it suits him. It pleases him to imagine Belle’s surprise upon seeing him; even considering the time his preparation took, he has still returned far earlier than she could possibly have expected. Her eyes will light up, he thinks – how could they not, after the pleasure they’d shared before dinner? Surely she regrets defying him, wishes she had attended with him, as he wishes she had as well. But there is nothing for it now, they will simply have to make up for lost time as best they can.

He opens the door from his dressing room into his bedchamber – and freezes. It is nearly pitch black, all the lights doused, though a bit of moonlight sneaks through the curtains, just enough to see the Belle-shaped lump lying still in his bed. For a moment, he is flooded with anger, but it recedes as he remembers she is but a simple serving girl. Probably awake with the sun and to bed with it too. It’s almost sweet, how trustingly she lies there waiting for him.

Drawing near, he smiles down at her, the way her head barely peeks out of the furs, just like the night before – though tonight her hair is loose, not braided over her shoulder. He is suddenly reminded of his fantasy before, of imagining burying his hand in her thick locks and guiding her up and down his length, and then he is suddenly, painfully hard all over again. For one moment he considers not waking her up. She looks so sweet and exhausted, and god knows he has worked her hard since the night before. But he also knows there is no way he can crawl into that bed with her and refrain from touching her, so he doesn’t bother to try.

Instead he pulls back the furs and counterpane, revealing her lying there in nothing but his shirt – which only serves to make him harder. He leans over her, strokes her hair away from her face, then gently slips each pearl button through its button hole, pausing only to caress her through the fine fabric as he moves down her body. She’s so warm and soft, softer even than the linen and silk she wears. He wants to wrap himself up in her, sink into her. Once the shirt is completely undone he can’t resist removing his own robe, letting it fall to the floor.

One hand automatically drifts to his cock, grasping firmly as though to reassure himself that yes, he will have what he wants, finally. And then he’s lying next to her, pulling her to him and running his free hand all over her bare skin, stroking her and himself languidly. It’s a relief, touching her, touching himself, the sensation of his own fingers on his rigid flesh both arousing and soothing all at
once. She shifts under his fingers and he presses closer, looking into her face until her eyes finally drift open. They’re dark pools even deeper than the darkness surrounding them, but what little light there is reflects off of them, too.

“Etienne?” she murmurs, and all he can think of is the way she said his name before, when he fucked her and told her to. He wants to have her again, just like this, her body so sleepy and warm beneath him…

“Belle,” he says, leaning forward and setting his mouth to hers. His lips are already parted, and she’s gasping with surprise so hers are too, and he presses his tongue deep inside to taste her, enjoying it in a way he hadn’t been able to the last time, when Lumiere was standing by and judging him.

She kisses him back, of course, although she doesn’t really know what she’s doing and he loves it. He’ll show her eventually but for now he just needs her mouth open under his so he can taste her as deeply as he wants to. Ah, god, he could kiss her like this all night… Until he realizes he can’t, not really, not when his cock is throbbing insistently and his own hand isn’t enough to satisfy him any longer. So he releases his grip just long enough to grab her by the wrist, guiding her to touch him. She’s hesitant at first, just the way he imagined she would be, and he lifts his head though he can hardly bear to.

“Touch me,” he orders, voice breathless and rough. “Like this, Belle, yes – ”

Her hand is not quite as soft as his, strangely – or not so strangely, considering her station – but it is very delicate and feminine, and he loves the way her fingers tremble on him as he shows her how to touch him. He’s already close, embarrassingly so, but he’s past the point of caring really. He wants her to make him come like this, wants her to feel his cock pulse in her grip as he shoots his seed all over her belly and breasts. But he wants more than that too, more than just her eyes locked on his –

“Look, look at what you’re doing to me. You haven’t seen yet, have you? Look at my cock, yes – Ah, god, I’m so close, ma Belle – Do you know how it happens?”

Even as he asks, he’s urging her to move faster, stroke him more firmly, and she’s tightening her grip, the heat and friction of her palm eased by the slick fluid leaking from him because he’s just so fucking close and it feels so fucking good, tingling and shivery and oh god he can’t last.

“I want you to watch me come, yes, do you want to see?”

“Yes,” she whispers, and he’s too far gone to really consider it, but later he will thinks she sounds surprised. “Yes, Etienne.”

He groans at the way she says his name. “Again.”

“Yes, Etienne,” she repeats. “I want to watch you come.”

And yes, that is enough, more than enough. “Then watch,” he gasps. “Watch!” And then he’s coming hard, the pleasure coalescing in his abdomen before shooting out in thick white ropes with every pulse of his heart and throb of his cock. He coats her stomach and chest and both their hands in a sticky mess he can’t even regret because he loves the sight of it on her skin, and the way she stares while he marks her. The weight of her eyes on him is as palpable as her touch, and just knowing she’s watching adds an edge of unbearable excitement, drawing the pleasure out until he’s dizzy with it.

It seems to last forever, not that he minds, and when he finally comes back down to earth she’s still staring, wide-eyed at the mess he’s made of both of them, panting through lightly parted lips. They
are more temptation than he can bear, and before he can convince himself to defer to her relative innocence he’s sliding his sticky fingers between them, pressing deep into the heat of her mouth so she can taste him. Belle looks up at him in confusion, although she doesn’t try to resist or pull away.

“Clean them,” he murmurs, still breathing hard, and she sucks hesitantly on his fingers in a way he will definitely have thoughts about later, oh yes. He watches eagerly as she tastes his come, swallows it, though her expression doesn’t give away her thoughts on the subject – beyond deep embarrassment, anyway.

“Now yours,” he tells her when she’s finally finished with his hand, and she obeys, pink tongue darting out over her own slender fingers to clean him away.

The sight makes his cock twitch with interest, and as soon as she’s finished he presses his mouth to hers with a groan. He can taste himself on her lips, bitter and salty and just the slightest bit unpleasant. He wonders if she finds it so or if she likes it. But then it doesn’t much matter; he has at least a week to help her become accustomed to it, as he is more than willing to do. Even now, if he weren’t so exhausted, oh the things he would do…

Instead he helps her out of his shirt and uses it to sop up the rest of the mess. He tosses it away – doesn’t care where, or who will later be responsible for getting it washed – then pulls her into his arms. It’s nice to lie there with her, to feel her silky hair spilling over his chest and tickling under his chin, and she’s as warm and soft as he could possibly have hoped.

“Goodnight, ma Belle,” he murmurs, but she has already fallen back asleep.

@ >`--

Chapter End Notes

Etienne’s paramour and his two friends are named after characters in the novel Les Liaisons Dangereuses by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, because I’m too lazy to make up names. It was published in 1782, which would make these courtiers the parents of the ones in the novel. If you’d like to picture the Vicomte de Valmont as Ryan Phillippe in Cruel Intentions, I will not stop you.

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel!
This time when she awakens, there is no disorientation. Belle knows where she is. She knows who she’s with, and why. She is not surprised to feel Etienne’s arms around her, or the smooth expanse of his bare skin pressed against her back, or his even breath fanning her neck. He’s fitted to her like a spoon nestled in a silver drawer, face buried in the space between her shoulder and throat, but he holds her gently enough that she does not feel trapped. It’s just as well, too – as novel as it is to wake up so warm, it’s nearly dawn. She knows this with the innate sense of one who has always had to be up before it, a habit neither prudent nor possible to break.

She will not be warming the Prince’s bed – and he will not be warming her – forever.

So she eases herself out of his arms, pulling away with nothing like regret and sitting on the edge of the bed. He makes an irritated little sound, petulant even in sleep, and Belle can just make out his scowl in the darkness of the chamber. The expression and the lack of light do nothing to dispel the impression she has of his face, the thought that he is reasonably presentable when not caked with maquillage. His body is more than presentable, honesty compels her to admit to herself, though she blushes to think it… And keeps right on blushing, as memories of the night before come rushing back.

It’s all hazy in her mind, disjointed, nonsensical. She’d assume it had been a dream except she doesn’t think she has it in her to imagine such things. How could she ever have imagined the feel of him all hot and hard and smooth in her hand, or the pulsing heat of his arousal building and building under her touch? Had she dreamed it, everything would have been much more logical. His size, for one, seems rather excessive, considering the space it’s supposedly meant to fill; her imaginings would have been much more reasonable, if she’d thought to imagine at all. The mess also, she never would have imagined so much – well – god, just thinking it is awkward.

Just thinking it is also filling her with a kind of restless warmth, a tightening in her belly that she doesn’t quite understand but suspects might be arousal although she can’t imagine why. Whatever it is Etienne felt when he showed her how to touch him, whatever ecstasy he reaches with her, she has certainly never experienced for herself. Yet remembering the way he spoke to her, the way he lost control as she stroked him, the sight of him spilling himself on her stomach… The taste of him in her mouth… Surely, surely people do not… Why would they? None of it makes any sense in the least. Her father and mother, for example, or Mr. and Mrs. Potts, surely they would not…? It is too horrifying to contemplate.
But last night, in the dark, with Etienne’s deep voice in her ear and his solid flesh in her hand – it hadn’t seemed horrifying then, and imagining it with him isn’t horrifying now, either. Well, it is, but only because it makes her feel things she doesn’t understand. She needs time and space to think, to process everything that has happened, to analyze it as she always does. Human interaction has never been as easy for her as it seems to be for everyone else. She has so little in common with everyone she’s ever met, and understanding them has always required more thought than other people seem to dedicate to it. Gaston wants her – she doesn’t understand why. Le Fou loves Gaston – she doesn’t understand how. Etienne – she doesn’t understand at all.

In the past she has always at least understood herself. Now however…

Now she is staring at his face as the room grows ever brighter, thinking that the slight darkening of his jaw overnight lends a very flattering definition to his features, thinking that she likes the way his long hair spills over the pillow, thinking it’s strange how much she’d like to reach out and run her fingers through it. She doesn’t, of course. If His Highness has ever voluntarily risen before noon, she will be very much surprised.

Instead, she slips off the bed and forages for something to wear. The shirt she borrowed the night before lies filthy and discarded on the floor – not fit to don, clearly. But there is also a crumpled silk dressing gown, much heavier than the dress he’d lent her the day before. It feels cold and slick against her palms, smoother than anything except perhaps Etienne’s skin, and it wears like heaven despite practically swallowing her whole.

She is not quite sure what to do with herself. Mrs. Potts had promised to make arrangements to have some of her clothing brought to the palace, but even the Dauphin’s own housekeeper would not have been able to get it here so quickly. For the moment she is trapped in this suite, then, although it is larger than her home in Villeneuve so perhaps “trapped” isn’t quite the word. Aside from the door she knows leads to his dressing room, there is another right next to it, and two more to match on the opposite wall. Shrugging, she chooses the one closest to her, opens it and steps through.

The room is bright compared to the bedchamber the early morning light streaming through the open curtains and illuminating one of the most beautiful sights she has ever seen: a large sturdy shelf filled floor to ceiling with books. It stands behind a desk covered with papers in stacks that suggest the same type of order her father maintains – whoever uses it can probably find whatever they’re looking for, while everyone else is out of luck. She’d assume she is standing in Etienne’s private office, but it clearly receives use so it doesn’t seem likely. It also doesn’t matter. If she had been offered a single wish as to what she’d find on the other side of that door, she would have wished for books, and here they are, dozens, more than she’s ever seen in one place at one time.

Grinning, she rushes to the shelf, admiring the beautiful multicolored spines all capped by gilded titles. They are not new, light creases indicating almost all of have been opened, but they are newer than any in Pere Robert’s collection, or at least better cared for. As costly as all books are, every edition in this library is far beyond that, each one a priceless gem. She is almost afraid to touch them – she wants to hold each one close and never let go.

There is no discernable method of categorization, she realizes as she examines each title. Books about mathematics and philosophy are sandwiched haphazardly between novels and plays, books in Greek and Latin scattered amongst those in French and even English. They’re not placed alphabetically by title or author, either: one shelf has de Bergerac’s *Contenant les Estats & Empires de la Lune* alongside Newton’s *Principia* and Diophantus’s *Arithmetica* (in a recent Latin translation).

She gently traces her finger over the embossed titles, feeling the indentations in the fine leather, head
spinning. There is pressure just behind her eyes suggesting she might cry. Some of these books she has heard of all her life, yearned to read, and they are all here – where she will remain for slightly less than six more days. Six months would never be enough time to read them all, even if she spent her every waking hour attempting it, and Etienne is not paying her to hole up in this office and read for the rest of the week. But perhaps, if she sleeps very little – *Principia* and *Arithmetica* at least, she must –

“What on earth are you doing in here?” Etienne’s voice drawls from the doorway, and Belle starts guiltily. But she has done nothing wrong – although whoever uses this office might have cause to be upset. Surely that is not him.

“I was just –” she begins, turning to face him, only to freeze when she realizes he is completely nude.

He has held her, of course. She has felt his strength, and seen enough to know he is beautiful. But never like this, so casually from head to toe, just – naked, in front of her, in broad daylight. Since coming to the palace she has dusted her fair share of exquisite marble statuettes in the Greek and Roman style, and he is no less powerfully carved, no less exquisite. Oh, god, she doesn’t know where to look, or what to do with her hands suddenly. It is almost enough to push thoughts of Newton’s *Principia* completely from her head.

Almost.

“You were just?” he prompts, and she blinks, trying to string words together into something resembling a sentence.

“I was just – ah, well – the books, I was –” Well, it resembles a sentence, she supposes, but only barely.

She doesn’t see him smirking at her, because she’s trying her best to look at anything other than him, but she can feel it, and it strikes her as most unfair.

“Must you laugh? Could you not simply put something on?”

Apparently, he must laugh, because he does. “Give me my robe and I’ll don it gladly.”

“Ideally we’d both be clothed,” she says, closing her eyes to resist the temptation to stare. He would love that. She will not give him the satisfaction.

“That doesn’t sound ideal at all,” he murmurs, the tone of his voice doing strange things to her heart rate.

“I was just examining this shelf.” It’s pathetic, how proud she is of finally forcing out something coherent – closing her eyes was the key, it seems.

“You like the colors, I suppose.”

“I like the books,” she corrects, stiffening a bit.

“You like the books? How?” She can clearly imagine the way his eyebrows must be drawn together over the bridge of his nose, the confusion on his face, assuming it matches that in his voice.

“How could I not?”

“But – You’re a peasant,” he says, as a statement of fact – as someone who doesn’t realize he has
been insulting.

Of course, he has and he hasn’t. There is no shame for her in being a peasant, but the way he says it… He makes it shameful. He makes it difficult not to snap at him. But she takes a deep breath, opens her eyes – and keeps them completely focused on his, no matter how they want to dip lower.

“My father is an artisan.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

“We’re superior peasants.” Her voice has an edge of amusement, but it is true. Even amongst the lower classes there is a hierarchy, and for all the scorn in which her father is held, they are somewhere near the top of it.

This concept is clearly too much for him, so he ignores it. “But you can read?”

“Yes.”

“In French?” he clarifies, and she almost wants to ask what he’d expect her to be able to read in. Not English or Latin, she assumes – although she can, both.

“Yes.”

“Really?”

He gives her a look full of such disbelief she almost wants to grab a book off the shelf, read a paragraph aloud just to prove she can, then beat him about the head with the tome. She’d do it, too, if not for the fact that the books are too precious to jeopardize, even in such a cause, and the penalty for attacking the future King of France is probably death.

Too irritated to respond verbally, Belle crosses her arms and nods.

“I see. And what was one of your favorite books growing up?” he challenges, as though waiting to catch her out. He’ll be waiting quite some time.

“La Jeune Américaine ou les Contes marins,” she answers readily. “Although really it was my mother’s favorite. I’m named after a character in one of the stories.”

“And now?”

“Well there isn’t much to choose from in the village. Pere Robert has a small library which he graciously allows me to access, but – ”

Etienne smirks at her, so certain he has won. “Ah, of course.”

“Candide is my absolute favorite, but Pere Robert recently obtained a copy of Rousseau’s Julie, which gave me much to think on.”

His smirk widens. “Oh really? Voltaire and Rousseau? How intellectual.”

Again, she envisions hitting him hard with the heaviest book she can find, but just imagining it soothes her somewhat. What’s it to her if he doesn’t believe her? He is the one paying for her company. She has no need to impress him.

As though reading her mind, he says “If you’re trying to impress me, this is the wrong way to go about it. Lust is all truth, love full of forged lies. There is no need to lie to me.”
Belle raises her eyebrows at him. “You know Shakespeare?”

Etienne’s eyes widen before his face becomes a haughty mask. “I had an expensive education. Perhaps the better question would be: you know Shakespeare?”

“I hope it wasn’t too expensive,” she retorts, ignoring his question. “Because love is all truth, lust full of forged lies.”

As soon as she says it, she knows it’s a mistake. He is unpredictable, and used to his own way. He is certainly not accustomed to being challenged by women of any class, much less serving girls or scullery maids. His eyes go pale and icy and for a moment Belle is certain she is about to be dismissed – sent away from this paradise of books before opening a single one. It’s enough to break a girl’s heart.

But he doesn’t dismiss her. Instead, he responds with petty malice, which perhaps she might have predicted if she’d thought about it. “Well well, perhaps you do read after all. What a shame Shakespeare loses so much in translation.”

He draws nearer and presses himself against her, all smooth solid scalding bare skin, and she gasps. Somehow she’d grown so preoccupied with refuting his words – with her own pride, really – she’d managed to forget he was completely naked throughout the discussion. In a way, she almost wants to congratulate him on being able to distract her from something so remarkable so thoroughly.

She expects he’ll strip his robe from her body and either take her back to his bed or just take her here, on the floor or desk or… Somewhere, she’s sure he has ideas she’s never even dreamed of. He’s half hard already, and in truth she would not be unhappy to escape a scolding that way. He’s very warm, and with no distance between them she can smell his skin, free of cologne or any scent – just him. It is not unpleasant.

Yet again, he does the unexpected. Rather than reaching for her he reaches behind and above her, removing a book from a shelf too high for her to reach. He is not gentle with it, not as she would be, and she has to stifle a cry of distress when he seems almost to drop it.

He shoots her an amused glance and steps back just enough to show her the title. It is the sixth volume of Theobald’s Complete Works of Shakespeare in Seven Volumes, an edition she has never had access to but which Pere Robert often mentions wistfully. He owns only the first and eighth volumes of a set compiled by Pope and Warburton, which though published later is supposedly much inferior. Belle has never been able to understand how, exactly. She’s read both volumes dozens of times and has never found anything wanting.

Or no, she’s found six things wanting: volumes two through seven. Etienne, she’s sure, has the complete set of Theobald’s edition. Perhaps he has more than one complete set of several different editions. Dozens of masterpieces just waiting for Belle to discover them… The mind boggles, really.

“I could read it to you if you like,” he offers, too smug for the suggestion to be well-meaning. “You won’t understand most of it but you’ll hear the cadence much better in English.”

She isn’t quite sure of the best course of action. Disclose that she reads English? Allow him to read it to her? He does have a lovely voice, smooth and deep, and she imagines he’d read aloud with flair. It is a long time since anyone has read to her.

Noting her hesitation, Etienne grins and sets the volume on the desk behind him. He threads long fingers through her hair, pushing it back away from her face.
“Or perhaps,” he suggests “you would like something else?”

He is still very warm, and very close. He still smells very good. And now that she’s thinking all these things, and thinking about his voice, and now that he’s touching her, it is an effort of supreme willpower to keep her eyes locked on his.

His grin widens, teeth very white and straight, and it is happy, unlike almost any other smile he’s given her. “You can look at me, you know.”

“I don’t want – ”

“You do. You couldn’t look away last night.”

She can feel the blood rushing to her cheeks and hates herself for it, because it will so delight him. And it does, she can tell by the way he abandons stroking her hair to trail his finger down the side of her face.

“And perhaps it’s my turn to look at you?”

He reaches for the sash of the robe she wears – his robe – and curses as he encounters the double knot Belle tied in case of this exact situation. Just to irritate him a little, because really he deserves it.

Unfortunately, he seems to be able to read this mischief in her eyes.

“You underestimate me, ma Belle,” he murmurs, before crowding her back against the bookshelf and sliding one hand inside the robe to cup her breast. His other hand works the knot without a single glance towards it. “I am well-practiced, you see. I could untie this knot in my sleep.”

And then he’s kissing her hard, his tongue invading her mouth and subduing her own, his elegant hand squeezing and stroking to bring her nipple to full attention even as he toys with the knot at her waist. He spoke only truth, she discovers, because it is mere moments before he is parting the robe and pushing it off her shoulders. It would fall to the floor except her hands are somehow buried in his hair, holding him to her and she’s kissing him back without remembering deciding to.

With a desperate sound in the back of his throat, he wraps his free arm around her waist, pulling her flush against him so that she can feel how completely ready he is to take her. He moves his other hand from her breast to her throat, thumb tracing over the bruise on her collarbone before he slides his fingers into her hair. They tighten and he tugs her head back, raising his head only to move his lips from her mouth to her neck. She gasps and flexes her grip on his hair, desperate to hold him where he is. His lips and teeth and tongue all feel amazing on her skin, although she has no idea what he’s doing with them – she just doesn’t want him to stop, doesn’t –

“Ahem.”

There is a pointed little cough from the doorway… And Etienne stops.

@ >`

Chapter End Notes

So apparently in the early 18th century there was a kind of battle over various editions of the works of Shakespeare. Different publishers compiled plays from various sources.
and took out snarky little ads maligning other editions. Alexander Pope (of *Rape of the Lock* fame) published an edition that heavily edited the source material by regularizing the poetic meter and cutting lines. This horrified Lewis Theobald to the extent that he wrote a scathing editorial about it and then published his own (better) edition. Later, a publisher named Warburton reissued Pope's version with a preface calling out Theobald... But the edition is NOTORIOUSLY bad. Apparently it's considered one of the worst editions of Shakespeare ever. So I guess Theobald won that one.

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you so much for your comments and kudos! Also as always, I have no life, so please don't hesitate to ask any questions you might have! I live to answer them.

And now, Chapter Nine, in which Etienne's friends are kind of dicks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

9

Three times in his life, he has stood back to back with another man, counted off twenty paces, turned and aimed for the heart – before adjusting his grip and shooting his bullet into the air. None of those men died at the barrel of Etienne’s pistol, because until this moment, he has never actually wanted to commit murder.

But now? Now Belle is in his arms, his own robe sliding down her body, almost fully nude and certainly fully amenable to his plans to lift her up and fuck her against the bookshelf, and Lumiere is at the door making that stupid. Little. Noise.

Oh yes, he wants to kill.

He also wants to protect Belle, to spare her whatever embarrassment he can. Based on the way she has her eyes squeezed shut, she is wishing with all her might to be anywhere but here, and he can’t say he blames her. She is unused to such things and he has no wish to see her humiliated like this.

Nor does he want Lumiere to get even the slightest glimpse of her naked body, but that’s something else.

To that end he tugs his robe back up her shoulders, wrapping it tightly around her and even knotting the sash so that she might be as decently covered as possible. For himself, he doesn’t much care. Just the timbre of Lumiere’s cough has killed every vestige of his desire, and he turns without an ounce of shame.

The maître d’ stands at the threshold of the office, smirking somehow without actually making any kind of facial expression. But he is certainly amused, Etienne knows him well enough to tell.

“Do you have a death wish?” he demands. “Or just impeccable timing?”

It is no effort at all to sound his usual icy aristocratic self – not that it will have any effect on Lumiere, but never let it be said he didn’t make the attempt at least.

“Cogsworth is the one with the impeccable timing, Your Highness,” Lumiere responds, humor unconcealed in his voice. “I am merely the one sent to inform Mademoiselle Brescond that the seamstress is here for her fitting.”

He can feel Belle behind him, lifting up on her toes to peek over his shoulder. Lumiere, utter bastard
that he is, *winks* at her, and yes, Etienne still wants to kill, perhaps with bare hands instead of pistols this time. Belle gasps and ducks back down.

“She will be along shortly,” Etienne grits out.

“Forgive me, Your Highness, but I’m afraid she must come now if there is to be any hope of finishing something today.”

Etienne glares. “You will not tell her what she *must* do. And if the modiste cannot complete something today due to a five minute delay, send her off and find someone else. Mademoiselle Brescond will be along shortly.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” Lumiere replies, bowing with a flourish – a mocking flourish, even though nothing about it is apparently mocking. Any time Lumiere bows to him, it’s mocking and Etienne knows it.

“And close the door behind you!” he adds as Lumiere, thankfully, exits.

Sighing, he turns back to Belle, who is not as red as he might have expected. In fact she is white, drained of all color, head angled slightly downward in a strangely defeated position.

“What’s wrong?”

She looks up and meets his gaze with eyes full of distress. “What’s wrong? I work with these people! It’s bad enough for them to know – what I’m doing here, but – for him to see, I can’t – ”

Etienne can’t help the anger and hurt rising in him. He’d expected her to be embarrassed, as he supposes most people would, but not because she’s ashamed of the nature of their relationship. Ashamed of *him*! She is a serving girl, for the love of god, she should be grateful and honored that he’s even taken notice of her! Sometimes he thinks she is not quite as impressed by him as she should be.

But she is also so clearly upset that he doesn’t quite have it in him to reprimand her. Instead, he focuses on the one fact he can simply refute.

“You do not work with these people now,” he reminds her, tugging her into his arms. If he only has five more minutes left with her he intends to make use of them. “They will serve you as they serve me, and if any of them dare to judge you, they’ll be dismissed without a character. It is simple enough.”

“You would do that?” she asks, and again he gets the feeling that she’s not at all grateful although she ought to be.

He shrugs. “Of course.”

Something about her face changes, something he can’t define but which makes him think she has much to say but will not say it. She should be thanking him. Why is she not thanking him? But he doesn’t ask, and when she remains silent, he sighs.

“Lumiere ruins everything, you know. This perfectly delightful little interlude, for example, and my surprise, but it cannot be helped.”

“Surprise?”

“The fitting. You are in desperate need of decent clothing, obviously, so I arranged it for you last
night.”

She looks at him as though she’d like to argue, but can’t considering she’s wearing his dressing gown.

“But you – ” she begins, and he smiles down at her.

“There is no need to thank me,” he murmurs, lowering his head to press his lips to hers, but she is frowning, eyebrows drawn together in confusion.

“But this isn’t – When we came to an agreement I – I didn’t realize I’d be compensated this way, I – ” And she is distressed again, still. And he is hurt again, still.

“This isn’t compensation,” he says stiffly, setting her away from him. “It’s a gift. And a necessity. You will still be paid as promised, if that’s your concern.”

Belle opens her mouth to reply, but he shakes his head, preempting her before she can speak.

“Enough, Lumiere is waiting. Tell him to have someone else lead you wherever you need to go, and send him back to me.” He can hear the hauteur in his own voice, the sharp bite, can see her flinch at it. He wants to be glad of it but isn’t.

“Etienne – ” she says, and he wonders why that word in her voice fills him with such warmth. Hardly anyone ever uses it, except Lumiere and sometimes Mrs. Potts. Paramours, never. But even now, even angry and hurt, he loves hearing it from her.

It is almost enough to make him forgive her, but he doesn’t get the chance. The office door opens to reveal Lumiere once more. Belle looks uncertainly between them, and Etienne suspects she is anxious to flee after the harsh way he spoke to her.

“Your Highness, I thought it might be best for Plumette to take Mademoiselle Brescond to the modiste.”

“Oh, thank you, Lumiere,” Belle says, smiling at the maître d’, and Etienne does not like it at all, no.

“She is waiting in the room with a dressing gown,” Lumiere tells her, and she hurries out of the office without a backwards glance.

“You will fetch me my robe once Belle is finished with it,” Etienne orders, and Lumiere smirks at him.

“Nothing would please me more, Your Highness.”

Etienne glares, out of charity with Lumiere, Belle and the world in general. His plans have been ruined, his surprise poorly-received…

“She makes no sense,” he mutters, not because he has any desire to confide in Lumiere but because he can’t help it. “Should she not be grateful that I have done this for her? Of course she should, but is she? No! All she can think about is her compensation.”

“Your Highness?”

“Never mind the fact that I’ve given her carte blanche with an exclusive modiste. Whatever she orders will undoubtedly cost far more than she does herself,” he sneers. “But is she pleased? No!”

“I think – ”
“She reads, did you know?” he asks abruptly.

Lumiere shrugs. “I did not know but I am not surprised. She is as intelligent as she is beautiful – not that I have noticed her beauty in any way of course,” he adds when Etienne glares.

“She has never looked at me the way she looked at this shelf of books. And she has never smiled at me the way she just smiled at you. Why is she being so difficult?”

“Perhaps she prefers me to you?” Lumiere suggests slyly.

“Get out.”

Lumiere simply rolls his eyes. “I will, but only to retrieve your robe – which you will don immediately, I sincerely hope.”

Etienne can’t muster the energy to be truly angry with Lumiere. He is too busy wondering if what he said was true. It can’t be, of course. He is a prince; who would prefer a maître d’ instead? Even if said maître d’ is handsome and charming – Etienne is handsome and charming enough himself. Lumiere is perhaps more attainable, but Belle has attained the pinnacle already. No, it can’t be true, what a foolish thought.

But she did smile at him.

Remembering makes Etienne frown fiercely, not that it has any impact on Lumiere when he returns with the robe. Etienne shrugs it on and almost sighs with pleasure – the silk is smooth and slick and still warm with Belle’s body heat, almost as though she’s draped over him in bed. He manages to hide the thought, thankfully, though Lumiere gives him a look as though he knows what Etienne is thinking anyway. Maybe he does. Lumiere is annoying like that.

“Where are Valmont and de Tourvel?” he asks. He assumes his useless friends must have stayed the night after their fun with the Marquise de Merteuil, especially considering his plans to have another dinner party tonight. They would have thought it pointless to return home.

He remembers the night before, the aristocrats hanging on his every word, the women flirting with clear intent. It had all been very unsatisfying, as he had expected to have Belle at his side, but the more he considers it the more he thinks he wouldn’t have enjoyed it any more with her there. Might have enjoyed it less. She would have been uncomfortable, the men impertinent, the women cruel – and he’d have rather been alone with her in any case.

Of course, he is still displeased with her. Perhaps tonight he should send Belle to the Saint-Cloud Suite and take the Marquise to his bed – if Valmont and de Tourvel were pleased with her. It would put Belle in her place, remind her that she is here only by his word. She would be jealous, then, knowing another woman had usurped her. Or no, more likely she would merely be worried about her compensation, and he does not wish to hear her mention it again. He can forget her motivation with surprising ease when she isn’t throwing it in his face.

“The Vicomte de Valmont and Monsieur de Tourvel are still abed, Your Highness. We allocated guestrooms in the east wing to prevent them from further defiling your study.”

Etienne smirks at that – he can imagine the scene all too clearly. The maids must be hard at work by now, and despairing of their fates. But the smirk fades as he wonders if Belle has ever had to clean up after his friends, or himself. And to think he plans to do it all over again tonight, and the next, and the next… Belle will be by his side this time, of course, but even still… The thought of socializing with the same sycophantic courtiers as usual holds less than no appeal. Not when he could be
defiling Belle in every room of the palace instead.

“Fine,” he snaps, coming to a decision. “Send Chapeau to me. I will dress then see Valmont and de Tourvel on their way. You will send word to the surrounding chateaux that I am cancelling all engagements for the coming week.”

Lumiere is surprised by this, and Etienne feels a moment of triumph. It is very difficult to catch his maître d’ off guard.

“Your Highness?”

“I believe I spoke clearly enough, Lumiere.”

“Yes, but – ” he begins, and Etienne waves him off.

“That will be all.”

Thwarted, Lumiere glares at him. “Of course, Your Highness. Right away, Your Highness.” Then, under his breath: “Happy to spoil the entire castle’s hard work on a moment’s whim, Your Highness.”

Etienne considers chastising him but, as it won’t do any good, chooses not to hear instead.

An hour later Etienne is presentable at last, clad in clothing that would be plain were it not made of the finest fabric: linen and silk for his shirt, of course, with really quite restrained amounts of lace, and dark gray silk embroidered with silver gilt for the waistcoat. True, the rosette buttons are pure fine silver, but the waistcoat is covered by his blue and purple shot silk banyan so all remains casual. At his insistence Chapeau leaves his long blond hair unpowdered, sets it with a few simple curls and clubs it back into a queue. If he is sending everyone away there is no need to be overdone or uncomfortable. Besides, he isn’t stupid – Belle is unused to it and clearly doesn’t like it, all the finery and maquillage. She is rustic, yes, but it does not fill him with scorn. It is almost sweet, that she clearly prefers his bare face to the most flawlessly painted version.

Really it has very little to do with her. It is too early for paint regardless.

Etienne makes his way to the east wing, to the Montbrun Suite where Valmont and de Tourvel often end up after a night of revels. De Tourvel is usually assigned his own room, of course, but invariably they each need someone to prop them up to walk so they tend to give up at Valmont’s. It is still early, especially by his friends’ standards; he takes great joy in throwing open the double doors and allowing the light from the hallway to flood the room, made pitch black and cave-like by the heavy velvet drapes.

“Mfshmphmph?” Valmont mumbles incoherently from the bed where he is sprawled, mostly clothed, diagonally and upside down. His breeches are undone but he is still wearing his boots, Etienne can’t help but notice. They are squashing and muddying two of the fine silk down-stuffed pillows. It has not been a good weekend for bed linens, he thinks in resignation.

“Wha – ?” is de Tourvel’s contribution from within the depths of the darkened chamber. The suite is huge, though not so well appointed as the Saint-Cloud Suite, but large enough that he could be hiding just about anywhere. Scuffling sounds from the corner eventually result in de Tourvel, stark naked, crawling out from under a velvet chaise.

“It’s just Anjou, de Tourvel,” Valmont says, referring to Etienne by his more familiar title – they never call him by name, of course, but his closest friends can’t always call him Your Highness, either. It becomes tiresome eventually. Luckily he has titles enough to offer alternatives, and along
with being Dauphin is also Duc d’Anjou.

“Oh. Well tell him to bugger off, won’t you?” de Tourvel responds, and Etienne rolls his eyes.

“I’m right here, you can tell me yourself. Or rather, you just did.”

“Good then.” He retreats back under the chaise.

“Are you alone, Your Highness?” Valmont is mostly coherent now, and sitting up – though his boots are still muddying Etienne’s beloved pillows.

“As you see,” Etienne says.

“He was hoping you’d bring your new whore by,” de Tourvel offers, crawling out from under the chaise once more, this time wearing the wrinkled satin knee breeches of the night before.

Valmont glares in de Tourvel’s general direction. “You were hoping too. She must be something to entice you away from the lovely Marquise, after all.”

Etienne stiffens, though he really can’t say why. This banter is familiar and common – and predictive of an afternoon of debauchery, often enough. He is usually perfectly happy to share as long as the woman in question is willing, and they are always willing when it’s the future King of France making the request.

And he won’t pretend he doesn’t enjoy it. There are only so many things one man may do with one woman, and he has done the majority of them so often as to be easily bored by such tame pursuits. Of course, there are also only so many things three men may do with one woman at the same time, but there is something transgressive about watching his latest paramour suck Valmont’s cock, for example, while he fucks her, that adds to the enjoyment.

He attempts to imagine Belle on her hands and knees, Valmont’s hands in her dark hair and cock down her throat as Etienne takes her from behind, and feels physically ill – even before adding in de Tourvel. It is as though there is a brick wall in his mind that he slams into at full speed, leaving his stomach roiling and mind blank.

“Well?” de Tourvel prompts, shuffling over and flipping an overturned dressing chair right-side up. He sinks into it and blinks blearily at his friends. “What’s she like, and when will you bring her?”

“Valmont was hardly worth the time,” Valmont adds in complaint. “Her arse and cunt were tight enough, and she did her duty, but to please you rather than us, I think.”

Again, Etienne forces himself to imagine sharing Belle that way and just – slams into that wall again. He can’t, and doesn’t want to, picture her like that. He wracks his mind for something to say that might satisfy them. “She is… Very beautiful. And shy. I do not think she would be amenable to such games.”

All of which is perfectly true.

De Tourvel looks at him assessingly, and Etienne is reminded that while Valmont is the cunning one, de Tourvel often sees more than one would expect.

“Ah, still the lovelorn swain I see!” Valmont jibes. “We don’t care how she looks or if she’s shy, do we de Tourvel?”

Shrugging, de Tourvel looks back to Valmont. “If Anjou isn’t going to share it hardly matters, does
it? We could have the Marquise back tonight instead.”

Valmont ignores him. “We want to know how she fucks. Is she tight? Does she suck dick as well as the Marquise? Does she like to eat your come? Your obsession with that is not quite normal,” he adds, laughing. “But god knows I like to watch it.”

With every word, Etienne can feel himself growing more and more infuriated – and more and more confused. Valmont is always this way, a little cruder than himself, much cruder than de Tourvel, endlessly interested in details to whet his appetite beforehand. It has never bothered Etienne in the past. But Belle is different. She is *his*, has only known him, and the thought of sharing her is just… No. He doesn’t want his friends talking about her, thinking about her, *knowing* about her.

“Enough, Valmont,” de Tourvel snaps, and Etienne is surprised to realize his hands are clenched into fists and he is quite close to slamming one of them into Valmont’s stupid face.

“Oh, very well,” Valmont huffs. “You’ll tire of her eventually, Anjou, and then I will be happy to take her off your hands. I’m not as rich or powerful but I am certainly prettier.”

Certainly is a bit of a stretch, but Valmont is – according to the ladies of the court – quite handsome, not to mention charming. Would Belle be susceptible to such things? He will never allow it, Etienne decides in that moment. If – when – he tires of her, he will order Valmont to stay away from her. The thought of his friend indulging in his usual games with her is simply unacceptable.

“Are we to go hunting?” de Tourvel asks, resolutely ignoring the tension in the room. “I cannot imagine any other reason for you to drag us out of bed at this ungodly hour.”

“You were not in a bed, therefore I could not drag you out of one,” Etienne says, smirking when de Tourvel responds with a rude gesture. “And no. I am here to cordially invite you both to quit my sight immediately if not sooner.”

“What?” Valmont demands. “You must know I was only teasing, I did not realize you took it so to heart!”

Etienne rolls his eyes. “Yes you did, but in any case this is unrelated. I am canceling all engagements for the week, including dinner tonight –”

Valmont gives him an all-too-knowing look. “This is about her, isn’t it? Your shy and beautiful whore? You are withdrawing from a full week of revels to dance attendance upon her, I suppose –”

De Tourvel looks between his two friends with alarm. “Valmont, do shut up.”

“Have you even fucked her yet? Or are you content merely to sit beside her and kiss her hand? You can do that just as well with my head up her skirt.”

Valmont laughs, and Etienne has simply had enough; it is almost a relief to drive his fist into his friend’s face as he has been aching to for most of this conversation. Valmont’s head snaps back and he collapses against the bed, moaning and clutching at his bloody nose.

“Yes, Valmont,” Etienne drawls, shaking his throbbing hand to dull the pain. “Do shut up.”

“Will you not defend me, de Tourvel?” Valmont groans.

“Of course not,” de Tourvel answers tartly. “You deserved it.”

Valmont considers this as he scrambles up into a sitting position once more. Finally, he shrugs.
“Fair,” he concedes, with a glance to Etienne. “Next week then, Anjou?”

Etienne can’t help but crack a smile. Irritating and worthless as they are, his friends are still his friends, and god knows this isn’t the first time one of them has punched another. Nor will it be the last.

“I will send word,” he says, unwilling to commit to anything beyond this week when he is not quite certain he will be surrendering Belle at the end of it.

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes

After much consideration, I have decided I agree with several commenters that Colin Firth in *Valmont* is the appropriate Valmont for this story:

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel...
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you so much for your comments and kudos! I'm pleased to see that most seem to agree with the Colin Firth/Valmont thing, glad you're going along with me on this!

And now, Chapter 10, in which no one is a dick because the Prince et al are busy elsewhere (though some inquiries are made about Etienne's... You know).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

10

“You’ve never had a dress made?” Plumette asks in disbelief, staring up at Belle as she stands motionless on a stool in nothing but a chemise.

Madame Cadenza – also affectionately known as Madame de Garderobe but who has asked to be called Mimi – circles her like a predator sizing up its prey, trying to determine where to place its claws, or pins as the case may be. Belle feels very awkward and very exposed. The bruises at her collarbone, throat and wrists are fully visible, and she can just feel Plumette and Mimi both staring at them.

“No…” Belle responds, uneasy. “I’ve always made my own clothing. The uniform here is the first dress I’ve ever owned that I didn’t make myself.”

Plumette grins. “This is going to be so much fun!” she enthuses, and Belle forces herself to smile.

Women enjoy this, she’s been told. Etienne thought she would enjoy this. She should try.

“We shall start with the day dresses,” Mimi says in her strange accent. Belle enjoys languages, enjoys breaking down the words and sounds, and detects hints of the West Indies, France and Italy in her voice. An interesting life, audible for anyone who knows how to listen. “How many, do you suppose?”

“One?” Belle ventures when it’s clear a response is expected. “I don’t need anything, really, so more than one seems – ”

“Stop stop stop!” Plumette exclaims, shaking her head. “You will not be offended, mademoiselle, if I observe that you have no idea what you are talking about. His Highness has given you carte blanche! I would not be doing my duty as your friend if I did not help you take advantage of it.”

By the determined expression on her face, Belle knows better than to protest – and she isn’t unhappy to have someone more knowledgeable take the reins. Most girls probably do this for the first time with their mothers, she thinks, but she has never had one and cannot imagine it.

“Excellent!” Plumette jumps to her feet brandishing a book of patterns – the latest from Paris, apparently. What she will do with fashionable Parisian gowns here in Villeneuve, she is unsure.
“Mimi, we shall have five – no, six! – day dresses, two riding habits, at least one ball gown, chemises and undergarments and all the rest.”

Mimi nods enthusiastically as Belle looks on with alarm. “I’m only staying another six days.”

“And?” Plumette asks. “He said you were to have whatever you wanted, did he not?”

“He did,” Mimi confirms, flipping through the book of patterns. “I am to work on nothing else until all of your dresses are complete, he said.”

Belle blinks in surprise, wondering why he should care about any of this. She still isn’t sure why she’s here, or why he thought this was necessary.

“Etienne said that?”

Plumette looks at her with sudden intense interest. “Etienne, is it?”

“His Highness said that?” Belle corrects, remembering he’d told her to call him by name only when they were alone.

Mimi and Plumette exchange a look she can’t quite read before Mimi nods once more. “He did. He was most insistent.”

“You would not wish to displease him, would you?” Plumette asks, and Belle considers.

“Sometimes I would,” she admits wryly, causing the two women to cackle with delight. “But in this, I suppose not. Not if he was so insistent. He’s unhappy with me as it is, I think.”


Plumette takes her hand and – well, doesn’t drag her but… Kind of drags her to the rose velvet upholstered settee along the wall of the comfortable workshop. She pulls Belle down next to her while Mimi sinks gracefully into a side chair and rests her feet on a low blue and gold brocade footstool – which yips in protest. Belle stares in shock for a moment until the footstool raises its little head and reveals itself to be a small dog in a very elaborate tiny suit.

“Shush, Frou Frou! Curl up again, be good for mama,” Mimi says. The dog does as it is bid, seemingly turning back into a footstool, and its owner looks up at Belle expectantly.

“Now!” Plumette says, squeezing Belle’s hands in her own. “Tell us everything.”

Everything is far too much, Belle decides immediately, as it encompasses things she doesn’t want anyone to know as well as being a dizzying amount of information – as she should know, since having it all in her head makes her a little dizzy herself.

“Don’t interrogate the poor girl,” Mimi chides, and Belle shoots a grateful look to the older woman.

“Very well, not everything then… Start with why he should be unhappy with you.” Belle opens her mouth to oblige, but then Plumette changes her mind. “No, start with calling him Etienne. You call him Etienne? No one calls him that!”

“Well, he told me to,” Belle says with a shrug, then adds, “He… Seems to like it.”

Plumette and Mimi look at each other and burst into laughter, and Belle can feel herself blushing scarlet. She hadn’t meant it quite the way she now realizes it sounded… But then maybe she did, she
thinks, remembering him urging her to say his name again and again while he was inside her. Which only makes her blush deepen, of course.

“Oh, now whatever is turning you red, my dear, that is a story I would like to hear,” Mimi says once she catches her breath.

“Yes!” Plumette agrees, grinning. “Tell us! How is he?”

“How is he?” Belle echoes, confused. “He was well enough when last I saw him, though displeased with Lumiere.”

Plumette waves this away. “He’s always displeased with Lumiere. That is not what I meant.”

“In bed, child,” Mimi says, glancing up from her own book of patterns. “She means in bed.”

“Oh!” How foolish of her. “He’s… Enthusiastic?”

Another round of giggles, another blush brought to Belle’s cheeks. Is this how people talk to one another? Women? She’s barely managed to wrap her mind around the fact that some people do these things Etienne has showed her… The thought that people might discuss them with friends is nearly more than she can handle.

“Is he big?” Plumette asks, and Mimi tsks.

“Size doesn’t matter if he doesn’t know how to use it,” she advises. “Does he?”

“Yes, does he?”

“I – ” Belle hesitates. “Should I be telling you this? Will he not be upset?”

“Only if you tell us he’s terrible,” Plumette says, grinning. “He isn’t, is he? I would be so disappointed in him.”

“I don’t think he’s terrible,” Belle responds after some consideration. “But then I’ve no one to compare him to. He’s… His body… He’s very beautiful.”

“And?” Mimi urges. “What else?”

Belle isn’t sure what to say to satisfy them. Surely some details are not to be shared? But Plumette and Mimi are enthralled, hanging on her every word. They must be expecting to hear something more exciting.

“He talks, sometimes,” Belle offers, thinking that it is exciting to her, so perhaps they will be appeased. “He suggests things I didn’t realize were – well – I don’t know. But he has a nice voice.”

Both Plumette and Mimi look disappointed – or no, Plumette looks almost outraged.

“He has a nice voice? A nice voice?! Belle, cherie, you’re doing this wrong! Tell us something interesting!”

Belle laces her fingers together in her lap and stares at them, knowing that if she says what she is considering saying she cannot look at either woman as she does so. But she is curious, and Plumette wants details, so perhaps she can share this and ask the question at the same time…

“Last night… He wanted me to touch him, and showed me how, and I – I think he liked it,” she says, blushing because she doesn’t think so, she knows so, but that isn’t the point of what she’s
saying. “But after he… finished… It was messy, you know – that surprised me – but he… Well, he… Wanted me to lick his fingers clean, so I did, and I think – But is that… Do people do that?”

She looks up to meet Plumette’s eyes and finds her friend staring at her wide-eyed. A glance at Mimi shows the same expression, with perhaps a bit more amusement. Even the dog is staring, for all the world as if it understands French and is as shocked as her friends by her question.

“I’m sorry,” Belle says quickly. “Was that too…?”

“No, no,” Plumette says hastily. “I just need a moment to picture it.”

Mimi starts laughing as Belle gasps.

“What?! Why?! Don’t!” she exclaims in alarm.

“No, it’s… It’s good. I’m impressed with you!”

Belle covers her face and wishes she could turn back the clock by five minutes or so.

“You’re embarrassing her,” Mimi points out, and Plumette tugs Belle’s hands away.

“There is no cause to be embarrassed! I have Lumiere, and Mimi has her Maestro. We are women of the world, no?” She smiles encouragingly. “But you shouldn’t let him make you do anything you are uncomfortable with.”

Belle can’t help but think that if she followed Plumette’s advice, she’d never do anything he wants her to – it all makes her uncomfortable. But that is not the same as unwilling, which she isn’t. She’s… Curious, even. Everything she finds strange he finds so exciting and as always she wants to know how and why. And anyway, it’s what she’s being paid for, isn’t it? How can she complain?

“I didn’t mind,” Belle admits. “It – I think it made him very happy, so – ”

“Well then! Nothing to be ashamed of, is there?” Mimi asks.

“I will never be able to look at him the same way again though,” Plumette announces. “Not ever. Tell us more!”

“Oh, leave her alone, Plumette, stop badgering the poor girl! Besides,” Mimi adds pointedly, “there is still much to accomplish. Have you chosen the patterns?”

Belle looks at the older woman blankly, but it seems Plumette has done everything necessary while Belle was busy turning every possible shade of red. The maid offers her a stack of drawings, and Belle pages through with growing dismay. The dresses are all beautiful, of course, but even the ones she knows are meant for day are as opulent as any ball gown. Each one is styled à la Française, first of all, with fabric flowing from pleats at the back and into a train. Needless to say, it is not a style that has caught on in Villeneuve. And that is just the beginning of what she finds objectionable.

“Plumette, they’re beautiful, but you know I can’t wear these,” she says. “Not after the next six days, at any rate. The pleats – ”

“You cannot wear a robe à l’Anglaise for the future king of France,” Plumette insists. “It is unpatriotic.”

“He wouldn’t like it,” Mimi concurs.

“Then he’ll have to not like it,” Belle says. “If I’m to have new dresses I don’t need, I at least want to
be able to wear them after this week.”

Plumette and Mimi exchange another of those looks Belle never understands.

“What?”

“Perhaps it will not be just a week,” Mimi suggests.

She is supported by Plumette’s nod. “Perhaps you will wish to stay.”

Belle looks at them both in incomprehension. “Why? And even if I did, how could I? His Highness will be happy enough to send me on my way by the end of my time here – or sooner. He is displeased with me already.”

“Men do not arrange something like this for women they are displeased with,” Plumette says. “Princes even less so. Do you think he would insist on so many garments if he thought you’d be gone next week?”

“Apparently he would,” Belle answers, though the seemingly sound logic makes her uneasy.

Another exchange of looks, another question mark in Belle’s mind. How do other people understand each other so easily? But the two women let the matter drop thereafter, for which Belle is grateful.

They do not drop the matter of the dresses, however. She argues with all her skill, but wins only the slightest of concessions from them. Mimi agrees to make two of the six day dresses à l’Anglaise with a shorter skirt and close-fitted back, and Plumette sulkily promises to keep the trimmings to a minimum when the time comes to choose them. In everything else, the two women get their way, especially once Plumette points out that as she doesn’t need the dresses anyway it shouldn’t matter whether she can wear them at home. Belle surrenders with as much grace as she can, but still can’t help but consider it all a terrible waste.

The next few hours test Belle’s patience sorely. She understands that women are supposed to enjoy this, choosing fabrics and ribbons and lace and whatever else. The girls in the village could talk about ribbons and lace for hours, and often do, but Belle has never joined in – and not just because she cannot afford to patronize the local dressmaker. Plumette is so enthusiastic about all of it, and Belle is trying, but… The act of choosing fabric and trimming has always been a chore. It’s just something to do before the additional chore of cutting everything to pieces and stitching them up into a vaguely Belle-shaped garment. She can sew, of course, and well enough, but doesn’t much enjoy that either.

It is only the thought that at least Mimi will be handling that finger-numbing work – with Frou Frou’s “help”, whatever that might entail – that keeps Belle from screaming.

But she resists, and persists, and finally she is leaving with Plumette, dressed in what Mimi calls a plain, simple gown she happened to have lying around. It’s pink liseré silk with a floral pattern worked in white and silver – certainly not plain, certainly not simple. Certainly worth more than anything Belle has ever touched, except perhaps Etienne himself. How does anyone have something like this just lying around?!

But she does not ask, nor protest. Beautiful as the gown His Highness had lent her is, she feels too uncomfortable wearing it. Mimi had given it the longest, strangest look when she’d first seen it, rather like the expression on Mrs. Potts’s face when she’d seen it too, in fact. It made Belle wonder once again if perhaps both women knew the identity of whoever left the dress behind – and worry once again that said woman would see Belle wearing it. She is happy enough to shed it, and her
fears, and leave both behind.

Mimi tells her that she’ll have one of the simplest dresses finished and sent up well before dinner. Belle smiles and nods and thanks her, wishing all the while that she would sew a little slower, slow enough to prevent her from joining all the guests for dinner. Also wondering exactly how simple her simplest dress will be, wondering if Mimi understands the meaning of the word.

She follows Plumette from the workshop through a maze of hallways she still doesn’t recognize, until they reach an area she does. One pathway will take her to the Saint-Cloud Suite, the room set aside for her to use though not apparently for her to sleep in, per Etienne’s orders. The other pathway will take her back to the west wing and Etienne’s room, which she only cares about because it contains the office, which in turn contains that glorious bookshelf bursting with millions of pages just waiting to be carefully turned. Belle can feel the lure of it as an almost physical pull, magnetic and inexorable. She wants nothing more than to take her time, run her fingers down each beautiful spine and choose the perfect one, cradle it close and open it up and read until the letters blur on the page.

It isn’t so simple, of course. The books, the office and the room all belong to Etienne, who is not paying her to do whatever she wants. Is he still there? Is he waiting for her? Surely he would not spend two hours or more cooped up in his own room, ready to pounce the second she returns – although, she supposes she also doesn’t put it past him. But he has guests, and commitments as their host. Perhaps…

“Do you know where His Highness is?” she asks Plumette, who smirks at her.

“Anxious to join him, are you?”

Belle blinks, wondering what would make her friend think so. “No, of course not. But if he’s somewhere other than his suite, I might be able to read in the office there…”

“You can read?” There is surprise in Plumette’s voice, but no scorn or disbelief, unlike Etienne’s before, and Belle is not offended. It is rare, after all, for someone of her station to read, never mind a woman.

“Yes,” she says.

Before she can elaborate, Plumette is sighing wistfully. “What is it like, I wonder? To be able to see words and understand them? I’ve always wished to learn.”

“I can teach you, any time you’re free,” Belle offers, touched in a way she can’t define. Much as she loves reading, she takes it for granted, the fact that she can when so many people she knows – smart people, brilliant people, people who could do anything with the proper education – cannot. “I teach some of the girls in the village when I can get away with it.”

For a moment Plumette looks excited, but then her face falls. “I’m afraid there are not enough hours in the day for me to get away with learning, mademoiselle. A castle this size? I spend six hours a day doing laundry alone! But it is kind of you to offer.”

To Belle’s surprise, Plumette embraces her, a gesture she returns once she recovers from the shock. She does not give voice to her thoughts, does not let on that she has been working on the problem of laundry, her most hated chore, for some time now. It wouldn’t do to get her friend’s hopes up. But really, with certain adjustments, it’s possible… She will have to consider exactly what is possible, and whether she can arrange it right under Etienne’s nose, and quickly.

Plumette finally pulls away. “Well. Yes. To answer your question, I do not know where His
Highness is, but he often goes riding with his particular friends around this time, when he has guests.”

Belle smiles. “Perfect. But –” A horrifying thought occurs to her. “Plumette, earlier, the conversation we had, those – details – you and Mimi pressed for – Do men…”

“Do men disclose such things?” Plumette asks. “They do say gentlemen never kiss and tell. I suppose it depends on whether you believe the Prince and his friends are likely to be gentlemen.”

Belle feels herself blanche. Plumette’s laughter follows her as she flees down the hallway towards the west wing.

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes

This is the inspiration for the "simple" dress Mimi gives Belle to wear. I changed up the colors because I think our Belle will look lovely in pink while white might wash her out.

Also, a quick word about the difference between a robe à l’Anglaise and à la Française... When in doubt, the French version of any fashion will always be the most inconvenient. As such, a robe à l’Anglaise usually just skims the floor and has a perfectly normal, close-fitting back, whereas a robe à la Française has a weird built in cape thing kind of (?) (also known as a sack back) flowing from the shoulders and dragging on the ground. Elegant enough in a castle, but not really wearable in a poor provincial town.

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel...
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much again and again for your excellent comments and kudos! Not gonna lie, this whole weekend was pretty heartbreaking, so your responses really cheered me up. Hopefully if you're having a hard time too, this chapter will be a bright spot :)

And now I present Chapter Eleven, in which Etienne's life is just so hard!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

11

It takes longer than Etienne would have liked for Valmont and de Tourvel to depart. They did not bring a full complement of servants or a baggage cart of course, but aristocrats never travel lightly, not even to a dinner but ten miles distant from their own chateaux. There are two valets to be found, two bags to be packed, two carriages and two teams of horses to be prepared… And then of course there must be an official leave-taking, because they are not just Etienne and Sebastian and Jean-Marie, they are a crown prince, a vicomte and… Well, de Tourvel can go hang, Etienne supposes, but Valmont alas cannot. And so Etienne bids his friends farewell with the various members of his court looking on. There is much bowing and offering of thanks and kissing of his ring, and then his friends are gone, thank god. The court disperses, and Etienne is free.

He heads immediately for the workshop on the assumption that Belle will still be there – though he must stop to demand directions, being unfamiliar with the servants’ wing. There is never any call for him to visit there, of course. There isn’t any call now, not really, but he feels… He cannot explain, even to himself, only knows that for some reason he wants to see Belle there, wants to watch her getting measured and choosing fabrics and whatever else women do when someone has been kind enough to offer them carte blanche with an exclusive dressmaker. He wants to see her happy and grateful, as she surely must be. Perhaps then he can rid himself of the strange anxiety he still carries after his unnerving conversation and fight with Valmont – not to mention the less than pleasant tiff with Belle prior to it. He is still out of charity with her, yes, but… He wants to find her anyway.

She is not there. When he finally arrives it is to see a cozy, cluttered room occupied only by Madame Cadenza - and her little dog, more finely attired than some of his courtiers. Even they are clearly preparing to leave, the human woman stacking fashion plates and fabric swatches to take to her staff, the canine furball chasing its tail in a desultory manner. That is to say, the fitting has been over for some time, despite the fact that it should still be very much in progress.

“What is the meaning of this?” he asks abruptly, and Madame Cadenza looks up with a gasp. The surprise of it remains on her face as she curtsies as deeply as she should.

“Forgive me, Your Highness, I was not expecting you.”

“Where is she?”

Madame Cadenza shrugs. “The young mademoiselle? Who can say? She left with Plumette once we
“How can she be finished?” he demands. “It has been but a few hours, I expected it would take most of the day.”

The modiste offers her stack of patterns and fabric samples and fans them out on the worktable. “She was most insistent on ordering but a few items, Your Highness. She also insisted on plainer fabrics than I would normally work in, but you said to give her whatever she wanted, and so…” Another shrug.

Etienne examines the sheets of paper and the small squares of fabric, scowling. The patterns are beautiful, and he thinks will suit Belle to perfection, but she has chosen only ten in total, and only one of them is a gown suitable for court occasions rather than a day dress or riding habit. It simply will not do, and he tells Madame Cadenza as much.

“No, no, no. Double the number of day dresses, add… Six more ball gowns, and for god’s sake don’t use plain linen for anything, even undergarments! Use linen and silk for those, pure silk for the dresses, merino wool or cashmere for the riding habits. Embroidery, beading, gilt thread, lace. Everything the best. She is not to be dressed like a peasant, do you understand?”

Madame does, and seems really quite pleased. Etienne is not. Rather, he is angry and… Hurt. He doesn’t understand why a woman so clearly obsessed with money would give up the chance to spend as much of it as possible. Her paltry order is practically an insult; did she mean it as such? He doesn’t understand her at all.

He understands her even less once he leaves the workshop and heads to the Saint-Cloud Suite, because she is not there either. The bed has been smoothed out since the night before, he notices – Belle had grasped the counterpane hard with both hands while he took her there. The memory soothes him somewhat, even though it was not what he’d wanted at the time. Sometimes he feels as though he never gets what he wants – to take his time with her. It won’t happen the next time either, he knows. He is too displeased and restless for such things just now, restless and half hard from remembrance. When he finds her, he will certainly not have it in him to make it slow or sweet – not that he ever is that last.

Trudging back to the east wing, he reflects on the vastness of his castle and the irony of it. He had chosen the Palais Villeneuve because it was far distant from Versailles but also nearly as large and as grand, if lacking the extensive grounds. A most suitable place to enjoy his self-imposed exile. But now its very size is a hindrance, because there are literally hundreds of rooms Belle could be in, and there is not enough time left in the day to check each one. Instead, he decides to return to his suite. She could possibly be there, and if not he’ll call for Lumiere and instruct him to find her. The maître d’ has an army of footmen at his command, and with all engagements cancelled for the week they will be lacking in occupation anyway. Might as well put them to good use and have them earn their extravagant pay.

Might as well put Belle to good use too, and have her earn her extravagant pay, he thinks darkly, remembering her earlier concern over compensation. She cares not for his gifts, will only grudgingly accept them, but his money… She’ll accept compensation for services rendered it seems. Are all peasant girls so acquisitive? He knows they are, and aristocratic ladies too, but he has never been especially bothered by it before. He isn’t bothered now, either. Just… Annoyed. It’s not the same thing.

Finally he reaches his suite, his annoyance only deepening when he sees that Belle is not lying on his bed, conveniently naked from head to toe as he’d been hoping. Is it too much to ask? Given what he’s paying, is it not reasonable to demand she be where he wants her when he wants her – like now,
when all he can think of is getting her under him to ride out the frustrations of the day? He wants to fuck her until all thoughts of golden coins with his own father’s face on them are completely driven from Belle’s mind. Until she is pleased with his gifts, and with him, and needs no convincing to stay longer than the planned-for week – if he wants her to, that is. Perhaps he will be pleased to see the back of her when the time comes.

*Perhaps?* Of course he will be. Why should he not? She is irritating, ungrateful, disobedient – beautiful, yes, but lacking in all the refinement he is accustomed to, not to mention lacking in all the skills he prefers. Surely the novelty of her innocence will wear off sooner rather than later. He will not spend another day as he has this one, wondering what she’s doing without him, pondering what she likes to read, imagining the smile on her face when she sees him – not that he has ever beheld it, though he expects it every time. He does not know why she refuses to oblige him by being as happy as she should be when he returns to her. For now, he only knows that he wants her and she is nowhere to be found.

Annoyed beyond all bearing, he strips off his banyan and leaves it on the floor in a puddle of shot silk he hardly notices. He will have to summon Lumiere and the hordes of footmen after all, it seems. Or will he? As he turns to reach for the bell pull, he realizes the door to his office is open just a crack, when he is certain he’d closed it firmly behind him this morning. The trusted servants allowed to clean his suite know better than to enter that particular room. His breath catches and his heart rate accelerates as he allows himself to hope that he has found her, with no help from Lumiere et al.

He approaches quietly, peering through the cracked door to see Belle sitting in his chair before his desk, dressed in an ethereal pink robe *à l’Anglaise*. It is sweet and simple, with nothing to distract from the perfection of Belle’s own features, and the delicate coloring echoes the natural blush in her cheeks while emphasizing the darkness of her hair and eyes. As with the gown he lent her before – which he trusts is somewhere safe, or someone will answer for it – she looks perfectly natural dressed in such luxury, as though made for it.

His fingers twitch at his sides - he wants to feel the texture of the gleaming silk under them as he takes her, wants to unlace the front to bare her breasts for him. The frustrated desire that’s been shimmering just beneath his skin rises and fills him, tangling with his irritation at her until he can’t really tell them apart. No longer bothering to hide his presence, he pushes the door open, and Belle looks up from the book she cradles like a child in her lap.

“What are you doing?” he asks, and she starts guiltily – unsmilingly. Not that it matters overmuch, of course.

“I’m sorry,” she says, although he notes with resentment that she doesn’t *sound* sorry, or at least not for what she should. She’s sorry he interrupted her! Infuriating. “I didn’t know where you were.”

“I was sending my useless friends on their way,” he says, stalking towards her in a way he can see unnerves her. Her eyes dart from side to side as though to find an escape route but there just isn’t one. “I have better things to do than entertain them, I think.”

Before she can respond, he reaches out and grabs the heavy volume from her hands.

“Etienne, may I have my book please?” she asks, and he raises his eyebrows at her.

“Young book? All these books are mine, Belle,” he reminds her, snapping it closed and revealing it to be the seventh volume of Theobald’s *Complete Works of Shakespeare*.

In English.
“How can you read this?” he demands, and she shifts under his glare. “You might have mentioned, when the subject arose, that you can read Shakespeare in English.”

“I thought – ”

“You thought what?” He is angry again, and hurt again, and can’t quite understand why because it’s been a long time since he’s been either, really – at least until very recently.

The color in her cheeks deepens, he is quite interested to note.

“I thought it might be – nice,” she says, clearly embarrassed. “For you to read to me.”

Annoyed as he is, he can’t help but be mollified by this, can’t avoid the little tendril of pleasure that curls inside of him at her words.

“Oh?”

“You have a nice voice.”

Without betraying a hint of his intentions, he slides between his desk and his chair with her in it, and leans in close while she stares at him in surprise.

“Perhaps,” he says, trailing one finger down her flushed cheek, “I might be convinced to read to you.”

He can see the pulse in her throat fluttering madly – faster than before? He hopes – and she swallows uneasily. “Really?”

“Later,” he murmurs, just before setting his mouth to hers.

Her lips are soft, unlike the kiss he’s pressing on her, using his tongue to urge her mouth open, sliding it deep to stroke against hers and taste her. She still has no idea what she’s doing, and accepts it rather than truly responding or participating, but he doesn’t mind – she’ll learn soon enough, because he’ll show her. Anyway, the hesitant flick of her tongue over his lips is more arousing than anything has any right to be. And god knows he was aroused enough already.

He pulls away, breathing hard, and she is too, her dark eyes wide as they meet his, but he has no intention of engaging in any kind of staring match just now. His hands move to grip her shoulders, and then he’s ushering her to stand. As with this morning, he backs her up against the shelf, delighted to be able to complete his earlier plans after all.

She stops him. Stops him! Sometimes he could just strangle her.

“What are you doing?” she asks, sounding worried.

“I should think it would be obvious, ma Belle.”

“But the books…” she says, and he considers.

“Fine.” He tugs her to the side and presses her to the wall next to the shelf. “Happy?”

But he doesn’t give her the chance to respond. He kisses her again, mouth hot and open, so insistent she can’t help but kiss him back this time. She wraps her arms around his neck and sinks her fingers into his hair and he is lost, truly lost, in mindless passion. His hands grasp desperately at the folds of her dress, the silk heavy under his touch just as he imagined, and pushes it up around her waist.
“Hold it,” he orders, barely bothering to remove his lips from hers but rather speaking against them. She does as he commands, leaving him free to grab her by the hips and lift her up, pinning her against the wall. Her breath catches and she instinctively wraps her legs around his waist, gasping again when she feels how hard he is. It was easy enough to lift her, as she weighs next to nothing, delicate and fine-boned as she is. It’s also easy enough to hold her in place with nothing more than one arm braced under her thigh and the weight of his body against hers. He slips his free hand down to search through the fabric of her skirt and undergarments until he finds her open and hot and slick to the touch.

Etienne sinks one finger into her with ease, a second with more difficulty, and she squirms against him, tilting her hips for more. She’s as ready as he can bear to wait for, he decides, pushing his fingers deep one last time before withdrawing them. He holds her gaze, almost daring her to look away, as he raises them to his mouth and sucks them clean. From the way her breath catches and her cheeks turn an even more vibrant shade of red, it shocks and embarrasses her – as he knew it must. It’s why he did it.

The taste of her is faint, vaguely sweet, near overpowered by the taste of himself, but he finds he doesn’t mind it. He is certainly not in the habit of shoving his face between the legs of any of the women he normally consorts with; god only knows who else has been there. Besides, most women, in his experience, don’t require such extreme measures and are able to orgasm quite easily, and as for the ones who do require it… Well, they are in his bed for his pleasure, not their own. But he thinks perhaps with Belle he would enjoy it, would enjoy having her spread open and vulnerable for him, would enjoy the feeling of her hipbones beneath his palms as he presses her into the mattress, holds her in place for his mouth…

Not now, however. She is so clearly desperate for him, desperate to be filled now that he has left her empty, and he is perfectly happy to oblige, unbuttoning his breeches one-handed and replacing his fingers with his throbbing cock. He nudges the thick head inside and she gasps, tensing. She’s still so tight, and the angle is awkward – he will have to go much slower than he wants to, to start at least.

“Relax,” he grits out through clenched teeth. It is difficult, almost impossible, to hold back when she’s so warm and wet and right there, already wrapped around the most sensitive part of him. He wants to push forward and fill her with one deep thrust but knows he really would hurt her if he did. Though it is easier than he would have expected to convince his body to care.

“I can’t,” she gasps. “You’re going to drop me.”

Etienne isn’t certain if he should laugh or feel insulted. “I could hold you like this all day, ma Belle. Perhaps I should; would you like that? Just relax, open – yes – you can take it – let me in –”

It happens somehow, though like everything else it takes longer than he’d like. But he eases in inch by inch, moving with little thrusts until he is slowly enveloped by her tight, wet heat. Perfect, yes, she feels perfect around him, just as he thought the first time and every time after. He surges forward until he’s fully embedded within her – then stills in order to prevent bringing everything to a humiliating close.

His free hand goes to the hooks at the front of her dress, and he tugs at them impatiently. They give almost immediately, unlike her. The bodice opens nearly to the waist, exposing nothing but her serviceable chemise, the opaque heavy linen hiding everything he wants to see. Soon she’ll have delicate undergarments so light and sheer they’ll be almost as good as her wearing nothing, yes, but for now… He pulls the neckline down as much as he can, revealing the tops of her breasts and the crest of each nipple.
It’s just enough – or too much, really. He groans and buries his face in her hair, panting against the delicate shell of her ear as he begins to move – faster and harder than he wants to, than he should if he hopes to take any time at all. She just feels so good, and looks so much more beautiful than she ought to, like a princess or a queen in all that silk, so much more beautiful than any peasant has any right to be. And she’s blushing, and breathing hard, and is so demure she could not even bear to hold his gaze if he could bear to look into her face but she wears his marks on her throat and he just –

His body is moving by instinct, out of all control, and he withdraws almost completely from her warmth before slamming back in, hard. Ah, god, the friction, the heat, she’s so – He thrusts again and again, forceful and deep, fucking her into the wall as she writhes against him and her heat surrounds his cock. The angle makes her feel different, tighter if that’s possible, and gravity ensures that he plunges to the hilt every time despite her body’s resistance. She gasps when he does it, when he pushes so far inside her, and he knows she loves it as much as he does – for which he’d be grateful if he could think straight, because god knows he has no desire stop.

He moves and moves and can’t think of a single thing to say, for once, because words always come so easily to him, in general and in bed. But no, it’s not that he can’t think of anything to say, but rather that everything he thinks of to say he knows he can’t or shouldn’t. He is still angry with her and hurt by her, this serving girl who scorns his gifts but covets his money… And yet he wants her to break this silence between them, to tell him she enjoys how hard he fucks her, that she thought of it all day, wanted it, wanted him… Because he has been able to think of nothing else.

All day, this was what he needed, to bury himself inside her, pour his frustration into her, but he finds his frustration has only increased. His control is nowhere to be found, and as much as he wants to fuck her just like this for hours, for days, he knows he’ll be lucky to stretch it to a few minutes. And yes, he resents her for it. All of his irritation, everything he hated about today – her fault. The fact that he’s pounding into her without any finesse at all, about to go off like an untried schoolboy – her fault. The fact that he’s utterly at her mercy and the fact that she must be enjoying it, the fact that once again he is not getting what he wants – her fault, her fault, her fault.

His fingers dig into the back of her legs where he grips her before adjusting his hold, sliding his palms to her inner thighs and pressing her even wider – until she takes him even deeper, as deep as her tight hot flesh can allow.

“Etienne,” she murmurs, unprompted, and as much as he tries to hold back the ecstasy cresting within him it’s all too too late.

For the briefest second he teetered at the edge and then he’s crashing over, his cock jerking inside her again and again as he fills her with his seed, his hips pumping as he forces it as far as it can go. And he’s cursing, or maybe just reciting her name, or maybe just gasping – it’s impossible to tell.

Or no. He’s saying “Mine” over and over and over, and she hasn’t the decency to agree - and the pleasure fades.

He has never felt less satisfied.

[@>-`--]

Chapter End Notes

I'm not sure how many of you guys are writers, but those of you who are know how
Sometimes your characters just take control and do whatever they want. Those of you who aren't, believe me, sometimes characters that you think you've made up or fleshed out have personality traits you had nothing to do with. What I'm trying to say is I DO NOT KNOW WHY ETIENNE LOVES LINEN AND SILK. I DO NOT KNOW WHY HE CARES SO MUCH ABOUT HIS BEDDING. He just... Does, he's very insistent upon it. Perhaps he'll let me know the reason before the story is finished...

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Wow, you guys really brought your A game to the comments section for Eleven! Thank you so much for all your feedback! It did indeed cheer me right up :)

And now, Chapter Twelve, in which Belle is Fully Aware of Many Facts!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

12

It takes Belle a few days to realize, but it occurs to her eventually: Etienne is angry with her. Again, or still, she isn’t sure, and she sure as hell doesn’t know why, but he is – and to a great enough extent that even she can tell. Given that she has never quite understood people in general and their emotions in particular, the fact that she can sense Etienne’s displeasure is… Surprising. And worrisome. He still has not paid her, and only two days remain of the week she has agreed to.

His anger is a subtle thing, making it all the more remarkable that she recognized it at all. It’s in his voice sometimes, certain words clipped in certain ways, and then sometimes behind his too blue eyes when he looks at her. It’s in his touch also, although he is never violent. It’s just – something, some intensity as he skims his hands over her skin, the press of his body demanding things she has no knowledge of, not really. But she can feel it, an almost desperation as though he would reach into her consciousness and pull out whatever it is he wants if he could just determine how. It unnerves her, but her curiosity grows day by day.

He is not quite what she thought he was, though like his anger that too is subtle. When he spends their first meal together glaring at poor Armand, the footman serving them, whose only crime was that Belle recognized him, smiled at him, and thanked him by name – that is precisely what she would have expected. When he ends dinner abruptly by sweeping everything off the table to watch the china shatter on the marble floor – well, she probably should have expected that, too. Luckily, Armand flees, because Etienne is frustrated and decides the now empty expanse of bois satiné and amaranth is the appropriate place to pour that frustration into her, before dragging her back to his suite. She doesn’t get much sleep that night, or any opportunity to read, either.

But the next day, when he finally shows her the gallery with all its breathtaking portraits and landscapes, his clear knowledge of and appreciation for the art itself surprises her. The castle certainly is beautiful, and full of beautiful things, but she’d assumed they were nothing more to him than marks of his wealth and power. She realizes as he discusses the play of light and shadow within a Vermeer that he understands their beauty – and, unbelievably, that he has much in common with her father. She herself understands what makes things beautiful but is rarely moved by it, while her father gets that same fervent gleam in his eyes as Etienne has when he pulls her closer to a canvas to observe specific brushstrokes.

Of course, he follows that by enticing her into an alcove on the pretense of wanting to show her something, and now she will never be able to walk the gallery again without blushing head to toe in embarrassment and shame. But that, at least, is what she would have expected of him.
Likewise, she is not at all surprised, though she is rather enraged, when Armand is dismissed without a character two days after that first dinner. Etienne doesn’t even bother attempting to justify it with any reasonable cause; he overhears Armand call her Belle, and turns him off for the daring to speak so familiarly to his Prince’s guest. All Belle’s protestations that she is not really a guest, that Armand is her friend, that she was not offended, seem to do more harm than good – as Etienne has done more harm than good to her opinion of him by his cruel action. Her defense of her friend sends Etienne storming off in a rage of his own, and Belle would have spent the remaining few days hating him quite happily at that point.

But then she watches as Mrs. Potts’s little boy Chip, terrified by the Prince’s anger, bumps into a delicate little table and sends what Belle can only assume is a priceless vase crashing to the ground. She rushes to protect the child, but she is too late – Etienne snags him by the back of the collar, and Belle is prepared to hate the Prince even more all over again if he dares raise a hand to Chip. Instead, as she draws closer, she hears Etienne thank the boy for ridding him of such a hideous thing, a gift from his father that he has apparently always hated. He then hands Chip something from his own pocket to play with and sends him on his way.

It is all very confusing, because she’d been so certain she’d understood what he was. Now he seems like some kind of puzzle, and puzzles she has always loved. She wants to piece together the clues that explain why he is angry with her, and why he coerced her into staying, and why she doesn’t recoil when he reaches for her the way she always does with Gaston. Even before meeting the Prince, she’d thought he sounded remarkably similar to that man she detests above all others, and she wasn’t wrong. Like Gaston he is handsome, confident, petulant, possessive… Why she should loathe one and find herself fascinated by the other is illogical and inexplicable.

Though perhaps that is unfair to Etienne. She’s already acknowledged that he was kinder to her that first night than Gaston ever would have been, and even angry with her as she knows Etienne is she has never felt he was a danger to her. Gaston… Sometimes she wonders. He looks at her with anger not behind his eyes but filling them, and maybe that’s worse. Of course, Gaston is not her problem now, and hopefully never will be. Etienne, for this short span of time, is, and she turns what she knows over and over in her mind.

Fact: Etienne was the one to initiate their arrangement.

Belle isn’t quite certain how significant this might be. She has been called beautiful often enough that she thinks it must be true, though she herself has never given her appearance much thought. (Sub-Fact: Gaston could certainly have any woman in Villeneuve and doubtless many other villages, women who want him desperately, yet he has chosen to harass her.) If she is beautiful, it is unremarkable for someone to desire her. (Although, again, Sub-Fact: Etienne could certainly have any woman in France, and Belle is certainly not that beautiful.)

Fact: Etienne called her “perfectly adequate” in bed, yet insisted she stay the night and then the week.

The most obvious conclusion to be drawn from this is that Etienne was lying, and Belle is extraordinarily skilled in bed, but Sub-Fact: she has never engaged in any intimacies before so this is unlikely. Perhaps she was simply convenient or less expensive than other options (although Sub-Fact: Etienne has no compunction against spending exorbitant amounts of money). Whatever the case he doesn’t seem to have any complaints about her performance. Overall, she decides this fact is inconclusive, probably unrelated to his anger.

Fact, related to previous Sub-Fact: Etienne arranged and paid for her to have new dresses made, even increasing her order and insisting on more expensive fabrics.
This one is truly perplexing. Belle can think of no logical reason for him to have done so when, Fact: he specifically said it was not part of her compensation. If he had done the same for anyone else, she would have assumed it was an extravagant gift made in friendship or affection, but even she knows they do not have a friendship and he holds no particular affection for her. Perhaps it is leverage, something done to make her feel indebted to him, to give him something to hold over her and force her to do his bidding? At the beginning of the week she might have believed that, but now… Aside from anything else, she has done everything he has asked of her without complaint, even those things that made her feel uncomfortable. So, Fact: he has no need of leverage.

Because this is something she doesn’t understand, it seems likely the answer lies within it, that his anger is in some way related to the dresses… But, Fact: he is pleased with the dresses, and the way they look on her. More are delivered every day and for some reason she cannot fathom, Etienne loves that part. He loves opening the boxes and lifting the delicate gowns out of their bed of scented tissue paper, loves undressing her then redressing her in her new finery – though sometimes there is quite a wait between the undressing and redressing, because, Sub-Fact: he also loves the sight of her in her new undergarments. He loves to touch her through the fabric, to slide his deft, elegant hands under the hem of each new chemise, to slip his long fingers inside of her and then she usually ends up undressed again. (Fact, unrelated: she doesn’t mind it.)

The more she thinks about it, the more she wracks her memory for corroborating evidence. When it finally hits her, she feels remarkably stupid for not thinking of it sooner, but Fact: Etienne’s anger began that morning in his office after he told her he’d had a seamstress brought in for her.

This, she thinks, must be the key, especially considering Fact, restated: he specifically said it was not part of her compensation. Sub-Fact, he specifically called it “a gift and a necessity”. Even considering Facts: they do not have a friendship and he holds no particular affection for her, Belle is aware that Fact: people expect appreciation from the recipient of a gift. Also, Fact: she does not especially appreciate the gift, because Sub-Fact: she has no use for fancy new dresses, and therefore Fact: she has shown little appreciation for them.

Belle feels that moment of exhilaration that always comes when she has solved some complex problem, but it is followed all too swiftly by ambivalence, because Fact: she does not know how to lie. Well, she knows how, of course – one simply makes a statement that is contrary to the truth – but Fact: she is not good at it.

Luckily, Etienne is busy with Cogsworth again, doing something he claims is too boring to inflict the details upon her, which only serves to further pique her curiosity but that is not the point just now. Whatever he is doing, she is grateful he is doing it. His absence leaves her free to seek out the only person she can think of who might be able to advise her. Surely if anyone can figure out how to show appreciation for something she isn’t appreciative of without lying, it is Plumette.

She finds her friend in Etienne’s public study, the one in the east wing. It is not open to all and sundry but is more accessible than the private office in his suite. It is also less obviously a place of business, the desk covered not with piles of papers but with various implements she must assume are only for show: a gilded letter opener, a quill that is not a quill at all but rather silver filigree worked in the shape of a feather and studded with diamonds, a matching inkpot.

There are chairs arranged around the room in conversational groupings, not something that would be conducive to… Interviewing stewards, or whatever a Royal Prince does with his time when he’s not with her. Worst of all, there are no books on the bookshelves, which are instead filled with knickknacks and statuettes and at least one mantel clock far less fine than what her father could have
created before his illness.

It is Plumette’s unhappy duty to dust all of it, a task she is currently absorbed in, and Belle certainly does not envy her. Her new duties are far, far preferable to anything else she was ever paid to do in the castle.

“Belle!” Plumette exclaims, interrupting Belle’s thoughts. “I didn’t see you there.”

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” she answers, entering the study and heading for one of the chairs.

“Oh, mais non, not that one,” Plumette says. “Trust me on this.”

Belle shrugs, mildly confused but not enough to question her friend. She takes the chair Plumette indicates instead, and sits with her hands folded in her lap, uncertain of how to begin.

“Is something wrong?” Plumette asks. “The herbs, they are not causing you any trouble?”

The very mention of the herbs Plumette procured for her to prevent pregnancy has Belle’s cheeks warming, and she wonders resignedly whether she’ll ever be able to be as cool and calm about things related to intimacy as Plumette is. Somehow, she doubts it.

“No, not at all,” Belle assures her, and sees her friend relax. Such herbs are dangerous, so it was not an idle fear. “But I could use some advice, if you have the time to give it.”

Plumette grins, setting her ivory, ruby encrusted duster (who has such things?!) aside with relish. “Of course! Is it about the Prince? I hope it’s about the Prince.”

“Do you remember when I told you Etienne – His Highness, I mean – was displeased with me?”

“Yes, but do you remember when I said that men do not arrange an expensive wardrobe for women they are displeased with?” her friend counters. “I assure you, they do not. You have nothing to worry about.”

“But that’s not true. He is still displeased with me,” Belle says. “I think he is unhappy with my response to the dresses, but – I didn’t want them! I don’t know what to do with them! I don’t know how to thank him sincerely when I am not grateful, and I cannot lie.”

“No?”

“Not convincingly.”

“Have you tried, ah, a physical demonstration of your gratitude?” Plumette asks with a sly smile.

“I am available to him as he requires me;” Belle says, cheeks flaming once more. “I do not think it is that aspect which displeases him.”

Plumette laughs, sweet trilling notes that last far longer than Belle feels her statement warranted.

“Ah, Belle,” her friend says when she is finally capable of speech. “I’m sure it is not. But there are things we might do for our men to make them happy, things… Above and beyond what one might consider expected, yes?”

“Like… Like the night he had me touch him?” Belle forces out the words despite her embarrassment.

“Somewhat. Has he – have you ever – ” For once, Plumette seems at a loss for words, but Belle suspects it is more to spare her innocent ears than out of any shyness on her friend’s part. “Has he
asked you to put your mouth on him?”

“On him… Where?” Belle asks, although she has a sneaking suspicion she knows.

“Belle, please,” Plumette retorts, confirming it.

She is not shocked, exactly. It has been clear for several days that intimacy between a man and a woman includes many things that seem to make little sense – yet also seem to bring Etienne great enjoyment. Belle is beyond wondering if people do such things – clearly, some must, because she does not think Etienne is that creative. So no, she is not shocked, but she is also not convinced this is the answer. Or perhaps it is, but she is not convinced she can do it.

“No,” she says slowly. “And perhaps that is too much gratitude. I don’t think – ”

“Perhaps,” Plumette agrees and smiles kindly, as though she understands the struggle Belle is going through, trying to wrap her mind around such a foreign concept.

“Have you considered offering to stay longer?” her friend asks after a moment. “I do not think he would object, and you can tell him you wish to have more opportunities to wear the lovely gowns he procured for you. It will seem like gratitude to him.”

Belle shakes her head. “I can’t, Plumette, even if I wanted to. My father – ”

Silence falls between them, Belle’s despairing and Plumette’s considering.

“I think you must simply thank him and be done,” Plumette announces finally. “You don’t have to appreciate the dresses themselves to appreciate the fact that he arranged it all for you.”

“I suppose not…”

“It was very kind of him,” Plumette says earnestly. “And not something he has done for anyone else. He wanted you to be comfortable in your surroundings for the week. I would not have thought him capable of such consideration,” she adds, almost to herself.

“I think he simply wanted prettier things to strip off of me,” Belle offers, but Plumette clearly disagrees.

“I think he wanted to do something nice for you, to make you happy. Surely that is worthy of gratitude?”

Belle nods, troubled. It does not seem likely to her that Etienne cares particularly about her happiness. But it was kind, or would have seemed so to just about any other woman. Perhaps Plumette’s advice is correct. Perhaps the words won’t sound false when she says them if she keeps the gesture itself in mind.

“Thank you, Plumette,” she says, and she is grateful so it is not a lie.

Plumette waves off her thanks and takes up her absurd duster again with a sigh as Belle exits the study. Now more than ever she wishes she could do Plumette a kindness, could teach her as she had offered before. But she will only be at the castle two more days, not nearly enough time to finalize the necessary changes to her laundry machine design, build it, test it and put it to work so Plumette can be free to learn. There is not nearly enough time to do any of the things she wishes she could do, truly. She has barely scratched the surface of the *Principia* and the *Arithmetica*. Theobald’s *Complete Works* is yet unbreached. But Etienne keeps her busy by day, busier by night, and he always seems to be holding her when he falls asleep, making it difficult to escape to the office to read.
It is this desire that weighs heavy on her mind that evening as she lies panting and slick with sweat – less than half of which is hers, she thinks – in Etienne’s arms. She will find a way to read more of the *Principia* tonight, she promises herself. It is slow going, as she tries to do the calculations in her head while she reads along, and the mathematics are challenging, more challenging than anything she has ever encountered. Understandable, of course, as they were invented by Newton himself. And the effort is so worth it. Reading it, understanding it, is like flying, like the entire sky expanding inside her head, vast and exhilarating and impossible.

Meanwhile, Etienne has finished but is still inside of her, half-hard and biding his time until he is recovered enough to move again. Objectively speaking, his short refractory period is quite remarkable, although Belle is of course ignorant of how it ranks comparatively. But she is used to this by now, his solid, warm body pressing her into the mattress, his lips and hands all over her skin as his arousal builds once more. It is not disagreeable, really. His touch is light and teasing and she likes the feel of his mouth on hers. It is all a pleasant backdrop to her thoughts of Newton’s *Principia* and the current proposition of her focus, Proposition 66, having to do with the solar system and filling her mind with an infinity of stars…

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes

*Newton's Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (more fondly known as just the *Principia*) is an acknowledged masterwork of mathematics and science first published in 1687. It pretty much blew everyone’s freaking minds at that point, because it set out natural laws and validated them with mathematics, while also validating earlier laws that had previously only been observed empirically. This book literally invented the field of mechanics and created calculus. Created. Calculus. Although he kind of thought it was geometry. Not really but like... The language of calculus didn't exist yet, so he explained it with geometry somehow? I don't know, I'm a writer, not a mathematician, but it was awesome. Oh, also it set out his laws of motion and the universal law of gravitation. All in the same freaking book. How? Who knows. Apparently he was a virgin all his life so he had to do SOMETHING with his time...

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you again so so much for your comments and kudos!!! I'm so delighted you all enjoyed that little peek into the strange mind of Belle.

And now, Chapter Thirteen, in which Lumiere is kind of a dick but it's for Etienne's own good really.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

13

Etienne never has dreams or nightmares – anymore. There was a time when he’d had dreams, and a time when they hadn’t been dreams anymore and he’d wished they would stop, but now he sleeps peacefully, more or less. Alcohol and laudanum have been particularly useful in that regard. And yet it seems all has failed him tonight; he awakens with his heart racing.

He lies frozen in terror and gasping, disoriented by the dark. But then he comes back to himself with a sharp inhale. He’s safe in the Palais Villeneuve, and whatever was chasing him doesn’t exist. There are only fractured images remaining in his mind: wolves surrounding him, Belle watching as they tear him apart, but then, later, her embrace, her delicate hand warm on his. A nightmare, yes, and a dream too.

Slowly, he releases the breath he’s been holding and glances at Belle beside him. He isn’t sure what he’ll do or say if she’s awake. He is a prince who will someday be a king; he can already hear the words echoing in his ears, the admonition that he should be strong, strong enough not to jolt awake in the middle of the night panting with nameless fear. Strong enough for anything, anything.

But as it happens, she lies on her side with her back to him, sleeping as peacefully as he’d like to. He hesitates only a moment before carefully pulling her into his arms. The feel of her there, her deep, even breathing against him, is more soothing than it ought to be, but why shouldn’t he hold her like this, allow her to chase away the last vestiges of whatever disturbed his rest? She is his, after all, do with as he pleases. For now.

His jaw tightens. Tonight is her second-to-last in the castle. Their time is almost past, and yet that feeling he had days ago that perhaps a week would not be enough has proven prophetic. He has not yet tired of her body – quite the opposite – and he is not quite convinced that she appreciates everything he has done for her as much as she should. There has been precious little gratitude, and even less deference, in her behavior towards him. It chafes, that she refuses to give him the respect that is his by right. He wants her to stay if only to draw that respect out of her one way or another. He wants her to stay…

No. He wants her to go.

She is disrespectful and distracted, rarely giving him her full attention. She smiles at footmen, calls them by name, and lets them call her by name in turn. She disappears for hours at a time, is never to
hand when he wants her – although to be fair, once he finds her she is always more than accommodating. She submits to him, yes, but in such a way that it never feels like true submission, never feels precisely like what he wants. She is vexing and infuriating and beguiling and even if he wants her to stay, he needs her to go. He can’t explain how or why but he knows he needs that.

He has very little experience choosing what he needs over what he wants.

But even asking her – no, telling her – to stay is not quite what he wants. She is his for the request and a handful of coins, he supposes, but it’s not enough. She should be the one asking him – no, begging him – to stay. She should be the one lying awake in the dark seething with frustration. She should have said something by now, given some hint at least. He cannot understand why she hasn’t. Surely she wants to stay. Of course she does. But she should damn well say so, that’s all.

It’s all too irritating for words. She should –

Without warning she is moving, shifting in his arms. He is not holding her tightly, too afraid to awaken her, and her movements are subtle, careful, as though she is trying not to awaken him. Etienne forces himself to keep his grip loose, his own breathing steady, unwilling to let her know he is awake regardless. She pulls away slowly, inch by agonizing inch, and he knows that if he had been asleep he would have continued sleeping right through this gradual retreat.

He has no idea what she is up to, but he has a few theories and likes none of them. That footman, the one he’d dismissed – Arnaud? – had been very familiar with her, and passably handsome. He’s gone, of course, or ought to be, but that wouldn’t necessarily have prevented an arranged tryst. Or perhaps… Would Lumière…? More importantly, would she…? Has she been doing this every night as he slept? He can’t quite imagine her going from his bed to another’s, and then returning as though nothing had happened. He would have noticed, would have smelled and tasted it on her – he thinks. But he is too angry to think, not clearly anyway.

She eases fully from his grasp, and he can just hear the muffled touch of her bare feet on the plush Savonnerie rug as she attempts to slip out of his bed and off to god knows where. He cannot allow it, of course. But he does allow her to think that she has succeeded, pausing a brief moment so that she can stand and give a quiet sigh of relief before he makes his move. It is not for nothing that he spends so much time fencing; each movement is swift and silent as he sits up, slides over, reaches out and snatches at her upper arm, holding her in place.

Belle gasps and freezes. With a single sharp tug he pulls her back against the edge of the bed, and she stands there as he swings his own legs over the side, though not to stand. He considers the pale line of her bare back before reaching with his free hand to grip her shoulder and turn her to face him. Her skin is smooth and soft, cold to the touch on the surface but with vital heat within. Etienne imagines someone else putting his hands on her like this, and tightens his hold.

She stands facing him now, between his legs, luminous and naked and a little worried – though not nearly as worried as she should be.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he demands, voice low, knowing she has heard his voice soft like this often enough before to understand she is in trouble.

“Just – to – to – get a drink of water?” It’s a question, not a statement, implicitly asking if he believes her.

He doesn’t.

“Try again.”
Her dark eyes dart around the room, as if one of the objects or pieces of furniture will speak out in her defense. None do, of course, and she returns her gaze to his face, blinking apprehensively. She offers no new excuse. It’s for the best, really, as she is a terrible liar – a fact of which he is pleased to inform her.

“Don’t bother lying to me,” he advises. “You’re not at all capable of it.”

To his surprise, she smiles slightly at that and shakes her head. “No, Your Highness.”

He waits for her to correct her use of formal address, then glares when he realizes she won’t. Oh, she’ll call every footman and serving boy from here to Villeneuve by name, but disdains to use his in this moment.

“Well then?” he snaps. “Just what do you have to say for yourself?”

“I apologize for waking you,” she says, and yes, he’s sure she is. “I did try to be quiet, but – ”

“Well of course you tried to be quiet. Did you do this last night? The night before? Tell me!”

She hesitates a moment, and he can almost see her trying to decide whether or not to lie. But she isn’t stupid, and heeds his warning, not attempting what she is not capable of. Instead, she nods.

“Yes, almost every night,” she admits.

Something about her words is actually painful, striking like a physical blow, a punch to the gut.

“Every. Night.”

Belle nods, sinking her teeth into her lower lip in that way that means she’s reluctant to speak. There must be something in his expression, perhaps the rage he’s feeling, that gives her pause.

“I – I didn’t think you’d mind, if you – had no need of me.”

“You didn’t think I’d mind?” he repeats, dumbstruck. “You didn’t think I’d mind if you were crawling out of my bed and into someone else’s?!”


Etienne feels a sudden urge to drag her closer, trap her in his arms, force her mouth open with his tongue and just – touch her everywhere, make her understand something he doesn’t understand himself. But imagining another man with his lips on hers prevents him.

“Who is it?” he demands instead. “That footman? Lumiere? Someone else? All of them?”

With each potential lover named, his fingers dig harder and harder into her shoulder until she struggles against his grip.

“Stop it,” she says, trying to twist out of his hold. “You’re hurting me.” He wants to tell her that it seems fair enough because she’s hurting him, but surely he isn’t actually hurt. Just angry. They had an agreement, and though nothing was ever specified as to other lovers, surely it was understood there were not to be any. His teeth clench as he remembers – but naturally the Marquise de Merteuil doesn’t count. It’s not as if he enjoyed it.

He loosens his grasp, slides his hand from her shoulder to her upper arm. Even in the dark he can see red marks matching neatly to his fingers rising on her skin, and almost apologizes in dismay. She is delicate and bruises easily and he certainly didn’t intend to – But no, she should be apologizing to
“Well?” She still hasn’t answered his question.

“Isaac,” she says at last, and he racks his brain trying to remember if there are any Isaacs on his staff. It is not exactly a common name here, and he doesn’t think – “I’ve been crawling out of bed, as you put it, to read Sir Isaac Newton’s *Principia*. And if you’d be so kind as to unhand me now, Your Highness, I’m a little behind schedule.”

It is Etienne’s turn to blink stupidly at her, mind racing. He wants to tell her that he doesn’t believe her, on several different accounts, to wit: it makes no sense for a peasant girl to be reading such advanced material, in secret, *in Latin*, in the middle of the night… But he knows she is not lying, cannot be lying, because it would be all too obvious if she were.


“I’m leaving in less than two days,” she points out quietly. “I haven’t even finished the first book. I haven’t even *opened* so many others. I just wanted – I don’t know when I’ll ever see such books again.”

There are so many things to consider in what she has said, not least of all the longing in her voice when she speaks of his books – and those just a few from his vast collection. He remembers the way she looked at them the first time he found her in his office, then imagines that awe and wonder multiplied a thousand thousand times at the sight of his full library – But that is to think on later. Now, she looks dejected, heartbroken even, at the thought of leaving, which is just as it should be.

“That is a problem easily solved,” he says, and his tone is not eager, certainly not – he is focusing very hard on ensuring it isn’t.

She stares at him, expressionless, as he pulls her even closer – gently, this time – until he can feel her soft full breasts against his bare chest and the swell of her hips against his inner thighs. Since the beginning of their argument he has felt nothing but rage, either icy or hot, but now he feels warm with desire and something perilously close to happiness.

“You will stay, and then you will have time enough when I am otherwise engaged to read,” he informs her, stroking her hair back away from her face, smiling. “It is simple enough.”

For a second, the longing on her face intensifies, and Etienne would like to believe it is because she longs for him to drag her back into bed as much as he longs to do so. But then she steps out of his embrace and shakes her head slowly.

“No. No, I really must trespass on your kindness no longer, Your Highness.” She hesitates, then, softly: “Etienne.”

The bitterness he remembers from the last time he had to “convince” her to stay wells up in his chest – *this* is why it’s never exactly what he wants. Because even though she longs to stay, she won’t, not just for him – but then who would? He is a prince; that is not how it works. That is never how it works.

“It’s late,” he snaps, glaring. “I have no desire to waste time with this game. How much?”

“How much?” she echoes.
“How much will you hold yourself ransom for this time?” His voice is biting and cutting and cruel because he is just so sick of this. “Does your current salary suit? Or shall I double it? Treble it? I don’t care. Come back to bed.”

“No.”

“No, it doesn’t suit?”

She shakes her head.


“No,” she says again. “I have taken more than enough of your time, and your money, and your gowns. Thank you for them,” she adds, earnestly. “I don’t think I ever said thank you. But I’m – I’m going to go read now.”

She turns and walks away, and Etienne is so deeply shocked that he doesn’t even appreciate it when she stops and bends at the waist to pick up the shirt he tore off of her hours before. He stares after her until she slips into his office and closes the door tightly behind her. A slight snick tells him she has locked it from the inside.

For some time – he isn’t certain how long – he simply stares at the closed door. He could break it down, yes, or perhaps no – It’s solid mahogany; he’d need a battering ram. He could get a battering ram – Or perhaps he should just bar it from the outside as she has from the inside so she cannot get out –

These thoughts race through his mind, all undercut with confusion because he has no idea what he’s feeling. Rage surges in his blood, clamors for him to pound on the door and shout through it and make her open it, but he’s also lightheaded, sick to his stomach. His chest aches. He just – doesn’t understand what just happened. Well, that’s not true. He understands that she rejected him, but he cannot fathom that she actually meant it. What does she hope to gain by her refusal, when he has already offered her anything – everything? Women, he reminds himself. Greedy scheming whores the lot of them but… Belle is not like any other woman he has ever known. She is strange, no question. What is she playing at?

It is this he repeats to Lumiere half an hour later, having summoned the maître d’ to the private sitting room in the Royal Suite. Not the office of course, no, because Belle is still locked in there, or was when Etienne stormed off to ring for a footman to drag Lumiere out of bed.

“Just what is she playing at?” Etienne demands, pacing, raking his hands through his long hair in frustration. It’s a knotted, tangled mess already, and tugging on it this way is certainly not helping, but he must do something with his hands and the only other option is throttling someone – and Lumiere would probably put up a fight.

Etienne can feel the maître d’ watching his pacing now with bleary eyes, unamused and unimpressed.

“What more can she hope to gain? I’ve already offered anything she could possibly want. Money, gowns, jewels… But is she grateful? No! She wants more and more but won’t tell me what!”

“Has it not occurred to you,” Lumiere asks, “that perhaps she does not wish to stay?”

Etienne scoffs. “Of course not. Why wouldn’t she?”
Lumiere places his palms on the armrests of his chair and pushes himself to his unsteady feet. “I’m going back to sleep.”

“Sit down.”

“Etienne –”

“Sit down!”

Sinking back into the armchair, Lumiere glares. “There is no dealing with you when you are in a mood like this.”

“That is no way to address your master,” Etienne snaps, somehow still capable of feeling irritated on top of all the other irritation.

“There is no dealing with you when you are in a mood like this, Your Royal Highness by the Grace of God Dauphin of France.” He infuses an entire universe of sarcasm into the admittedly overblown title. “You will listen to neither reason nor sense, and I would rather be abed.”

“I’ve yet to hear anything even remotely resembling reason or sense from you.” Even to his own ears, he sounds sulky, but he can’t help it. Why is no one ever on his side?

“You attempt to treat Belle – forgive me, Mademoiselle Brescond – the way you would any other paramour. She is not the Marquise de Merteuil –”

“I know this, Lumiere; I’m not stupid.”

Lumiere says nothing, merely raises one eyebrow in that infuriating way he has.

“I’m not.”

“As you say,” Lumiere responds blandly. “Then it will come as no surprise to you that you cannot purchase the lady’s affections with a handful of Louis d’Or.”

“Item one,” Etienne begins, “I have no desire for her affections. Don’t be any more absurd than you can help. Item two, she has already been purchased for far less than the Marquise – twice. She is as motivated by money as any other woman. I can only assume she believes she has the leverage to demand more.”

“If so, is she wrong?”

“Shut up.”

Lumiere shakes his head firmly. “No. You want reason and sense? Then think, Etienne. Why would a virtuous young woman like Mademoiselle Brescond wait until now to sell her favors? If she cared for nothing but coin, I can assure you there are any number of men in the village and the castle who would have been only too pleased to provide some.”

Etienne growls, brought to the point of rage by the very thought. If anyone dares – But Lumiere has asked a question. Lumiere thinks he is clever. Etienne disagrees. “There is a world of difference between some peasant or footman and me.”

Lumiere sighs and stands once more. “Goodnight, Your Highness.”

For a moment, Etienne thinks he will let the maître d’ go. He has been singularly unhelpful so far; Etienne would have better luck talking to himself. And yet…
“Wait,” he says, voice low and quiet, just as Lumiere touches the door latch. “Tell me. If not for the favor of the future King of France, why would Belle –”

Turning back to him, Lumiere leans against the door and crosses his arms over his chest.

“Her father is dying,” Lumiere answers. “I assume what you have already promised her is enough to make him comfortable. She will not be motivated by anything beyond that. She cares nothing for finery or jewels. In short, you can entice her to stay through none of your usual methods.”

Etienne blinks as he considers this new information. Without deciding to, he lowers himself into the chair Lumiere has only just vacated, and thinks. “Her father – But I thought –”

“You thought?”

“I thought she – When she spoke of him, there was such fear in her voice.” Not the kind of fear he assumed, it seems.

Lumiere looks at him with entirely too much understanding, and Etienne lowers his gaze, unable to accept the pity in his eyes.

“Then what am I to do?” He thinks back to showing her the gallery, thinks of the feel of her in his arms as he pulled her close to show her each painter's technique, the way the disinterest in her eyes melted away to be replaced by the proper degree of awe due to Rembrandt's transcendent use of light and shadow. "I don’t – I don’t want her to leave.”

“Perhaps you have inspired a regard for your person?” Lumiere asks, and Etienne looks up again sharply.

“Of course I’ve –”

“That’s a no, then,” Lumiere says. “Have you exerted yourself to please her?”

Etienne’s glare intensifies. “Of course I have! I gave her carte blanche with –”

“Pour l’amour de Dieu, Etienne! In bed! Have you exerted yourself to please her in bed?”

“What goes on between us is none of your concern!” Etienne snaps, loathing the idea of giving Lumiere even the smallest detail. Such things are private.

“That’s a no, then,” Lumiere says again, ruthlessly.

Etienne clenches his teeth, fighting the urge to justify himself, but in the end has not the strength. “She is new to – unaccustomed – as yet unused to – you understand. Once she acclimates she will be as easily pleased as any other woman, surely.”

Lumiere buries his face in his hands for a long moment, muttering to himself too quietly for Etienne to hear. Finally, he looks up, expression weary. “I have truly failed you if you can possibly think so.”

“I’ve not the patience for your cryptic pronouncements,” Etienne informs him.

“Is it not obvious?” Lumiere demands. “Belle is unaware that she is supposed to be easily pleased! Do you understand?! Have you any idea how to –”

“Of course I know how! Most women do not require such effort.” He refuses to believe what Lumiere has implied. Surely he would have noticed if every woman he’d ever been with had been merely pretending to satisfaction. Surely.
Lumiere shakes his head one final time. “If you say so, Your Highness.”

Then he slips out the door, closing it carefully behind him, leaving Etienne alone with his thoughts.

@>`--

Chapter End Notes

So I'd like to draw your attention to a single snippet you probably didn't notice: "the plush Savonnerie rug". I just want you all to know that I spent like three hours reading about rugs in my quest to find the fanciest of all possible fancy 18th century French rugs. In case anyone ever asks you, that would be Savonnerie rugs. According to Wikipedia the products of the manufactory belonged exclusively to the Crown until 1768, and "were among the grandest of French diplomatic gifts". So OBVIOUSLY Etienne has a bunch of them. He probably piles them one on top of the other so his feet don't get cold...

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you so much for your comments and kudos! I'm delighted that you were all about Belle's love affair with Issac and Lumiere being So Done with Etienne's Nonsense. As I mentioned in a comment reply, I get the feeling he's been So Done for a loooong time...

And now, Chapter Fourteen, in which Belle, Etienne, and all of you are well satisfied.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For once, Belle does not rise with the sun; she cannot, as dawn was already breaking when she finally succumbed to her exhaustion. It had been joy, pure joy, to lock herself in Etienne’s office, to know that she would not be bothered, to read each page of the *Principia* with the attention and reverence it deserved – then read each again, like as not, in order to fully grasp it. By the time she’d finished the first volume, her mind had been too full of stars and numbers and weightless endless space to even consider attempting the next. Her eyes had closed of their own volition. She had slept as deeply as anyone contemplating the mysteries of infinity ever could.

Now she awakens in the office, body upright more or less, head pillowed on a pile of books as though hoping to absorb the knowledge they contain through osmosis as she slept. She can’t remember choosing to do that, and has nothing but a sore neck for her trouble, but that is easily ignored. She blinks in the morning light and feels – happy? Well, she does – she is happy, beyond happy, to have read uninterrupted, to have learned, to have realized the solution to her problem of the laundry machine through the genius of Newton’s calculus. But she is confused as well. She had not expected Etienne to leave her so completely to her own devices.

*Etienne*. Yes, she is confused. He confuses her. He wants her to stay. He is angry she will not. Thanking him for the gowns had not appeased him in the slightest, though she can’t imagine why. And yet he’d allowed her to put a solid door between them, hadn’t raged and pounded on it as he had that night she’d refused to join him for dinner – a week or an eternity ago, depending on how one looked at it. She had half expected him to. More than half. But she is grateful he did not. Of course she is. She still doesn’t know what she would have done in response.

The truth is, she had been tempted. Terribly so. He’d told her she would stay, and have time to read as she desired, and she’d wanted to. For the books, of course. And Plumette, and the laundry machine. Not because of the spoiled Prince expecting her to bend to his every whim, no matter how blue his eyes are, no matter how elegant his hands, no matter how he looks at her as though she’s comprised of brushstrokes to rival his Vermeer. Her father is *dying*. She has already been away too long. She misses him and Pere Robert and – well, that’s it, really. Villeneuve has never held much charm for her. But her father and her friend are enough, more than enough, and there is nothing for her in the castle, nothing real.

He had looked so sad when she’d refused him, she recalls now. Even in the dark she had seen it,
though she can’t understand it. They have spent much time in bed and she believes he has gotten value for his money, but she is not appreciably more skilled now than she was one week ago. She is not a fool, and she has seen the endless parade of women he’s taken to his bed since she began working at the castle. Any one of them, and any one of the countless women still anxious for his attention, must know better than she does how to please him. Surely whatever enjoyment he might have had of her ignorance has waned.

And yet he’d asked her to stay.

Suddenly, Belle shakes her head and scoffs – at herself. It is too early for such thoughts, and anyway attempting to imagine Etienne’s motives is pointless. She understands him about as much as any other human she has ever known, or even less, which is saying something. His reasons for doing anything are as much a mystery as the heavens – more so, now that she’s finished the first volume of the *Principia*. The heavens move according to mathematics she understands. Etienne’s thought process is far more opaque.

She rises stiffly and stretches, lengthening muscles and soothing the aches, then moves to the door. There is a moment of hesitation before she turns the lock, and the click as she does sounds very loud in the silent room. Again, she half expects Etienne to come barging in the second he knows he can – he is many things, but patient is not one of them. But he doesn’t. So she opens the door and steps through… And finds herself completely alone in his bedchamber. It is not so late that he should be awake, yet the opulent bed is empty.

It’s unexpected, and Belle is at a loss, uncertain of what to do. Since that very first morning she has never awoken alone; Etienne is inclined to pull her close in the night, and he is very warm so she is not inclined to argue. But of course it’s different when they’ve slept apart. Did he go to someone else after she locked herself away? Is he there with her now? She doesn’t care, she decides. She’ll be gone soon and the endless parade of lovers will resume – if it hasn’t already.

Perhaps he simply awoke early for some unknown reason. For all his seeming indolence he does have much to attend to throughout the day, even if most of it seems petty to her, issues of where to place furniture or hang paintings or whom to invite to an upcoming fête, for which she will obviously not be present. It’s almost a shame, really – she does have such beautiful gowns. They belong at a fête, much more than she does. They belong at the Palais much more than she does. Perhaps she will leave them behind, and he can pass them out to future paramours when they need something to wear in the morning.

Well. She must do something, though she isn’t sure what. She could ring for a servant, but her interactions with them are still stilted and awkward so perhaps not. She could go in search of Etienne, or better yet in search of Plumette. Or she could return to the office, to the books, give in to their magnetic pull. It is her last day in the castle, her last chance to even touch any of those gorgeous volumes, and Etienne will surely not leave her unattended for long. He cannot fault her for not seeking him out when he knows right where she is. No, it is best to stay put and keep reading until he comes for her – as he will. If he’d wanted her to stay beyond today, surely he won’t waste the day, either.

So she chooses a volume of Theobald’s *Complete Works of Shakespeare* at random and settles in to read *Troilus and Cressida*, followed by her beloved *Romeo and Juliet* – and it is somewhat different in this edition than in the edition Pere Robert has lent her, although she isn’t certain she can say the Theobald version is better. She still prefers the version she is familiar with, perhaps due to that familiarity alone. After reading the last rhyming couplet she wanders out of the office once more to find a tray of food set up – just enough for one, only one plate. She eats it, then crawls into bed to read *Hamlet*. Then *Othello*. Then she needs a new volume…
The entire day passes without word from Etienne.

She doesn’t understand it. Why not simply have her stay for six days instead of seven, if he intends to ignore her for the last? Her refusal to remain must have truly offended him for him to completely disappear like this. She should be grateful; since learning to read all she has wanted is the chance to read uninterrupted, and that was before receiving access to that incredible shelf of precious books. To have Theobald’s Complete Works at her fingertips and an entire day of hours in which to read it… This is a dream come true. Additionally, she does not particularly like Etienne, or particularly think he particularly likes her.

And yet the later the hour grows, the longer the shadows, the more distracted Belle becomes. She finds it difficult to focus on Coriolanus – *a kiss, long as my exile, sweet as my revenge* – and cannot finish Julius Caesar – *you all did love him once, not without cause*. It is due to logistical concerns, of course. If he is so displeased with her, will he still pay her what is due? Shall she leave tonight, or in the morning? Does it even matter if he doesn’t return to tell her? Perhaps she should simply leave now. But no, she will never receive payment then. Perhaps she will never see him again. But that was always to be the case, this is just a little earlier than expected. Still… Perhaps she will never see him again.

These are the thoughts that occupy her mind as she drifts off to sleep, Volume the Sixth of Theobald’s Complete Works open facedown on her chest.

It is that weight lifting that awakens her, or rather Etienne lifting that weight away. He is always waking her, she thinks – he keeps such strange hours. And then she remembers he left her alone all day, and all the confusion comes rushing back, though also some small sense of – something, at seeing him. Relief? Because he will pay her, of course.

“You’re back,” she murmurs as he sets the book aside (and oh how she envies the way he handles it, as though it is nothing more than an everyday ordinary object, as though he has hundreds more – which he does).

He doesn’t answer, merely reaches down to smooth her tousled hair with his palm, then card his long fingers through it. Her eyes close at the sensation – she enjoys this, finds it soothing.

“No – look at me,” he says, and his deep voice is very soft so she obeys, more out of her own curiosity than anything else. She wants to see the look on his face, to understand the softness of his voice, but though she can easily make out his expression in the flickering candlelight she certainly isn’t responsible for, she has never been able to read him. All she can say for certain is that he looks tired, eyelids heavy over ice blue eyes.

His hand drifts from her hair to her face, thumbs tracing over her eyebrow, fingertips trailing down her cheek, and his touch is as soft as his voice, featherlight, barely a touch at all but it does something to her, sends a shiver of anticipation through her. Her anticipation is satisfied by the feeling of his lips following the path of his fingers, gliding over her face until they graze over her mouth and stay there, not so much kissing her as simply resting his lips upon hers. His hand moves lower, stroking her breast and cupping it gently, and she arches up to press herself more fully into his palm.

“Belle,” he says, brushing against her mouth as he forms the word, and then he’s crawling on top of her somehow without lifting his lips or his hand.

He is heavy but not too heavy, the weight of him pleasant, and she feels vaguely glad that the last time he had her was not the last time of all. Not because there was anything wrong with it, but because she hadn’t known it might be and so hadn’t consciously chosen to remember it the way she is now. She wraps one arm around him to imprint the way the muscles of his back flex under her
hand on her memory, and twines the other about his neck to better remember the feeling of his hair threading through her fingers. It’s long and soft and silky – it feels rather like her own, something she hasn’t noticed before. This is useful information; perhaps in the future, if she somehow forgets what this is like, she can touch her own hair and be reminded.

She waits for everything to take its familiar course, for the kiss to deepen, for his touch to become less gentle – though not in a bad way, of course. She isn’t made of glass and doesn’t need to be handled as though she is. But instead he raises his head and looks down at her again and yes, as always, his eyes are just so blue. It occurs to her that if she never sees him again, she’ll never see eyes that color again either – for surely no one else could possess eyes of just that hue. She has never seen it in anyone else.

“Belle,” he repeats, the corner of his mouth lifting in the slightest of smiles. “Your name suits you down to the ground, did you know?”

He turns his attention to the buttons on the shirt she wears – his shirt – undoing them easily, and she shifts uncomfortably as she realizes she’ll soon be completely bare and very well-lit. By his design, she assumes, as she certainly did not fall asleep with several candelabras blazing. Somehow she has always avoided being so fully exposed to him, and had rather hoped there would be no need. Her face blazes to match the candelabras at the thought.

“I have not done my duty by you, if you can still blush at this,” Etienne says, smile widening as he opens the shirt, but his expression changes to something more serious as he drinks her in. “Down to the ground, Belle, I swear. You are so very beautiful.”

Before she can respond, though what one can say in response to that she doesn’t know, he leans close to brush his lips over hers again, just a fleeting touch before he moves to the hollow of her throat and the dip of her collarbone. His breath teases her skin as much as his mouth does, and his hands are not idle either, fingers skimming down her sides and over her stomach. She shivers at the sensation, every nerve ending in her body coming alive under his gentle touch.

Then his lips graze her nipple and she inhales sharply. It feels – ah, she doesn’t know, but he does it again and again, enough for her to decide that it feels good, better than anything – at least until he opens his mouth and flicks his tongue over the sensitive point. The very tips of his fingers stroke over her other nipple, adding little ripples of pleasure until she gasps his name, unprompted for once. He rewards her by closing his lips around her and sucking. The sensation is strange and glorious, his mouth so warm and wet, tongue teasing, teeth scraping, but all gently, so gently. She buries her hand in his hair to hold him to her, and she can feel his lips forming a smile against the swell of her breast.

He raises his head after what feels like a torturous eternity, glancing up and grinning at whatever he sees in her face before lavishing the same attention on her other nipple. He licks and sucks and teases and she has no idea what he’s doing, not really, but it makes her incoherent beneath him, writhing under each tantalizing assault of his tongue and teeth. It’s so much, almost too much, and she almost doesn’t notice when his free hand slips between her thighs. He strokes one finger over her before opening her delicately, fingertips caressing and exploring in a way he’s never attempted before.

“God, Belle,” he groans against her skin, barely intelligible. “This is how I’ve wanted you, so wet for me, yes – ”

With a painfully light brush of his mouth, the slightest of kisses, he abandons her breast and rises over her, still touching and stroking between her legs. His eyes travel over her and he watches as he works on her, the movement of his fingers more purposeful now as though searching for something. She has no idea what that something might be, but she knows precisely when he finds it, because it sends a bolt of pleasure straight through her – sharp and electric, like being struck by lightning, and
she can see triumph flashing in his gaze as he focuses his efforts there.

It’s impossible to imagine what he’s doing to her, exactly, she only knows that his movements are light and torturous and slowly driving her mad. Purposely, of course, she’s sure of it, and it’s so unfair but oh god she does not want him to stop. Whatever he’s doing is building some kind of tension inside her, coiling tighter and tighter and concentrating in that place where’s touching her so carefully, so controlled, never enough, except she doesn’t know what “enough” would be, or if she can bear it.

“Etienne – ” she gasps, or sobs really, and he looks down into her face with an infuriating half smile.

“You have only to ask,” he murmurs. “I could be kind, if you would only beg me to be.”

She’s almost desperate enough to do it, to plead for him to – well, she doesn’t know, but he must, he must know exactly what she needs. But he looks so unbearably smug, so pleased with himself, and while the small part of her mind that is observing what is happening to her acknowledges he has every right to be so, the rest of her rebels at the thought of giving in so easily.

It’s one of the most difficult things she’s ever had to do, but somehow she finds the strength to shake her head, panting and arching up into his hand and wanting to beg but just refusing to.

“Just as well,” he says with a grin, lowering his mouth to her cheek, her throat, and finally whispering in her ear: “I want to be inside you when you come for me, ma Belle. I want to feel you all around my cock, want to come with you – ”

Suddenly, the movement of his clever fingers ceases and he is no longer touching her between her legs at all. The wordless cry of protest she makes would embarrass her except she is far beyond that now. She feels wound so tight, too tight, a coil of potential energy with no incitement to become kinetic – as Newton might perhaps see it. She doesn’t just want to come undone, she needs to, because it hurts too much otherwise.

“Patience,” Etienne counsels, adjusting himself until she can feel him pressing against her entrance.

She wants to snap that she has been quite patient for the past week – but doesn’t, of course. Mostly because her thoughts are so fully possessed by him and everything he’s doing to her, everything he’s making her feel, that she can’t be bothered to string that many words into a sentence, and a little bit because it’s not true. She had no idea anything could feel like this, no idea it was even possible. If she had, she certainly would not have been patient in waiting for him to decide to show her.

He begins to push inside and she gasps, lifting herself to him even though that’s the opposite of what she wants to do. Whatever he did to her has made her almost unbearably sensitive, and the feeling of him entering her and stretching her is a kind of pain so exquisite she almost begs him to stop. She wants to beg him to stop, but the words turn to encouragement on her tongue, an endless litany of Etienne and Yes until he’s fully embedded, deeper than he’s ever been before.

He’s trembling, she realizes, his face buried in the crook of her neck, his breath fast and uneven on her sweat-slicked skin.

Impatient once more, Belle shifts under him, tangling her legs with his and urging him with her body to move inside her. The pressure of him filling her has only heightened the tension within, and she is so close to something, so close to what she hopes is what he always feels with her. It would be nice, she thinks, to understand why he wants her so badly, why anyone would want this so badly – although it’s becoming clearer to her by the moment.
He clamps his hands on her hips, hard enough to bruise, stilling her movements. “Stop,” he orders. “Oh god, just stop – I can’t – I need a moment – ”

She can’t help but smile at that. “I said those words to you once, do you remember?”

“Don’t remind me.” He isn’t teasing – he’s begging, as though that memory alone will be enough to shatter his control. But then, she wants it shattered.

“You told me to wrap my legs around your waist,” she says, sliding her calves up the backs of his thighs before locking tight around his slim hips, and just like the first time it opens her even further, allows him to move deeper, every inch of him hard and hot and throbbing inside her. “Like this – it was so – Oh! It feels so – ”

Before she can find the word to end that sentence, something in him snaps. He growls in her ear, actually growls, and then he’s thrusting hard and fast, pounding into her. He likes it like this, she knows, has taken her like this so many times during the week, but after the way he touched her before, she likes it like this too. There’s something inside of her – she doesn’t know what – that he hits with every stroke, and it builds on everything else, urging her higher and higher.

Suddenly he has one hand in her hair, pulling her head back, and he’s looking down into her face, expression tense and wild and eyes just painfully blue.

“God, Belle,” he moans. “I can’t – ”

And then his free hand is back between her legs, touching her with gentle precision very much at odds with the way he’s pushing into her, but there’s some kind of rhythm too, and it really is almost, almost... Not quite –

“Now. Now,” he demands, fingertip grazing over her and –

It’s both too much and just enough all at once. She cries out as all the tension built inside finally releases, and maybe she shouldn’t be but she’s thinking about Proposition 66 and the movements of the heavens and the way stars are born and die, in supernova explosions of blinding white light – because that’s what it feels like inside. The pleasure sears through her entire body and she is purely incandescent with it, blinded by it, shuddering under and around him until he pulses within her, filling her with another kind of heat. And she’s just… Flying.

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes

I hope y'all aren't too attached to the plot, because it's about to take a well-deserved breather for a few chapters...

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel!
I'm sure it gets boring to read every time, but thank you so much for all your comments and kudos! I love everyone's analysis and I'm so glad you guys were pleased by the last chapter... Though not as pleased as Belle, I think!

And now, Chapter Fifteen, in which Etienne really ought to be ashamed of himself but somehow I find it unlikely.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He has seen her this way once before, Etienne thinks dazedly, staring down at Belle writhing under him. Well, “thinks” is perhaps too strong a word – there are no thoughts now, not really, just images and feelings all wrapped up in incoherent lust. But he has seen her this way once before, that first night, the first time he took her. She had been just as small and beautiful and exquisite, rigid and gasping as she is now, painfully tight around him – and growing tighter, though god only knows how he will stand it. But she had been in agony then, and is nothing of the kind in this moment. This is perhaps what that should have been, if he’d only thought of it.

Perhaps later he’ll feel guilty for it. Now all he can feel is an almost unbearable tide of arousal building inside at the sight and feel of Belle so close to falling apart for him. He’d intended to be controlled, intended to bring her pleasure then take his own, but those resolutions had disintegrated as she’d spoken to him, wrapped her legs around him. It had been too much, watching her taking him so deep and loving it, feeling her cunt clasp so tight around him that he can barely move inside of her. But he manages it somehow, plunging into her without any restraint, as deep as he can, as hard as he can, then deeper, then harder, until he’s at least as close as she is.

Her dark eyes are wide, locked on his, and almost – confused, as though she’s never felt anything like this before, not even by her own hand, and that thought is more than he can take. He touches her carefully out of sheer desperation; he has only a few seconds to get this right before he’s finished, and he’ll be damned if he leaves her unsatisfied now.

Luckily the light brush of his finger over her is effective. Her whole body arches up against him as she cries out, a wordless sound even better than his name because it’s so full of shocked pleasure, and he surrenders to the feeling of her tight heat stroking and caressing him. Her body is begging him to fill her with his seed – he is only too happy to oblige. He buries his face in her throat and thrusts hard one final time, holding himself still as he releases inside of her, wracked with ecstatic shudders again and again until he is completely spent.

And yet it isn’t enough. The pleasure recedes and she is still hot and open beneath him, her heaving breaths pressing her hard nipples against his bare chest, her fingers tracing restlessly up and down his spine. Somehow he’s still fully hard, unbearably aroused just by the memory of her coming for him, desperate to witness it again and again.
He raises his head to look down at the dazed expression on her flushed face and eases out of her.

“Etienne,” she murmurs, possibly in protest if she’s still as sensitive as he is. The slide of her slick flesh against him is almost more than he can bear, almost enough to encourage him to sheath himself again immediately, but he wants something else, something more.

With maddening slowness – maddening for them both, he’s sure – he kisses his way down her body, savoring the taste of her skin, latching on to one hardened nipple and suckling until she gasps his name again. He lingers there before pressing his lips to her belly, scoring his teeth gently over one hipbone, finally reaching the triangle of dark curls between her legs. With palms flat against her inner thighs he urges her to spread them, then looks up with a smirk as she resists.

“Open your legs for me, ma Belle,” he says, meeting her wide eyes, and she shakes her head, blushing. “Mmm, yes, show me – I want to see the mess I’ve made of your pretty cunt – you’ll not regret it, Belle, I swear – ”

She doesn’t obey, not entirely, but she does stop fighting, and he presses her thighs open easily. His breath catches then quickens at the sight of her spread for him, the sight he’s longed to see since that first morning. She was too innocent for this then, and is probably still too innocent now, but he can’t make himself care about her embarrassment at the moment. Not with her glistening pink flesh open for him like some exotic flower, his come nestled inside and dripping down her legs. She looks completely, thoroughly fucked and it’s the most arousing thing in the world, knowing he’s the one who did that to her – knowing he’s the only one who has ever done that to her.

Before she can clamp her legs closed as he’s sure she wants to, he buries his face between them, tongue tracing over her folds, tasting all her sweetness and all his salt. She jerks under him, surprised, and he clutches at her hipbones, holding her down and still for him. It would be easy, almost too easy, to cover her clit with his mouth, lick and suck at it until she comes screaming his name, and he will eventually, but for now he tortures her with long teasing strokes, circling around and brushing near that sensitive spot until she’s struggling again – but this time to get closer to him. She arches up against his face desperately and he loves knowing what she needs when she has no idea, only instinct.

Mouth still so agreeably engaged, he looks up at her, at the smooth line of her body pulled taut like a bowstring, breasts heaving, head thrown back. It’s impossible to see from his angle but he can easily imagine the expression on her face, her teeth sinking into her lower lip to hold back her cries, eyes shut tight to avoid the embarrassment of seeing him with his head between her legs. Perhaps he ought to be annoyed by her reticence after everything, but instead Etienne feels an amused kind of tenderness for her. She is too sweet, skin slick with sweat and flushed with humiliation and passion.

Without warning he raises his head, and she sobs with frustration. He smiles and placates her with his fingers, sliding two inside, the spill of his own seed easing the way. Even after taking his cock so deep she’s still so tight, too tight to accept another finger – though she’ll manage his cock again soon. The thought sends a fresh surge of desire through him and he takes himself in his free hand, caressing his solid throbbing flesh just enough to take the edge off, just enough to allow him to tease and torture her instead of immediately rising up to bury himself inside of her.

“Is this too much?” he asks. “Shall I stop, in order to assuage your modesty?”

“No,” she moans, shifting under him. “Don’t – ”

“Don’t what?” He presses hard against her inner walls and laughs quietly as she gasps. “Don’t eat you until you come for me again? It’s quite indecent, is it not? I should be ashamed of myself.”
“Probably,” she agrees breathlessly.

His smile widens into a grin. “Shall I stop then?”

“No!” He can feel her delicate hand cup the back of his head, her fingers tangling in his long hair. “No, please – ”

“Open your eyes, Belle,” he orders. “You must watch me or I’m afraid I’ll be unable to continue.”

“I can’t – ” she says, but somehow she does. Their eyes lock and hold, hers darker even than usual because her pupils are blown so wide with desire.

He lowers his mouth to her again, flicking his tongue over her clit as her grasp tightens convulsively in his hair. His fingers flex inside of her, forming a counterpoint to the rhythm he’s established, and he strokes himself the same way with his free hand so that it’s almost like being inside her again, almost like fucking her. He focuses on driving them both higher and higher while he pins her with a challenging gaze. Her cheeks redden as he watches but she doesn’t look away – she’s brave, his Belle, not to mention desperate. She knows well enough that he’ll stop if she allows her eyes to drift closed again.

Finally, when she’s completely incoherent, reduced to nothing more than reciting his name interspersed with blasphemy, he seals his lips over her, sucking hard. Another thrust of his fingers, a light nip of his teeth, and she shatters underneath him, muscles contracting and releasing as she cries out in ecstasy and – he thinks – shock. He helps her through it, soothing her with long, soft licks as she writhes under him, then gently withdrawing his fingers and pressing his lips sweetly to her inner thighs when she’s spent. The tension drains out of her and she lies back, exhausted, just about melting into the sheets.

Now that she’s finally sated, his own pleasure becomes more urgent, more necessary. He releases his grip on his cock for a brief moment, just long enough to switch hands so he can stroke himself with the slick fingers that he’d been using to fuck her moments before. It’s not quite how he planned it but heat is already pooling at the base of his spine and he can’t help increasing his speed. He’s too close; there isn’t time even to push himself inside of her.

Instead he kneels between her legs as the shudders overtake him, pumping his hand up and down his shaft, ecstasy surging through him in waves as he milks his come out all over her cunt and belly and thighs. The sight of his thick white seed spattering her skin – and the sight of her watching it as avidly as he is – makes him come even harder until he can barely hold himself upright, gasping with the pure pleasure of release.

He finally surrenders to gravity when it fades, collapsing onto his side next to her, trembling and enlightened. He has not been a virgin in a very, very long time, and despite what Lumiere might believe or insinuate he has certainly brought women to pleasure through his efforts – though again, it has been a very, very long time since he’s bothered. But not so long that he doesn’t know he has never felt it like this, as though Belle’s pleasure flowed through him more strongly than his own. It makes him want to have her again and again, to bury himself inside her and watch her face, to see the ecstasy rise up like a tidal wave and then come crashing down to submerge them both. It’s like drowning, yes, it makes him want to drown in her.

Instead, he slides one arm under her back and pulls her close to him, close enough that he can rest his cheek against the soft swell of her breast – close enough that he can hear her heart, still beating wildly. The air of the room is cool on his heated skin but her body is warm against his. For a moment he considers crawling on top of her again – he’s still half-hard and sure with a little stimulation knows he could better that – but he’s also filled with a delicious lassitude, too weak to perform
credibly quite yet. It’s enough to lie her like this with her, to feel her fingers carding through his
hair, to listen to the throbbing of her blood in her veins until it slows.

“Etienne? Are you awake?” Belle asks softly, and he realizes he has been lying there in silence for a
few long moments, just listening to the rhythm of her, to her breathing. Her fingers card through his
hair, nails barely scratching his scalp in a way that makes him almost purr. He stops himself – just.

“More or less,” he says, glancing up to meet her eyes then smiling as she blushes.

“Must you enjoy my discomfort so?” she demands, although she seems more amused than angry.
In answer, he presses his lips to her throat, scraping his teeth gently over her pulse.

“Mmm, yes, I think I must,” he murmurs into her skin. “Again I say I have not done my duty by you,
if you can still blush at this.”

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” she reminds him.

“And yet…” he raises his head and smiles wickedly at her. “I’m afraid I’ll likely subject you to more
indecency once I’ve recovered.”

Her blush deepens. “I did not realize – I didn’t know it could – that I could feel so – ”

“No?” he asks, feeling quite pleased with himself. “Have you never experimented at all?”

“I don’t – ”

“Here,” he murmurs, taking her hand and guiding it to her own breast. “Have you never touched
yourself like this?”

“Not until after you… I did try, once, after you and I – to try to understand – but it didn’t feel the
same.”

He moans and hardens at the thought, imagining her imagining him… It’s too much. “Show me.
Touch yourself the way I touch you.”

Hesitantly, she brushes a fingertip over her nipple, already rosy and pebbled with arousal.

“Pinch it,” he orders, and watches as she obeys. “Do you like that?”

“I don’t know,” she admits with a laugh.

Holding her dark gaze with his own, he tugs her hand away from her breast and drags it down her
belly, through the mess of his come there before urging her fingers between her own legs.

“What about here?” he asks. “Have you never touched yourself here?”

“No,” she answers. “Of course not.”

“Try it now,” he orders, guiding her fingers to her clit. “Here.”

“Oh!” she gasps, withdrawing her hand almost immediately. “I didn’t realize – ”

“Don’t stop,” he says, guiding her fingers back to her cunt. “I want you to make yourself come while
I watch.”
“I can’t – ”

“I’ll help you,” he assures her, cupping her breast and teasing her nipple with his thumb. “Stroke yourself, gently – yes, like that – ” he encourages as she begins to move one finger over herself. From his angle above her he can’t see as much as he’d like to, just her hand delving into the neat triangle of dark hair between her thighs, but he can feel the way she stiffens in his arms, hear the way her breath catches, and knows that she’s enjoying herself – as is he.

“Tell me how it feels.” His breathing is heavy as he says it, and he trails his fingers down her leg then over to grip his cock again.

He’s just as hard as if he hasn’t already spent the whole night fucking but then he did go nearly 24 hours without – an unheard of eternity for him. His hand, still slippery with his own seed, slides easily up and down his swollen flesh, and he watches Belle intently to match her pace. It’s torturous, as she explores herself so slowly, so uncertainly, but it’s better that way. If he were to touch himself the way his body is screaming at him to, he’d end up spilling all over her with embarrassing immediacy – again.

“I don’t know how it feels,” she gasps. “It’s – Ah, god, I don’t – ”

“Very descriptive.” He rewards her by closing his lips over her nipple and suckling for a long moment. She arches up into his mouth as he does, and whimpers when he pulls away. “What are you thinking about?”

“Thinking?” She laughs breathlessly. “About – Before – When you kissed me there – ”

“When I ate you out, you mean,” he corrects, allowing himself a little more speed, a little more pressure as he remembers. “When I licked my own come off of your thighs – Fuck, Belle, you taste so good when you taste like me – ”

“Etienne!” Even of the brink of orgasm, Belle’s voice is scandalized, and even on the brink of orgasm, he grins.

“Yes, yes, I’ll be very ashamed later, I assure you.” Reluctantly, he releases his cock, feeling it throb and ache in protest. Still, it must be done; he very much doubts his ability to maintain this sedate pace much longer and he doesn’t want to finish yet. He distracts himself by teasing her nipple with his tongue – then distracts her by sliding three fingers deep inside her without warning.

“Etienne!” she cries again, her hand stilling its movements in shock. There is so much desperation infused into that single word – and his name has never sounded better to him.

“Yes, yes, I’ll be very ashamed later, I assure you.” Reluctantly, he releases his cock, feeling it throb and ache in protest. Still, it must be done; he very much doubts his ability to maintain this sedate pace much longer and he doesn’t want to finish yet. He distracts himself by teasing her nipple with his tongue – then distracts her by sliding three fingers deep inside her without warning.

“Belle – ” His voice is as desperate as hers, but rough where hers is sweet, almost a growl. “I need to be inside you – ”

Before she can respond – though she is surely in agreement – he rolls away from her, lying on his back to pull her on top of him. She weighs almost nothing it seems, her body so smooth and slender and elegant with her small high breasts and narrow waist. He puts his hands there to guide her, adjust her until he can feel the wet heat of her cunt against his cock, the sensation ecstatic agony to his sensitive flesh.

“Like this,” he groans, grinding into her without deciding to because he just needs some friction, any friction, or he’ll go insane. “Sit on my cock, Belle, ride me – ”

For a moment, it’s as though Belle’s face has been completely wiped clean of expression. The brightness of her heavy-lidded eyes, the hectic color in her cheeks, the desire written so clearly for
him to see, all of it drains away as her eyebrows draw together in confusion. He can almost see her thinking about it, and then the moment is past – she’s back with him, grasping his cock and lifting herself over him.

She’s awkward and clumsy as she guides him to her, but he holds her steady until her tight warmth envelops him. He watches avidly as she struggles to accommodate him, feels her stretching to surround him and it’s just – so much, too much. The feel of her, the sight of her with dark hair wild about her shoulders, wet pink lips parted and gasping as she slowly sinks down on to him, his come still slicking her belly and thighs – He has to squeeze his eyes shut as she finally sheathes him to the hilt, because he knows he can’t withstand the sight and the sensation both.

“Yes,” he rasps when he has regained some semblance of control. “Just like that, yes, move with me – I’ll show you, yes – ”

Hesitantly, she obeys him, following the rhythm he sets with his thrusts and his fingers digging into her hips. He chances opening his eyes to watch her take him, watch his shaft disappearing inside of her again and again as she moves.

“I can’t – ” she says, “Please, I want – ”

“ – Me to make you come?” he asks. He can’t tell whether she’s nodding in response or merely throwing her head back in ecstasy but either way he won’t oblige her. “No, I told you I want to watch you make yourself come for me.”

“Etienne, please – ”

Her begging is almost his undoing, the excitement building in him nearly too much to bear, but he grits his teeth and fights through it. “Touch yourself. Now. I’m so close – ”

Finally she surrenders to his will, slipping her hand down between her thighs, and with her legs splayed to cradle his hips he can see everything: his swollen cock pounding into her, her fingers stroking her clit in time with his movements. She is beautiful, of course, he has always thought so, but like this – he thinks she must be the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen, and this must be the most perfect moment of his life.

And then she shudders above him and he realizes he was wrong, because watching her come as she rides him, feeling her tight sheath clenching and releasing around him, hearing her sob his name – this moment is better than perfect. He has no superlative for it. Even as he reaches his own pleasure, still caught in the aftershocks of hers, he knows his orgasm will never surpass watching hers… Which is saying something, because the ecstasy that floods him is truly glorious, wrenching and almost painful in its intensity.

Time ceases to exist, or so he assumes, because the next thing he knows he is still on his back, shivering a little at the chill air of the room skimming over his sweat-dampened front. Belle is, sadly, no longer atop him; she sits beside him, on the edge of the bed with her back to him. He feels a little pang at the sight of the ridges of her spine; they are not too terribly deep. When he reaches out to trace them with his fingers, he knows she is not starving. She has had all she needed to survive – but never more. Etienne is suddenly fiercely glad that he took her to his bed. How on earth might she have survived otherwise? Does he pay his servants well enough that she could have lived on it without her father? He has no idea. It’s disconcerting, having these thoughts when he should be enjoying the afterglow.

This would be easier if she were in his arms.
“I’m cold,” he says. “Come back to bed.”

“Would you – Would you mind terribly if I didn’t?” she asks. “It’s just that I wanted to read one last play before I leave in the morning.”

He has been prepared for this, yes, had known somehow even finding pleasure with him would not be enough to hold her – he is never enough for anyone, though at least others find value in his rank and wealth. Belle doesn’t care about those things, or him either. But he had hoped…

Well. It doesn’t matter. He is well prepared.

Despite his exhaustion, he climbs out of bed, walking around it to find his coat, discarded in a crumpled heap where he left it (Chapeau is going to kill him). He rifles through his pockets and retrieves the letter he spent all day procuring.

“Here,” he snaps, thrusting it at her. “Read this instead.”

She takes it from him, confused – then even more so when she reads the front.

“It’s – It’s addressed to me?” She doesn’t mean it to be a question, he knows, but it still is somehow.

“Yes.”

“In Pere Robert’s hand.”

“Yes.”

He watches as she breaks the seal and unfold the single page, watches as she reads.

“How did you even – ? This isn’t possible,” she says finally, looking up at him. Her face is blank, neither pleased nor displeased. He wishes he could read her as easily as she can read just about anything, apparently.

“I don’t know if you know this,” he drawls, “but I am in fact the future King of France.”

“So you – What? Threatened Theophile de Bordeu with charges of treason if he didn’t abandon his other patients and admit my father to his private clinic?”

“I convinced him much as I convinced you; in each instance, all it took was money. He was the more expensive between the two of you, naturally.” The comment is unkind, but then he wants to hurt her, even more so when his snarled words seem to have no effect on her.

“You did this to keep me here,” she says.

He opens his mouth to respond but has to think. The answer is neither yes nor no. “I did this for you.”

“To keep me here.”

“Will it?” he demands.

“If I stay, he will be cared for?”

“By the foremost expert in the field, yes. And in surroundings to rival ours here.” Surely this cannot hurt his case.
“If I leave...?”

He simply raises his eyebrows at her.

“Ah.”

For a moment he thinks even this will not be enough, but then she nods – just once. He wants to feel triumph at it, but cannot, not when he had to go to such lengths to achieve this hollow victory.

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes

In case you're wondering, Theophile de Bordeu was a prominent French physician of the era, but I don't know if he had a fancy private clinic or if he dealt with the disease which would become known as Parkinson's (which is what Maurice unfortunately has). There were some moderately effective treatments for Parkinson's even in the 18th century, including remedies derived from the mucuna family, mainly to be found on the Indian subcontinent. It seems reasonable to me that a sufficiently brilliant doctor would have studied Ayurvedic medicine and know about it. There was certainly plenty of trade with India by that point so a determined physician could probably have gotten ahold of some - but of course it would have been costly! In the 19th century it was also noted that certain extracts of belladonna can help treat the tremors associated with Parkinson's, but that doesn't mean it wasn't known earlier. Belladonna was used for many other things so individual physicians could have observed the same before it was all systematically investigated in the next century.

...What? You mean 18th century treatments for Parkinson's are not foremost in your mind after reading that chapter? Curious.

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Someday I'm going to surprise the hell out of all of you by refusing to thank you for your comments and kudos... But that day is not today! I loved reading all your thoughts on Etienne's two steps forward/one step back progress! He'll get there eventually...

And now, Chapter Sixteen, in which Belle is glad she is sitting down.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

16

It is strange, Belle thinks the next day as she stands in an empty workroom in the practically abandoned north wing. For someone who went to such lengths to secure her company, Etienne seems to show little inclination to take advantage of it. Sleeping as far from her as possible in his huge bed, rising before her somehow to deal with matters unknown – he has left her to her own devices for the second day in a row, and Belle is not quite sure what to make of it. She knows what to do with it, however; now that she is staying for some indeterminate amount of time, she can work on her laundry machine on a grander scale. Perhaps she won’t even have to hide it from Etienne. Perhaps he would allow her to install it for him.

Then again, perhaps not. His laundry gets done either way, what should he care how long it takes the servants being paid to do it? And how likely is it that he’d allow those servants to use that free time to learn to read? The Palais Villeneuve is massive, the second largest castle in all of France – discounting the grounds, which are nowhere near as extensive as those at Versailles. Regardless, there is always plenty of work to be done. Who’s to say the servants currently doomed to work in the laundry won’t simply be set some other task? Or worse, let go? Perhaps she ought to –

She shakes her head, slamming a door on her thoughts with conscious effort. She cannot think like that, cannot allow her what if's to cascade from terrible outcome to terrible outcome. She can get lost in them sometimes, lost in all the possible results of her actions and choices to the extent that she is paralyzed by them. No. For now she must attend only to the task before her. There is a workspace, ideally suited to her experiments. There is time to conduct them. That is all she needs to focus on, all she needs to think about. Everything else will keep.

This is a decision more easily made than adhered to, of course. She is able to refrain from obsessing over the potential impact of the machine she plans, but her mind focuses inward instead. She has always known that there is something wrong with her. Well, not wrong, precisely, but not quite right. She has always found it so much easier to connect to the characters in the novels she reads than to the people she knows; even then, she doesn’t always understand the emotions they experience throughout the course of the story. She has long suspected that she doesn’t feel things the way other people do, maybe doesn’t feel anything as much, as strongly, as everyone else does. It’s a lonely realization, and far lonelier when she’s forced to wonder if she even feels loneliness as keenly as she should. Perhaps, she has thought, that does make her wrong.

But last night… Last night she had felt things she’d never imagined with an intensity she’d always
assumed she was incapable of. And she isn’t quite sure what to – Isn’t quite sure how to wrap her mind around everything. What does it mean, that he can make her feel so much? She understands anatomy and biology, to an extent. For example, Fact: men derive great pleasure from the sexual act, possibly as an inducement to continue the species. Sub-Fact, newly discovered: women too may derive great pleasure from the sexual act, though seemingly not as a matter of course (she has little enough experience to extrapolate from, yet she thinks it must be representative).

That is all simple enough. But there is also Fact: Etienne is capable of (helping her? encouraging her? making her?) find pleasure in the sexual act, but Fact: he has never bothered to before. This confuses her, because Fact: he clearly enjoyed her enjoyment, so why waste a week? But either way, Fact: Etienne chose to give her pleasure, and Fact: Belle does not understand why.

It is this that confuses her most of all. The pleasure itself is a straightforward thing, new and a bit alarming, but… It feels good. It’s uncomplicated. The enlightenment it brings with it is a pleasure all its own, this precious new understanding of what she realizes must be an important part of existence for most people – perhaps the only part of that endlessly confusing puzzle she has ever truly felt the way she assumes everyone else must. But the motivations behind it, Etienne’s motivations… They make no sense to her. It’s impossible to believe they ever will.

Fact: he wanted her to stay. Perhaps that is the only reason behind his actions the night before. But he must have known she’d require nothing more than that letter from Pere Robert, nothing more than the knowledge that her father is being cared for by Theophile de Bordeu, the only man who might possibly be able to truly help him, the man with no room in his private clinic for another patient even if Belle could have afforded it. She had investigated all her options, of course, but had been able to do little more than despair at the impossible ones. In the end all it had taken, apparently, was money, and Etienne has never had any aversion to purchasing her cooperation. But… Is that all it was? Fact (much as she ignores it most of the time): Etienne is the future King of France. If he had ordered her to stay, forbade her to leave, Fact: there would have been very little she could have done about it.

She is supposed to feel that way now, she knows. Supposed to feel trapped, imprisoned by his unspoken threat to remove her father from Dr. de Bordeu’s care should she have the temerity to leave. And yet… Somehow, she feels as free to walk out the castle gates as she ever has. Freer, perhaps. This confuses her as much as anything else, because it is based on nothing, completely illogical, and logic has never failed her so before. Yet she cannot bring herself to believe that anyone who could touch her the way Etienne had last night could possibly do something so cruel. That first night, yes, she would have believed anything terrible of him. She had felt… Not unwilling, but certainly coerced to remain, knowing that if she refused, if she left, she would not receive the coin she so desperately needed and that was the end of it.

This should feel the same but does not. Why?

Fact: she has no answer.

Enough! Once more, she slams the door on her roiling thoughts, bars it tightly. The only fact that truly matters now is that she is staying, and she is glad of it. The reasons for that gladness are many and varied and mostly unrelated to the master of this castle. That is all.

There is a scuffling on the other side of the heavy door, and Belle rushes to it, hoping it is Lumiere with the items she has requested. Until Pere Robert sends her notebook from Villeneuve as she begged in her response to his letter about her father, there is little actual progress she can make as far as building the machine goes. But there is no harm in having the materials ready, and perhaps testing the strength of a few different types of rope, a few different varieties of wood… Still imagining the experiments she might design, she throws open the door – and freezes.
It is not Lumiere but Etienne who stands there as though conjured by her thoughts, smirking as though he knows it.

Immediately a wave of heat flows through her – not the heat of desire, but of absolute and unrestrained embarrassment. This is the first time she has seen him since the night before, and suddenly all she can think of is the way he told her he ought to be ashamed of himself before burying his head between her thighs again. This is not – Is this how others – How do people manage under such circumstances? What does one say to someone after – It was bad enough before, but now – She has no idea what to say or do.

“Belle,” he murmurs, and she has always found his voice – nice – but now it is something more, pitched low and rough and – she needs to sit down.

“Good morning,” she says as soon as she can convince her mouth to work, crossing the room desperately to sit on the stool against the wall. But it is too low, she realizes as soon as she looks at it. She’d feel ridiculous sitting on it while he stood, like a child sitting on the floor.

Instead she moves to the worktable, rests her hip against it; the table is solid and keeps her from sinking to the ground, though her legs remain unsteady. This doesn’t solve the problem of having to look at him, however. He is dressed as simply as she has ever seen him, in breeches and one of his seemingly endless supply of fine linen and silk shirts. The sight of him standing there so tall with his hair loose about his shoulders, darker stubble covering his jaw, his eyes the pure pale blue of a winter sky – It fills her with a powerful shock of longing, an almost painful knowledge of the emptiness inside her and an overwhelming desire for him to fill it.

This is – This is new.

“It is good, isn’t it?” he asks, that infernal smirk widening, and she wants to press her lips to his and just erase it with her mouth. What is she even thinking? Reality doesn’t work that way, facial expressions are not erased, not even by a kiss – but she is still not averse to attempting it. What is wrong with her?

“Where shall I leave this?” he continues, hefting the crate easily.

“Over – Ah, over there,” she says, gesturing vaguely, and he saunters in the direction indicated before bending down to place her supplies against the wall. She wants to look away, to avoid noticing the way the sleek muscles of his back and – lower – move and flex, but her body refuses to obey, not until he straightens back up.

She glances down at her hands just before he turns and catches her staring.

“Is the workroom suitable for your needs?” His expression is mild but his movements are – he’s stalking across the floor, full of dangerous feline grace that belies his casual question.

“Yes, perfectly.” Her voice is higher than usual, though she isn’t sure why. “How did you know?”

He shrugs, now just a few feet away.

“Lumiere told me of your request. He thought it odd, but then he doesn’t know about your late night meetings with Isaac,” Etienne says with a laugh. She smiles weakly, uncertain about whether he is genuinely amused about something that upset him so two nights before. “I’ve used this room in the past myself and thought it would do.”

“Used it?”
“I tinker myself, from time to time,” he answers dismissively. She wonders what exactly he means by tinkering, what he tinkers with. But it’s a small piece of the puzzle that is him falling into place, something which explains his extensive collection of scientific works. It’s almost impossible to reconcile, the indolent aristocrat and the… Scholar? That expensive education again. But he certainly doesn’t seem…

In her distraction, she has missed his final progress across the floor, and is suddenly surprised to find how near he is. He is nearly toe to toe with her now, close enough that she must look up to meet his eyes, close enough that she truly feels his size, how broad his shoulders are, how he towers over her.

“Oh,” she whispers.

“Oh,” he echoes, annoying smirk growing into a wicked smile, and before she knows exactly what’s happening, his elegant hands are at her waist and he’s lifting her up onto the table.

Well, she had been wanting to sit, so that’s something at least.

He says nothing, merely holds her gaze with his magnetic pale eyes, watches her as he slips his hand under her skirt. She starts a little as she feels his palm on her knee, feels it sliding up her inner thigh to the place where her legs are pressed rather tightly together. A slight raising of a single brow is all it takes for her to open for him, and he nods in approval as he strokes her lightly, teasing his fingers through her folds and over that deliciously sensitive spot he’d shown her the night before.

“Lumiere is following behind me,” he informs her even as he slides one long finger deep inside of her. “He was momentarily detained but will be here soon.”

She blinks up at him, dazed, hardly understanding as his touch rekindles the fire that had burned down to embers in the night.

“I say this so you know I must be quick and you must be quiet, otherwise he’ll know exactly what I’m doing to you right now. Do you understand?”

Her breath catches and she nods, desire and apprehension warring within her.

“Good.”

Suddenly Etienne has two more fingers buried within her, stretching her and pressing against something that makes her gasp and lift her hips, body moving instinctively to force him deeper. It feels good, very very good, but it’s somehow maddening too, and not quite enough. Less satisfying than being filled completely.

“If we had time, ma Belle, I’d give you my cock instead,” he murmurs into her ear, sensing her frustration, attempting to assuage it by setting a punishing rhythm. He slams his fingers roughly into her in a way that she would have expected to be painful but absolutely is not. “This must suffice for now – unless you’d like Lumiere to catch us? I could be persuaded –”

He adjusts his hand and presses his thumb to that aching point from the night before – though this is very, very different from the way he’d touched her then. Last night he was coaxing, teasing the pleasure from her body, but now he is demanding, insisting that she feel it. And oh, she does, though it’s sharper and more immediate than she remembers.

“You must hope he is still climbing the stairs, for if he has reached the hallway he can certainly hear you.” It is only as Etienne says this that she realizes she is moaning loudly.

She clamps her teeth down on her lips from the inside, trying desperately to silence herself, but it is
impossible, especially when he increases the speed of his thrusts and the pressure of his thumb as it
moves over her. Belle can feel the ecstasy rising inside of her with a speed and strength she has never
imagined, and she can’t help but give voice to her need, can’t not. Thankfully, he takes pity on her,
covering her mouth with his free hand and holding it there, muffling her cries.

“He’s very close now, Belle,” Etienne says, eyes burning into her. “But you’re closer, I think…”

A sudden sharp twist of his fingers inside of her proves it, and she teeters on the edge of release just
long enough to hear the knock at the door before he does – well, something that pushes her over, she
doesn’t know what. She shudders against him and around him as waves of pleasure flow through
her, and she’s grateful for his palm pressed so hard to her lips because otherwise she knows she’d be
screaming.

Just as suddenly as he’d put his hands on her in the first place, he withdraws them, pausing only long
enough to brush a searing kiss over her open mouth before yanking her skirts back down to cover
her decently. She pants, unable to catch her breath, unable to comprehend that he is crossing the
workroom to open the door until he’s already doing it.

“Your Highness,” Lumiere says, nodding – his arms are also full of supplies, she notes, trying to
imagine which ones in order to distract herself, to regain some composure.

“Lumiere,” Etienne responds, gesturing him into the room. “Impeccable timing as always.”

“Where do you want this?” the maître d’ asks, looking to her. Belle considers attempting to speak,
decides against it, and points to the far side of the room where the first box awaits.

Lumiere moves to do as he was bid, his back now to both her and his master, and she can’t help the
way her eyes focus on Etienne, the way she scans him for any sign of what has just passed between
them. But he looks his usual self, haughty and almost bored, and she allows herself to relax
somewhat.

Etienne smiles slightly at this – then raises the hand he’d had between her legs moments ago to his
lips, and sucks his fingers clean.

She thanks god she’s still sitting, perched on the worktable.

@@>``~

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so. I'm about to break your sweet little hearts, and I do apologize, but it cannot be
helped. I'm going out of town Thursday for 2.5 weeks, and will not have access to the
internet (other than on my phone). Therefore, I will be unable to update until after I
return :( I know you guys have gotten used to weekly updates, and I hope you can
forgive me for interrupting them! But I'm still well ahead in my writing so you don't
have to worry that I'm going to ghost on you. If anything these 2.5 weeks will allow me
to get even further ahead since I'm pretty sure I can at least bring my laptop with me and
get some writing done.

I will see you October 11th, same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Well, did you miss me?! From your comments on 16 it would seem some of you did! I hope you survived the wait, and I want to thank you all for being patient. My trip was to visit a friend who's about to have a baby, and we decorated her nursery and everything, it was excellent (even though she chose owls as the theme instead of BatB but what can you do). I do intend to finish responding to everyone's comments but it's getting pretty late so I think I'm going to post now and then get some sleep...

And now, Chapter Seventeen, in which Etienne gets told.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Etienne has never felt himself to be a coward. Has he not stood before three different men, on three different occasions, perfectly willing to be shot through the heart? Surely that is bravery. And yet even as he savors the taste of Belle on his tongue, he knows he has done something if not cowardly then perhaps not quite brave, either.

He blames her, naturally. If she had only shown a proper amount of gratitude the night before… If she had only stayed for him, or for the pleasure he could bring her to, rather than requiring blackmail to hold her… Had she stayed, her father’s treatment could have been a gift to her, something she would appreciate more than the fortune’s worth of gowns he’s purchased. But he had been forced to use it for leverage instead – though he isn’t sure what difference it makes. It makes his head throb, trying to determine whether he meant it to be or not, but he just isn’t certain. All he knows it that leverage is what it was in the end, and it displeases him.

Sleep had not come easily, after. Not even the warmth of her beside him could lull him into anything like rest. He should have woken her then, he sees that now, should have pulled her under him and taken her until he was sated enough to close his eyes. Made her come, or not, just as he chose. But instead he’d crawled out of bed, oh so careful not to disturb her, and wandered to the nearest room with a brandy decanter. That had done the trick, eventually, though he can’t say this pounding headache as punishment for overindulgence is any better than the exhaustion of a sleepless night. It’s familiar at least, when somehow nothing else is.

This – whatever it is he felt on seeing her in his workroom – is it fear? He isn’t certain, but then that’s where his cowardice comes in. He doesn’t want to know what it is. Whatever it is, there is no reason for it. Aristocratic ladies, the ladies of the court, are all well-educated, well-spoken, intelligent, although he could not possibly care less about any of that. So long as they are willing to spread their legs he is content, and Belle is no different. The fact that she shares his interest in Shakespeare and Newton and tinkering is nothing more than a footnote to the entire novel of his desire for her, for her hands and her mouth and her cunt. Hadn’t he proven it just now? To her and to himself, both?

He stares at her, at her wide dark eyes still unfocused, her cheeks a becoming pink, her lips swollen from the pressure of his palm over her mouth, and is satisfied that he has proven it most thoroughly…
But he still thinks it wasn’t quite brave of him. Why should he have to prove anything to her? She is just a serving girl, after all. An inconsequential peasant who has caught his fancy for this little while. Next week, the week after, soon enough, he’ll replace her with the Marquise or some other courtier and be happy enough to do so. He grows bored easily. He has nothing whatever to fear.

Delicate face still red with orgasm and embarrassment, Belle hops off the worktable and turns her back to the room. Still fighting for composure, he assumes. It had been unkind, perhaps, to give her so much pleasure so quickly even knowing Lumiere would join them shortly – though that had been part of the appeal. It had seemed important for some reason that Lumiere know his master is not so inept as the maître d’ supposes. Well, he knows now. Based on nothing more than Belle’s dazed expression, it must be obvious just what he was doing to her mere moments before.

Etienne glances at Lumiere and sees that yes, he knows, but no, it’s not as vindicating as Etienne had expected. For one thing, Lumiere is clearly not impressed; he has the temerity to roll his eyes and shake his head as though Etienne has played some pathetic and juvenile prank. But for another, he knows that if Belle realized Lumiere could easily tell what had just happened between them, she would be humiliated. Etienne himself has never cared much to keep his sexual exploits private – obviously – but Belle is modest and he feels somehow wrong for violating that, despite the fact that she has no idea.

It’s all very confusing. Even his cock is confused by all the guilt, though he can’t say he’s sorry he’s no longer hard. With Lumiere in the room it serves no purpose.

“Will there be anything else, Mademoiselle Brescond?” Lumiere asks, and Etienne opens his mouth to admonish Lumiere for his familiarity – before realizing he technically hasn’t been overly familiar at all. Yet the tone of his voice, the look in his eyes – something about his expression has violated that rule, the spirit of it if not the letter. Etienne settles for glaring at Lumiere, which the provoking man blithely ignores.

“Hmmm?” Belle responds, turning and blinking as though surprised to see anyone standing there. “Oh, no, nothing, thank you…”

Guilt or not, Etienne can’t help smirking at Lumiere in this instance. With a final roll of his eyes and overly elaborate bow, Lumiere exits stage left, and good riddance. Etienne turns his attention to Belle instead. She is now kneeling by the crates against the wall, digging through them intently. Not the way he has often imagined her on her knees, no, but the gentle smile curving her lips seems to suggest that her discomfort has passed. He has seen a similar expression on other women before – usually upon receipt of a sumptuous gown or extravagant piece of jewelry.

He wants to be annoyed that she would so obviously rather receive a box of random junk than any of the gifts he’s given her, but can’t quite bring himself to be. For perhaps the first time in his presence she seems completely at ease, fully absorbed in her work. Not the way he has often imagined her on her knees, no, but the gentle smile curving her lips seems to suggest that her discomfort has passed. He has seen a similar expression on other women before – usually upon receipt of a sumptuous gown or extravagant piece of jewelry.

He asks, voice full of genuine curiosity. He has tinkered in the past as he said, but always following some well thought out plan, using components expressly manufactured for his needs. This random collection of gears, rope, pipes and pulleys refuses to arrange itself into any useful thing in Etienne’s mind.

As with Lumiere earlier, she looks up at him in surprise, as though she’d genuinely forgotten his very existence. He supposes he ought to be insulted, but finds it endearing instead.
“I intend to perform a few experiments based on my previous attempts but using the precepts and calculus from the *Principia,*” she says.

“Yes, but why?’

“I’m – I want to build a machine.” Her answer is hesitant, truthful because she has to be but vague as though hiding something.

“What kind of machine?”

“It’s, well –” She reaches down to retrieve something from an apron pocket before realizing she is wearing a silk gown sans apron, of course. “If I had my notebook I could show you. My goal until recently has always been to build a laundry machine to use in the well at the center of town, just large enough to attend to my own work. More time to read, you see. But now –”

“Now?”

Her dark eyes kindle with excitement and enthusiasm, sparkling is a way he’s never seen before, not in her and not in anyone else. It’s entrancing, her passion, though he could wish it were directed at him instead.

“Now I envision the machine on a much larger scale, large enough to handle all the laundry of the Palais. It would require supervision but nothing like the number of women needed now. Plumette tells me she spends ten hours a day washing clothes and linens!”

Etienne shrugs. “Probably. What does it matter? She’s paid well enough for it.”

“In Villeneuve, in my spare time, I like to teach the young girls to read,” Belle says, apropos of nothing. “The schoolmaster doesn’t appreciate it, of course. He thinks it’s bad enough that I myself can read. But aristocratic women are all literate, are they not?”

Another shrug. “More or less. I daresay they *can* read – whether or not they actually enjoy it is something else altogether.”

“Why should peasant women and serving girls not be literate as well? If there were time for them to learn, time which would not detract from their duties…”

“Peasants and servants don’t want to learn to read,” Etienne informs her. “Most of them aren’t intelligent enough to manage it anyway. Everyone knows that.”

“Oh, do they?” Belle asks, glaring. “I wonder if anyone has ever bothered to ask.”

“Come, Belle, this is too much! They’ll begin to have ideas above their station –”

“As I have ideas above my station?”

“That’s different. You were already far above your station. It’s just that now you dress like it.”

She doesn’t appreciate that, he can tell by the way her lips thin and eyes narrow, but he cannot for the life of him imagine why – he is complimenting her, her refinement and carriage and manners. Intelligent as she is, she still doesn’t seem to realize it. He thinks of her delicate hands, the roughness of them, so different from women he has known before, and so wrong, too. She was clearly never meant to be a peasant. Now that she is to remain, her palms will become smooth again, as the work he has for her is significantly less arduous…
“Will you agree?” she asks, and Etienne realizes that she never stopped talking but he has missed every word.

“Forgive me,” he says, giving her his most charming smile. “I was thinking of something else.”

He allows his eyes to travel over her, from the fading marks at her throat – which he will delight in replacing – all the way down to the hem of her brocade silk gown, leaving her in no doubt of what precisely he was thinking about. She blushes becomingly of course, but again does not seem to appreciate it.

“I was explaining the experiments I plan, and asking whether I might build a machine for you if their results are favorable.”

“A laundry machine?”

“Yes. As I said.” There is a tightness to her voice that reminds him, disconcertingly, of Lumiere at his most irritated.

“But you don’t just want to build the machine,” he points out. “Once it’s built you wish to teach my servants to read – at my expense – correct?”

“If it won’t detract from their duties – ”

“Why do you care?” It is this point which confuses him. “They don’t seem to.”

“Plumette does,” Belle answers quietly. “She told me so.”

He sighs, his conviction wavering. Naturally he has a soft spot for Plumette. How can he not, after Versailles? And, much as he would like to ignore it, he has something of a soft spot for Belle also. It wouldn’t do for her to know any of this, however. He looks at her, wondering what he can ask of her, what he wants from her, what concessions he will demand. A familiar image flits through his mind again, her on her knees, but he doesn’t think that’s quite… Not what he wants from this, not now.

“I will consider allowing you to build your machine,” he tells her finally. “In exchange for this consideration, you will attend upcoming court functions.”

“But – ”

“After this last week, the courtiers are restless. My schedule will be demanding, and if you do not attend with me, I will never see you. This defeats the purpose of having you to hand,” he points out.

The dread in her face is so extreme he almost laughs at it. Imagine her being afraid of a few courtiers, when she is so brave in so many other respects! He cannot imagine any other woman standing up to him as she has done. Even now he bargains with her rather than ordering her because she has already dared to refuse him once.

“You could ask, you know,” she says, examining him as though he’s a particularly interesting insect under her microscope – or under his, as he has one and must assume she does not.

“Ask?” The concept is utterly foreign to him. “Why should I ask?”

“I might choose to agree of my own accord. You don’t always have to – It doesn’t always have to be a transaction.”
It’s a beguiling concept, the thought that she might simply agree to join him for dinner just because he wants her to – perhaps because she wants the same. Was that his mistake, that first time he ordered her? He is not used to asking anyone for anything – but then he is not used to bargaining, either.

“Will you join me tonight then?”

“No.”

Whatever nascent warmth he’d felt in his chest burns out, and he glares. “But you said – ”

“I said I might choose to. It’s not asking if I don’t have a choice,” she points out reasonably.

He simply glares at her, and anxiety seeps into her serene expression.

“Etienne, please,” she begins. “I am not… With other people, even my own class, I’m never – ”

“This or nothing, Belle. If you wish to build your machine…”

He can see her throat work as she swallows, then squares her shoulders and nods. “Very well. And teaching the women to read?”

“We’ll address that when the time comes,” he says. If it comes. Her project sounds ambitious and though he knows she is intelligent he is not certain she can achieve her desired results in the end. He rather hopes she can’t and they never have to deal with it. She doesn’t like his response, of course, but what choice does she have?

“Very well, Your Highness,” she says, deliberately.

“Belle,” he warns.

She turns her back to him. To him! He knows she does it purposely, knows she means to insult him, but he chooses to believe she simply needs to search through her crate again. Her hands pick through the junk, and then she is fully absorbed in her work once more.

He says her name again, anxious for her attention, but she barely glances at him.

“You should go,” she tells him, shocking him to his very core.

“You do not give the orders here.”

“What? Oh. Will you please go?” she asks sweetly.

“Why should I?”

“You make me nervous,” she answers immediately. “I cannot conduct my experiments with you… Standing there, looking like that… Looking at me like that… Yes, like that exactly! Stop.”

He ceases undressing her with his eyes – he’d only done it to annoy her, anyway. Later he’ll undress her in truth and make her regret her rebellion, or be grateful for it. Somehow, he’s smiling, all his anger disarmed. He knows he makes her nervous, of course, but he enjoys that she admits it so straightforwardly. She is not coy, his Belle.

“As you wish,” he murmurs, giving her an elegant bow worthy of Lumiere.

She doesn’t notice.
With a sigh he exits the workroom and makes his way out of the north wing. It is the oldest part of the castle, the remains of the original medieval Cite de Villeneuve stronghold which once protected the entire region. Some ancestor of his demolished most of it a century or so before, leaving the main portion of the central keep standing and building around it. It is unfortunately drafty in the winter and unbearable in the summer heat, and therefore used only for storage, but he likes the look of it, the heavy stone blocks, the single remaining tower with its narrow stairs and narrow windows. It is beautiful in its own way. He wonders if Belle can see it.

Upon entering the east wing, he turns to the nearest available footman – who stands wide-eyed with terror upon being spoken to by the Dauphin himself.

“Fetch Mrs. Potts to my study,” Etienne orders.

“Your - Your study, Your - Your Highness?” the young man stutters, and Etienne almost mocks him for it before he is distracted by the footman’s words.

“Perhaps not… Perhaps the library instead,” he says with a smirk.

The footman bows low, looks up, hesitates, bows even lower and then retreats with unseemly haste. Etienne thinks he will have to have a conversation with Lumiere; his standards are clearly slipping.

Shaking his head, he throws open the doors to the library and moves to the center, spinning slowly and enjoying as always the glory of his most beloved room in all the castle… In all of France, perhaps in all the world. The library at Versailles is extensive, and pretty enough in its own way, but his father has never cared for the written word and has neglected it shamefully – at least, as of the last time Etienne beheld it. He cannot imagine anything has improved, especially without himself there to encourage it. His father would be happy enough to let it rot merely because his wife and son loved it so.

But the library at the Palais Villeneuve is beyond anything the library at Versailles could ever aspire to be. Larger than even the Grand Ballroom, rising almost the full height of the Palais, adorned with gilding and frescoes to rival the wonders of the Renaissance… It is as sumptuous and regal as it ought to be, to house such a collection of books as the one he has assembled. Belle, he knows, would love it, and he would love to see the expression on her face as she beheld it, but he also… He will show it to her someday, of course he will. Once he can convince himself he won’t be bothered to see the way her eyes light up, the way she smiles, the way such joy is never directed at him.

She would have stayed for the library alone.

“You wanted to see me, master?” Mrs. Potts asks, interrupting his reverie, and he turns to see her in the arched doorway. She is a handsome woman, and though he knows she has changed since his first memories of the young nursemaid who cuddled him when no one was looking, she is ageless somehow and ever just the same. The expression on her face is soft and understanding as always, although he isn’t sure what she understands at this moment.

“Yes,” he says, in his most commanding voice. Perhaps because she always makes him feel like a child, he always tries to be particularly formal with her. She doesn’t care – he thinks it amuses her. “You will rearrange some things for dinner tonight. Mademoiselle Brescond will be attending, and you will have her seated at my right.”

“I most certainly will not!” she responds.

“What? Why?”
“Seating her at your right hand is a good as declaring she is your mistress –”

“She is, more or less –”

“– and Belle will not appreciate that, not at all!” Mrs. Potts shakes her head at him. “Are you so willing to throw her to the wolves?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Do you think the other women you have favored with your – *attentions* – will take this new development lying down?”

Etienne narrows his eyes at her, wondering if the double entendre was purposeful or not.

“They’ll tear her to shreds.”

“They won’t,” he says definitively. “I won’t allow it. She’ll be at my side and I’ll be well able to control the conversation.”

“Even if you could guarantee that – which you know you can’t, Etienne, don’t give me that face – she will be under such scrutiny. She’s shy. It will make her uncomfortable.”

Scowling, he begins to pace. Little though he likes to admit it, Mrs. Potts is not entirely wrong. Oh, he can protect her from the spite of the court, he has no doubt of that, but all eyes will be on her. He doesn’t think she is shy, precisely, merely modest and unused to company… Still, he knows that unlike any other woman of his acquaintance, she will not preen under the attention. No matter how finely she is dressed, no matter how radiant she looks, she will not enjoy being observed.

Additionally, though he has convinced her to stay for an undetermined period of time, which in his opinion constitutes an agreement to be his mistress, he somehow doubts she will see it that way, and probably would not like the term. He doesn’t like it much himself – it doesn’t entirely fit. But that is neither here nor there.

“Well then what do you suggest?” he demands, frustrated. “What is the point of insisting she attend such events if I do not benefit by it?”

Mrs. Potts is quite as good at extravagantly rolling her eyes as Lumiere is – in fact he thinks the maître d’ probably learned it from her.

“She will be made known to the court and able to join in other events. That benefits you well enough.”

He scowls.

“I’ll seat her nearby so that you can direct a few comments to her,” she offers.

His scowl intensifies.

“I’ll seat her at the opposite end of the table from the Marquise de Merteuil.”

“Why should I care about that?” he asks, with as much nonchalance as he can manage.

“Oh, please,” is the only response she gives.

He sighs. She knows everything, *everything*. He wishes he knew how.
“Oh, very well,” he huffs. “Do you as like. You will anyway.”

“I will,” she agrees, smiling.

@ >`--

Chapter End Notes

So I have nothing against the library at Versailles; it's huge and beautiful and filled with like gilding and cherubs and books and all that good stuff. But the Beast's library in the new movie was inspired by the Biblioteca Joanina in Portugal, surely one of the most beautiful libraries in the world:

Stiff competition, you know?

Speaking of competition, Etienne is jealous of a library. He's kind of pathetic if you think about it...

See you next week (yay!), same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all your comments and kudos! I really do think you must have missed me, for which I'm very grateful :)

And now, Chapter Eighteen, in which things go a little sideways for our intrepid heroine, and someone gets stabbed with a fork.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

18

The Vicomte de Valmont is:

- Handsome
- Charming
- Sitting beside her
- Touching her thigh under the table
- Telling her to call him Sebastian

Belle catalogues these facts in her own detached way, observing everything but experiencing very little of it. Instead, she thinks. With his wavy dark hair – unpowdered, he must be vain of the color – and sparkling eyes, his open face and engaging manners, the Vicomte rivals Etienne for handsomeness. Especially now, as His Highness is painted and pretty as usual at court functions but the Vicomte has not bothered. That is certainly more to her taste than layers of maquillage, although Belle supposes Etienne has a reputation to uphold while the Vicomte… Well, whatever his reputation is, a less overwrought look apparently will not damage it. His coloring is also more to her taste than Etienne’s; she has never found fair hair particularly attractive.

And yet the feel of his hand on her thigh, the heat of it burning through layers of textured silk, is having no effect on her. She is not repulsed, not the way she would be had Gaston touched her so brazenly, but she is not interested. There is knowledge in his touch, she comprehends that instinctively, understands that he could do with his hands whatever it is that Etienne did with his that felt so good, but that doesn’t seem to matter. The Vicomte’s touch does nothing, doesn’t raise her heart rate or bring a flush to her cheeks – not one of desire, at any rate, though she is somewhat embarrassed at being touched so familiarly in public. His fingers trace the ruched trimming of her gown with insinuating delicacy but all she can feel is the force of Etienne’s glare directed at them both from the head of the table.

It is all very uncomfortable, as most of the meal has been. Etienne is not close enough for conversation, for good or for ill. But he is close enough that she can hear his various pronouncements and bons mots, and there is nothing good about that at all. He is clever, yes, but his sense of humor is cutting and almost cruel as he ridicules people both present and absent. The long table – a solid shining expanse of bois satine and amaranth wood, inlaid with gold and semiprecious gems, of course – echoes with the laughter of courtiers, even those who find themselves on the receiving end of the Prince’s rapier wit.
She can’t help but think with distaste that he is lucky he is so powerful, else every gentleman at the
table and some of the ladies too would surely have slapped a glove in his face at some point. But he
is powerful, and all of this reminds her of it, and she doesn’t like it at all. There is nothing of the man
she has come to know in this spoiled and spiteful aristocrat, and nothing to admire either – not that
there was much before. But there were glimpses, sometimes, or at least she had thought so. Watching
him now, it’s almost impossible to believe.

On top of everything else, she is uncertain of how to interact with those surrounding her. Valmont is
witty and charming, a shameless flirt, but Etienne clearly dislikes her engaging with him – the
Vicomte has been a target of the Prince’s pointed remarks more than once, and that narrowed blue
gaze is so intense that if looks could kill, Valmont would be really impressively dead. It is unlikely
that Etienne is jealous of her, of course, but he is certainly something, and now she isn’t certain what
to do. The Vicomte still has his hand on her thigh, is now sliding it up with intent enough to cause
alarm, is still insisting she call him Sebastian, and she doesn’t know how to rebuff his advances
without revealing her connection to Etienne. She doesn’t know if Etienne wants it known.

Even if he wouldn’t mind, Belle herself has no desire to confess the truth to Valmont or anyone else.
She still hopes her reputation in Villeneuve might survive this escapade, though she hasn’t quite
determined how, and all the ladies of the court have been eyeing her with as much hatred as Etienne
has been directing at the Vicomte. The two of them could be really impressively dead together, she
thinks without amusement. But unless and until that happens, it is up to her to put an end to
Valmont’s encroaching touch without the excuse of not wishing to upset the Prince.

A true lady of the court would manage it with skillful verbal manipulation, she supposes. She’s seen
examples of it throughout the meal, the way the women are able to cleverly reject unwanted attention
while somehow making it seem like the man’s idea. Belle has no idea how they’re doing it, and no
desire to attempt it herself.

Instead, she stabs the Vicomte’s wandering hand with her dainty chased silver oyster fork.

“Gah!” His exclamation contains both surprise and pain – pained surprise? – and Belle hopes she
hasn’t truly injured him even as she struggles to hide her amusement. His trespassing touch has been
withdrawn, thus she considers her gambit a success.

“You had something to say to us, Valmont?” Etienne drawls. “Or was that the whole of your
conversational contribution for the evening? One can only hope.”

There is mean-spirited laughter, of course, and she almost regrets that she has made the Vicomte a
target for the Prince’s ire.

“Well,” Valmont says. “That answers that question then.”
“Which question?”

“Of what you are to him,” the Vicomte responds with a sly smile. “I knew when he sent everyone away last week that he must have a new whore. Shy and beautiful, he said. Not too shy to skewer me with your silverware, I note. Bravo.”

Belle digests this information, reminded of her frank conversation with Plumette and Mimi earlier in the week, her fear that Etienne was perhaps having similar discussions with his friends. It would seem she was right to be concerned. She takes issue with two of his three descriptors of her, however. She is apparently beautiful, yes, but she is not shy, she is withdrawn – it is not the same thing – and she is not a whore, or at least she doesn’t think so. By the strictest definition, perhaps, yet she certainly has no plans to come upon the town once her arrangement with Etienne is completed. It was only her circumstances which had compelled her, and they have been vanquished, more or less – thanks to the Prince.

All of which is neither here nor there, and certainly none of Valmont’s business.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she attempts, wondering whether she should be offended.

The Vicomte laughs, delighted. “My god, where did he find you? You’ve no guile at all.”

She scowls, wishing that the power to dissemble was like reading or mathematics, a skill one might acquire with diligent study. Not that she has ever attempted such study, but she finds it impossible to imagine any amount of diligence would be enough to make her into a proficient liar.

Etienne scowls too, she can’t help but notice, though he does not seem to be looking in their direction at all.

“No, really,” Valmont says. “Where did he find you? I have never seen you before… No one has. I certainly would have remembered.

“You have seen me, my lord,” she informs him.

“How many times must I insist you call me Sebastian?” he complains, though she thinks that he is teasing. “I’ll wager you do not refer to High Highness by his title, now do you?”

Belle allows herself a prim smile. “I do indeed – in public, my lord.”

“Ahhh, in that case I insist you address me as Valmont… In public. We shall negotiate what you will call me in private once we are alone.”

She can’t help but laugh then, can’t help but find his flirtation ridiculous. His voice is a low purr, very attractive, but no comparison to Etienne at his most seductive, and surely the Vicomte is not serious in his insinuations. Surely he must know how little Etienne would like it.

“By all means, my lord Valmont.”

He grins at her, and Belle realizes she really is enjoying his company. “I despair of you, dear Mademoiselle! But now, do enlighten me – where have I seen you before? I must be blind, that I could overlook such radiance.”

Sighing to herself, she thinks that it is no wonder he doesn’t recognize her. She’d hardly recognized herself once Plumette had finished with her, though thankfully her friend had not painted all her own features away. Instead she had hidden Belle’s freckles with a pouf of powder and enhanced her lips and cheeks with a delicate wash of color, done something to her eyes to make them look more
golden than brown, and piled her hair up in a mass of shining dark curls she’d never have thought
her resolutely straight locks could achieve, much less hold. None of these touches are drastic yet the
overall effect makes her look ethereal and… Not quite real, like the most perfect porcelain version of
herself. It’s unnerving, truth be told. Add in the sumptuous gown of silvery blue watered silk
trimmed with ruched and pinked punchwork… No, she has never looked less like herself, less like
the serving girl she truly is.

“I refreshed your drink at the ball last week,” she says finally. “Claret, was it not?”

Valmont’s flirtatiousness seems to melt away, all the charm and flattery, to be replaced by a
calculating, speculative expression. “Are you in earnest?”

“Yes?”

“You were previously employed by him, a servant here in the Palais?” he clarifies, though it seems
straightforward enough to her.

“Yes.”

“I remember,” he murmurs, almost to himself. “You filled my glass, left… Anjou drained his glass
immediately and followed you… We did not see him again. And yet I cannot believe it.”

“What can you not believe?” Belle asks, filing the name Anjou away in her mind to be considered
later. “And why?”

“His own servant, under his own roof? He just – He never – ”

“Yes, it has been mentioned to me,” she says, impatience in her thoughts if not her voice. It seems a
petty thing to her, to be made so much of.

“You don’t understand,” the Vicomte says curtly. “His father – Oh, I cannot speak of it here. Would
you care for a turn about the gardens, Mademoiselle?”

She realizes suddenly that her plate has been removed, that the third service is over and everyone is
preparing to move to a special salon for the final service of fruits, nuts and confections. Others have
risen to mingle, including the Prince. His back is turned to them with obvious intent. It would be
quite unexceptionable, she supposes, to leave the table now. Etienne clearly has no need or desire for
her company, and her curiosity at Valmont’s words is a living, burning, gnawing thing, demanding
to be satisfied. She has wondered, many times, about his father, but His Highness has never deigned
to mention him in anything more than passing.

“I would, my lord, thank you.”

It is the work of a moment to follow the Vicomte out onto the terrace and thence down the steps to
the parterre garden spread out like a blanket before the Palais. It is lit by torches and certainly not
empty; various couples and groups stroll about, never wandering too far from the castle but enjoying
the clear, balmy night. The brisk air is a relief after the stifling heat and smoke and perfume of the
formal dining hall and Belle breathes it in gladly.

“Have you explored the gardens as yet, or am I to have the privilege of guiding you?” Valmont asks,
though she thinks he seems troubled, less carefree than before.

“I’ve passed through them several times,” she says.

“And do you enjoy them?”
Belle considers, surveying the wide, flat expanse before her, the carefully trimmed hedges and small decorative trees. The truth is that she has never had much interest in parterre gardens. She likes the geometry, the symmetry, yes, but striking as they look from inside the castle, up close they are squat, spikey things, all sharp edges and rocky paths. More than most she can appreciate the desire for order, but thinks perhaps that nature was never meant to be ordered so. She prefers the prettyish sort of little wilderness at the side of her cottage in Villeneuve to this, the most beautiful parterre garden in France – even considering Versailles, or so she has heard. It seems a tragic waste of space and labor to her.

“They are very impressive,” she answers finally, because it is true. Designing them must have taken months, laying them out and planting them even longer, and there was surely much mathematics involved, which she of course approves of. It is just… Not very beautiful, to the extent that even she knows it.

The Vicomte flashes her a smile. “Very diplomatic of you. I too find them somewhat uninspiring. Have you seen the winter rose garden?”

“No… I’ve never even heard of it,” she admits.

“Perhaps it will be more to your liking,” he says, leading her through the parterre paths looping around to the side of the castle. There is more terracing there, levels descending down the side of a hill, and suddenly she finds herself in a stone folly covered with white roses.

It is cultivated but not constrained, the roses climbing up the supports of the structure and making a kind of canopy overhead, not quite natural or wild but nothing like the geometric parterres above. No, it is all quite beautiful, and smells heavenly too.

“Do they bloom in the winter too?” she asks curiously, wondering at the garden’s name.

“No more than any other roses. But they are white, you see. When the season ends the petals blanket the ground as thickly as any blizzard.”

“Oh.”

She glances around the area, half-imagining white rose petals falling like snow, half-wondering how to broach the subject that had been so briefly raised at dinner. Valmont holds some pieces of the puzzle that is Etienne, pieces she needs to solve the mystery he presents, but she cannot for the life of her determine how to guide the conversation where she needs it to go. She should pay better attention to the ladies of the court, perhaps, to learn that skill.

“Her Majesty Queen Marie – our dear Prince’s mother, you know – had it planted when she came here,” the Vicomte informs her, sinking down onto a bench bracketed by rose-covered columns. “This was her favored residence until her death, and she loved this garden.”

“You have known His Highness for a long time, I assume,” she says in what she hopes in an encouraging way as she sits next to him. The cold of the stone seeps through her layers of silk but she ignores it.

“You have known His Highness for a long time, I assume,” she says in what she hopes in an encouraging way as she sits next to him. The cold of the stone seeps through her layers of silk but she ignores it.

“Oh yes, all my life, or nearly. Queen Marie was always very kind to me.”

“And the King?” Belle asks, too impatient to be delicate about it.

Valmont turns to her, mouth twisted bitterly. “Not for nothing is he called "Louis Le Vicieux, Mademoiselle.”
Belle blinks at this. “He is? Not to his face, surely?”

“Well not by me!” the Vicomte laughs. “I have some regard for my own safety. But he perhaps would not mind. I believe he enjoys it.”

She wonders, briefly, if he should be telling her such things. What would others think, were they to overhear? Perhaps such talk is treasonous. But she supposes Etienne is not likely to allow his longtime friend and his – whatever she is – to be executed for it.

“What does all of this have to do with His Highness… And myself?” she asks at last, hesitant. Hesitant to ask and hesitant to hear the answer, both.

“The King has any number of unsavory habits, not the least of which is insisting any woman serving in the castle be – available to him. I’m sure you understand. It is a condition of employment, more or less, though not one the women are always aware of beforehand.”

It is easy enough now to understand why Lumiere and Mrs. Potts were so shocked by – well, everything. But Valmont’s motivations are less clear.

“Etienne could never be like that,” she says with confidence. “But you are his friend, you must know that as well as I do. Why are you telling me this?”

“Why?” the Vicomte turns to look at her in surprise, his face somewhat closer than she might have expected. “To warn you, I suppose. His Highness has taken an interest in you, but you must know – he will never engage in anything that seems like something his father might do, not for any length of time. I’m surprised it’s gone as far as it has.”

“I still don’t – ”

“Myself, on the other hand…” He reaches out to touch her face, stroking her cheek, and she notes again, distantly, that his touch has no effect on her – though his words and now his actions are somewhat alarming.

She pulls away as best she can, but his hand holds her effectively in place. There is no fear, not really; Valmont thinks he is seducing her, or that he can, she supposes. As yet there is no need to actively struggle or anything so melodramatic. She has handled Gaston’s increasingly desperate advances for over a year, after all, and has every confidence in her ability to make her disinterest perfectly clear to the Vicomte.

“My lord, I assure you – ”

“Sebastian, remember? Now that we are alone?”

“ – whatever you might think, indeed whatever might be true in the future, at this moment I can assure you the Prince will not appreciate your interest in me. I suggest we return to the castle.”

“Oh, Anjou won’t mind,” the Vicomte says with a smile. “He’s always happy enough to share, and I certainly have no objection to him joining us if it would please you. But I could keep you, you see, whereas he never will.”

There is far too much to analyze there, more than she can properly focus on at the moment, so she addresses the least confusing statement. “I have no interest in being kept.”

“Ambitious, are you? You cannot imagine he might marry you.”
Heaven forefend! She can’t help the laughter that escapes her at the very thought. “Now I know you cannot be serious. Happy enough to share? I should have known. Let us return to the castle now.”

She manages to stand halfway before he takes hold of her arm and tugs her back down to the bench. Then his free hand is in her hair and his mouth is on hers and she is thinking that perhaps he was serious after all.

@>`--

HISTORICAL NOTES

There are kind of a lot of notes this time, so I hope you don't mind if I just add them here. If you're not interested feel free to skip! Notes won't usually be this long there was just a lot of historical detail in this chapter for some reason.

1. This is the dress Belle wears to dinner. The first picture is black and white so the dress looks gray, but if you look at the additional images it's a lovely silvery blue color which I think would look amazing on our Belle! I also think the simplicity of the trimmings would appeal to her. It's elegant and not overdone which I think Belle would approve of, although Etienne probably thinks she needs some pearl beading or something.

2. Formal meals at Versailles around our time period were served in courses and usually consisted of about 30 dishes altogether. The first course, or service, consisted of what we'd consider appetizers which would remain on the table the entire meal, followed by a second service of main dishes and a last service of side dishes, except they'd be served in mini courses during the second service. The final service took place in a special salon and was what we might think of as dessert. Etienne isn't at Versailles of course but he's pretty into being fancy so I think he'd be likely to maintain something like that.

3. Okay, a historical note on Etienne's parents. Based on clues in the 2017 movie, I've decided our story takes place in 1764 or 65. In the real world that was Louis XV's reign, but he was known as Louis le Bien Aimé a.k.a. Louis the Beloved, so not really a great candidate for Etienne's cruel father (although he was kind of a dick in his own way). I've reconciled this in my own twisted mind thusly: there were actually three heirs to Louis XIV, all brothers and all also named Louis. The two eldest died of smallpox or measles or similar, and the youngest grew up to become our Louis XV. In my alternate universe, the eldest brother survived. So he's still Louis XV just not the same Louis XV.

Our Louis XV was married to a polish princess, Marie Leszczyńska. But their match was political and based on a lot of factors that are constant no matter which Louis she ended up married to, so she's still Etienne's mother. In the real world, she and Louis XV fell in love and had a happy marriage for about 10 years, at which point he started taking a string of mistresses and making her pretty much miserable, which just breaks my heart :(. Unfortunately the fictional marriage I've stuck her in was probably worse, and yes I do feel guilty about it.

Thus endeth my long-winded historical notes!

@>`--

Chapter End Notes

So there's good news and there's bad news. The good news is that I've been chosen as a
volunteer docent at a kickass museum, which is excellent because I love museums and history and my life is kind of boring! The bad news is that my training is every Wednesday at 9 a.m., which means I probably shouldn't stay up until 5 a.m. editing and posting my new chapter the night before. SO I am tentatively moving posting day to late Wednesday/early Thursday, pending my actually attending the training and seeing just how little sleep I need to function. If I CAN post as usual next week I will, but don't be freaked out if I don't post until Wednesday okay?

See you again next week, POSSIBLY same BatB time, ALWAYS same BatB channel!

(12.17.17: Posting day is now every early Monday/late Tuesday.)
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your comments, kudos and congratulations! I decided not to sleep tonight so I could edit and post this chapter on my usual day, just because I love you all! I will always try to update on the usual day if I can, but don’t be surprised if it ends up a day later depending on training okay?

And now, Chapter Nineteen, in which Etienne almost formulates the theory of relativity, and Sebastian has cause to regret once gifting our Prince with a head-sized silver platter...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

19

He’d been painfully conscious of the moment she left the castle – accompanied. The intensity of his awareness of Belle is just one of a very long list of worrying developments that have only recently come to his attention. For example, he has discovered that as much as he loves the sight of Belle in the finery he gifted to her, he does not like the disappearance of her freckles or the complicated arrangement of her hair. He loves the sound of her laughter, but not that he is not responsible for it. He loves her presence at his table, but not the distance between them, not Valmont at her side, not the spite of the ladies of the court, and most especially not that Mrs. Potts was right.

He’d have protected her well enough if anyone had said anything to her, but of course no one had. They’d simply stared, as any new face at court is cause for speculation, especially when the face is so very lovely and he is so very well known as an admirer of lovely things. He’d watched them all whisper about her to one another, and remembered that is something he cannot control, never has been able to, and realized he’d thrown her to the wolves after all.

There is just something profoundly wrong about the whole evening, not all of it having to do with Belle – he thinks. He feels – uncomfortable, off balance, his silver gilt embroidered silk velvet frock coat awkwardly tight across his shoulders, his matching court shoes pinching his toes. It had been her expression, perhaps, all through dinner. She’d smiled for Valmont, yet all of his own jests had resulted in what he’d almost call a grimace if evinced by anyone else. His Belle is too kind, too sweet, to take pleasure in anyone else’s ridicule or humiliation, and in their time together he has found that kindness – endearing. But it certainly does not make her suited to life at court. He is who he is, who his courtiers expect him to be, but he’d been sick to death of Belle’s disapproval well before the final service.

Which, incidentally, was also just about the time she’d disappeared.

He hadn’t been watching, had purposely not been watching, but he’d known just the same. That she was gone, that Valmont was gone, that he wanted to kill someone – preferably Sebastian, but really anyone would have done. But he hadn’t, no. He couldn’t storm after them as he’d longed to, not without drawing attention and making everything worse – not for him, but for Belle, and things had been bad enough as it was. Guilt is not an emotion he has much experience with, at least not until
very recently, but he’d felt something very like it when he remembered the way he’d forced Belle into this dinner.

It had been enough, just enough, to keep him inside, enough to keep him conversing with his courtiers despite being unable to keep his mind on the game. All of life at court is a game he usually excels at. He’s good at granting the honor of his attention here, withdrawing it there, complimenting here, ridiculing there, playing his most ambitious courtiers off one another simply because he can. Simply because it amuses him to watch them scrambling, so desperate to claw their way into his favor and stay there – as if he doesn’t know why they bother.

Tonight, it hadn’t been amusing; tonight, he’d played poorly.

It was just… Distracting beyond all measure, the *tick tick tick* of the ormolu mantel clock. It is a lovely little confection of porcelain and gilding housing the finest movement courtesy of young Pierre Le Roy, delicate gears so beautiful in their own way but also accurate, the pinnacle of technological achievement – until tonight at least. Despite the chatter in the room he’d heard every single tick of the clock, felt every single sweep of the second hand, and it had been wrong, surely it must have been wrong. A second had never felt so like an eternity before. He’d been unable to think of anything save for the sudden lengthening of time (a most curious scientific phenomenon!) and what could possibly require so many of those interminable seconds compiled into minutes compiled into what must surely have been near an hour except that the most accurate movement in all of France claimed it had been barely a quarter of one.

He had been, perhaps, on the verge of doing something insupportable. Something like abandoning his own dinner party to chase after a peasant girl and his closest friend, which all the court would know somehow the minute he’d left the terrace. But the ticking of the clock, the beating of his heart, the tightness in his chest – yes, he had been very very close to doing something very very stupid.

It had been Lumière who’d saved him from himself – as per usual, though Etienne would never admit it. The maître d’ had caught his eye from across the room, and nodded ever so slightly, and slipped out the doors to the garden, and the knot in Etienne’s chest had loosened fractionally. Enough, at least, for him to casually escape the Marquise de Merteuil’s conversational traps, followed immediately by escaping her clutches. For reasons he does not wish to contemplate, the way the woman stroked her pale hand down the front of his jacket, then stealthily down the front of his breeches, had made him shudder in revulsion. Wrong, just like everything else about the night, all wrong.

The cool air on the terrace is a relief once he finally escapes, but he cannot enjoy it much. He feels strangely frantic at the thought of Belle alone with Valmont – strangely because he’d made himself clear enough to his friend with a fist to the jaw, and Valmont is not stupid, and neither is Belle. Neither of them would have any reason to arrange a tryst. Besides, Belle knows well enough which side her bread is buttered on. That thought is marginally comforting though not quite pleasing for some reason. And anyway none of it does anything to mitigate the sick feeling he has that something is not right.

He will deny it until his dying day, but in that moment he thanks god for Lumière and his uncanny ability to read his master’s mind.

Propelled by that strange sense of urgency, Etienne takes the stairs leading down into the garden two at a time, scanning for any sign of Belle, Lumière or Valmont, in that order. The formal parterre gardens are nothing more than low hedges and topiary bushes, and there is nowhere for anyone to hide, no convenient bower to disappear into – a fact he has lamented, in the past. Tonight he is grateful for it, or would be if the lack of vegetation had allowed him to easily spot the one for whom
he searches. Instead, it only allows him to see that she is nowhere in the main garden.

There is a moment for him to swear violently, and he takes it, running through every curse word in his impressive vocabulary of blasphemy. It says nothing good of Valmont’s intentions, the fact that he’d take her from the well-lit and highly visible formal gardens to somewhere more secluded. His fingers clench into fists when he considers just what those intentions might be – not that it’s difficult to guess. Belle is a beautiful woman, even more so tonight than usual, or so Sebastian would think. But that’s only because he’s never seen her freckles, never seen her hair down about her shoulders. And he shouldn’t. She does not belong to Valmont.

She belongs to Etienne, and his friend will regret ever glancing in her direction if he has laid a single finger on her. And if Belle was complicit, if it was her idea? Well, she’ll regret it too, although he’ll have to consider how to ensure she does. Normally when a woman he has an understanding with displeases him he simply dismisses her, but that will not do in this case, obviously. He has no intention of letting Belle go, much less telling her to.

He thinks these thoughts with every furious step as he stalks through the strange barren geometric landscape of his garden. If the two fugitives are nowhere to be seen there, they must be somewhere in the lower levels, the orchard or herb garden or winter rose garden. As Lumiere is also nowhere to be seen Etienne assumes he must have had the same thought. The maître d’ had a fair lead on him, and Etienne hopes he has found one of them or both of them – but not in an embrace, or anything more than an embrace, please god.

Suddenly, he hears a rustling coming from the direction of the stairs leading down to the lower levels. Someone walking – quickly, though not quite running. Someone much lighter of foot than either Valmont or Lumiere. There is barely a second for that thought to register before Belle appears at the top of the stairs, a second so brief he is still surprised to see her anyway.

She stands at the edge of the parterre garden, the silver silk of her gown seeming to feed on the moonlight, to reflect it back and glow with it. Combined with the strangely sterile perfection of her face, she seems otherworldly, fey, too radiant and too beautiful to be real. For a moment he is almost overwhelmed by it, until he notices her glancing around as though to get her bearings. Then rage spreads under his skin as he realizes she doesn’t understand where she is because she had simply followed Valmont wherever he chose to take her. The thought of her allowing him to lead her, of her trusting him, is intolerable. Not that he doesn’t trust Sebastian himself; Etienne trusts him more than almost anyone else – but not with Belle. They are too much alike for him to trust Valmont with her.

Speaking of Sebastian, where is he? If not guiding her should he not at least be trailing after Belle? Etienne feels curiously torn by his friend’s absence, both pleased he is nowhere to be found and infuriated that he’d leave Belle alone to wander, lost, by herself. Intelligent as she is, there is also a vagueness to her, a sense that she is easily lost in her own thoughts (perhaps because of said intelligence). She seems to prove it by drifting towards one of the stone benches lining the path and sinking down onto it, apparently without spotting him though he is making no effort to conceal himself. Even if he were, there is literally nowhere to hide. No, she is simply not paying attention. He has seen this expression on her face before, something flat and blank that indicates she is thinking deeply about something – perhaps her father, perhaps her laundry machine, perhaps Valmont… It’s impossible to say, but she is certainly distracted.

He draws closer, eyes skimming over her shadowed features, searching for something, some kind of indication… One thick dark curl trails down her neck and over her shoulder, directing his attention to the silk velvet ribbon she wears as a necklet – and a means of hiding the most obvious of the marks he left on her – to her delicate collarbone to the enticing valley of her décolletage, rising and falling with her every breath. These are details that escaped him before. He cannot quite think why until he
realizes that the curl caressing her throat was nowhere in evidence during dinner, was properly pinned up throughout.

He has raked his fingers through enough carefully constructed coiffures in a haze of mindless passion to understand what has caused hers to come undone.

The tightness in his chest grows tighter still, tying itself into a hard knot that sinks to the pit of his stomach. His feet guide him the rest of the way to her without any conscious choice on his part, and he stands looking down on her, willing her to acknowledge him.

She looks up, surprised, as his body blots out the moonlight, and squints to discern his features. He can’t help but wonder if she imagines he might be Valmont in that moment, and his jaw tightens at the way she says “Etienne?”, the lilting question of it.

“Yes,” he answers through clenched teeth.

“Is dinner over?” she asks, such a banal question.

“Are we to engage in polite small talk now, Belle?” he demands, and she blinks up at him.

“I just thought – ”

“You just thought you could leave a banquet hall filled with every courtier in a 10 lieue radius, accompanied by one of my closest friends, without my noticing?”

“Of course not,” she says.

“Oh, of course not,” he repeats with a snarl. “But you thought my obligations as host would keep me from following you.”

“Etienne – ”

He interrupts her immediately, resentful of the pleasure his name in her voice always gives him.

“Where is he?”

“The Vicomte de Valmont? He’s – ” she hesitates slightly. “I’m not sure. I wanted to return to the castle and he – Did not.”

“Surely there is no need for such informality, Belle,” he scoffs at her. “Surely he insisted you call him Sebastian.”

Her lips compress themselves into a thin line. “He may have invited me to. I did not accept.”

“No?” He reaches out to touch the single lock of hair trailing over her shoulder, feels it wrap all slick and silky around his finger. “Even after accepting his help with your coiffeur?”

“You’ve read the Principia,” she says, irritated. “Gravity is a natural law, no hairpin is proof against it.”

“We’ve had this discussion; don’t bother lying to me. You’re not at all capable of it. Remember?”

“It’s not a lie.” Her voice lacks conviction. “It’s a fact.”

“Ah, yes, let’s deal with facts – the fact that you were secluded in the garden with one of the worst rakes in all of France for nearly half an hour, for example, and the fact that your hair is falling out of its pins.”
“Is he?” she asks. “One of the worst rakes in all of France?”

“He’s my friend, Belle, what do you think?” Etienne snaps.

“I think – ”

“That was a rhetorical question. Do you have anything to say to the matter at hand?”

“Etienne – ”

She reaches for his hand. Her slender fingers are icy as they curl around his wrist, and he allows her to pull him down next to her on the stone bench, which is icy too. In all his silk and velvet he hadn’t noticed the cold, but pressed to her shoulder he can feel that Belle trembles slightly – although he’d like to think that a reaction to his proximity. Her dark stare lingers on his face and he has the feeling she’s trying to look through the layers of maquillage, to strip them away and see the features beneath.

“Could you just – believe me when I say that there is no reason for you to be angry with me?” she says finally. “Please. I don’t want to argue.”

Her short speech is full of sincerity, more sincerity than she is capable of manufacturing, and it brings him up short. This is not the half-suggestive circumstance of a few days ago, her leaving the bed in the middle of the night. She had left with Valmont under his own eye, under the eyes of the all the court, and stayed gone for an interminable length of time. Her hair is falling about her shoulders. He isn’t stupid. But she says there’s no reason for him to be angry with her, and she means it.

He allows his eyes to glide over her, engaging in his version of her earlier stare, trying to see the details of her appearance through his own rage. Her coiffure is mussed but relatively intact. She looks tired, pensive, certainly not like a woman well-satisfied or even moderately pleased. There is nothing noticeably amiss with her gown or her person… Or so he thinks, before she moves to cross her arms against the chill and the lace flounce of her pagoda sleeve falls back, exposing part of her forearm and wrist. The moonlight is bright, a colder version of daylight, and he can see the bruise, the marks of fingers grabbing and holding tightly. He has, perhaps, left similar marks on her in his passion but not in that location, and not so recently that they’d still be livid.

Any anger he feels is suddenly forcibly redirected from her to his supposed friend, any half-formed thoughts of somehow punishing her replaced by far more painful, permanent forms of punishment for Sebastian.

“I don’t want to argue either,” he manages, despite the rage choking him. Had he not told Valmont that Belle was shy? Had he not told Valmont that she would be uninterested in the usual games? Had he not punched Valmont in his stupid chiseled jaw and thought that was the end of it?

No, he thinks, he doesn’t want to argue – with her. He wants to pull her into the warmth of his embrace, wants to feel her trembling cease and then resume due to a cause other than the cold, wants to draw all the pins out of her hair until it ripples in shining waves down her back so that he can thread his fingers through it. He wants her to tell him what happened, wants to kiss her crown and her temple and her throat and promise her Sebastian’s head on that hideous repoussé silver platter the villain himself had once presented as a gift – then sally forth to keep his word.

Then again, he imagines she would not quite approve of his plans for Sebastian, regardless of what happened in the garden. Her kindness again. Luckily he suffers from no such handicap.

“Is dinner over?” she asks quietly. “I enjoyed it – ”

“Liar,” he murmurs, though in truth he’s barely listening to her.
“– but I did find it rather draining. Perhaps I could go up to bed? Perhaps… Perhaps we could go up to bed.”

He looks at her in surprise and what would be amusement if he could feel such a thing through all his anger; she’s never suggested anything like that before, and is suffused with red at suggesting it now. It’s different, he supposes, now that she is fully enjoying it, and he does feel a sense of pride at that. Normally he’d like nothing better, but under the circumstances… There is a murder to plot, after all.

Before he can respond, he hears the stupid little noise Lumiere always makes when he’s pretending to try to be inconspicuous. It is less irritating now than usual, as he intends that Lumiere will make himself useful. Etienne turns his head to meet his eye, responding to the maître d’s raised brow by gently brushing the lace of Belle’s sleeve aside under the guise of rubbing her arm to warm her. Lumiere’s expression as he takes in the bruise there is more irritated than murderous, but then the man is well-trained – not that one can usually tell.

He gives a fine display of it tonight when it counts, however, informing Etienne of Valmont’s location in an undertone, acquiescing without words to his master’s murmured order to join him there after Belle is safely returned to the palais, and offering Belle his arm in a courtly manner that raises no suspicion. Etienne tells her he will join her after informing the courtiers the evening is at an end, and within minutes she is bound for the castle and he is bound for the winter rose garden.

Chapter End Notes

Pierre le Roy was clockmaker to Louis XV and was responsible for several important advances in timekeeping technology. His inventions are considered the foundation of the modern precision clock. The accuracy of clocks was incredibly important in the early 18th century because they were used at sea to determine longitude. The British government, French government and probably many other governments offered massive prizes to whoever could build an accurate marine chronometer, and all the advances made towards that goal improved the precision of clocks in general. In Britain, a clockmaker named John Harrison won the prize for his marine chronometer, but Pierre Le Roy won the prize in France, and his method is considered more accurate and elegant than Harrison's. (But don't ask me how or why because that bit makes no sense to me.)

So, considering Le Roy's genius and skill, and the fact that some clocks had second hands as early as the 15th century, they just weren't especially common, I think it's totally reasonable that Etienne's ormolu mantel clock could drive him crazy ticking out the seconds while he obsesses about Belle. Especially since Etienne is into all that sciencey stuff. He would totally pay the royal clockmaker stupid amounts of money just to have a second hand that serves little purpose.

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Guys, I am LOVING the scholarly discourse going down in the comments of the last chapter! It blows my mind that you have so much insight into these characters. And I'm really moved that anyone would put so much effort into thinking about anything I've written. So thank you so much for coming along on this ride with me!

And now, Chapter Twenty, in which Etienne comforts Belle as best he can, and I'm not sure how much scholarly discourse his method is likely to engender...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The winter rose garden is beautiful by daylight, serene and quiet in a way that reminds Belle of the cathedral at Aix-en-Provence. Weak light filters down through the canopy of leaves and roses casting shadows as if through the leading of a stained glass window, but colorless, pure, like the white rose petals and the snow all around. It’s strange, she thinks, that roses should bloom in the winter, but here they are, petals unfurled and frosted with ice that sparkles as they drift down to land at her feet. They cover the snow, or become it, until she’s surrounded by them and the whole world is white as far as the eye can see. Then somehow she’s lying face down in their softness. She luxuriates in it, inhaling their scent and feeling more petals stroking her bare skin, her shoulders and back and lower, as they fall and fall…

He shifts somewhere behind her, and she can easily imagine his position, kneeling over her with his knees bracketing her hips. Now that she thinks of it she can feel him there, the warmth radiating from him, though only his fingers actually touch her.

“How awake?” he murmurs from above her, even as one of his hands moves up to stroke her hair then push it aside.

She considers answering in the affirmative, but the drag of her own hair over the nape of her neck is so distracting, and anyway she isn’t entirely certain that she is awake. This is better than awake, this conscious not-quite-dreaming state, soft and hazy and warm and so suffused with delight at every brush of his fingertips. Then he leans forward, pressing his sculpted chest to her back and his lips to the side of her throat, just where it meets her collarbone, and all thoughts of forming coherent words just melt away. Whatever sound she makes in response to the kisses he trails along the line of her shoulder must be answer enough for him because she feels his mouth curve in a smile against her skin.
He moves lower, stroking lightly down her sides in a way that makes her inhale sharply and shiver, lips following down her spine. They’re one of his weaker features, or so she tries to remind herself – too thin, too set in an infuriating smirk too often – but her body disagrees. She writhes helplessly under his mouth, trying to arch her back, desperate to feel more; he adds a flick of his tongue simply to torture her she assumes.

It is torturous, gloriously so, each movement so languid, so unhurried. He works his way down inch by inch until he finally sets his lips to the small of her back and rests his hands on her hips. Pausing for a moment, he turns his head to lay his cheek against her and tease her mercilessly with his warm breath on her skin. Those few seconds feel like an eternity to her, but she trusts to Etienne’s own desire, his own impatience, to see this through.

Thankfully her trust is not misplaced, and he shifts again behind her, sitting up in a way that suggests purpose. The feel of him disappears completely for a second, but then his hands are on her knees, urging them apart. *Spread your legs for me,* she can almost hear him think, and wishes he would say aloud, but she obeys the unspoken command nonetheless. She is past caring what she looks like now, what he can see – she just wants him to touch her, and if he has decided he likes the sight of her like this for some reason, who is she to argue? He rewards this bit of cooperation with a firm touch on her inner thighs and the heat of his palm meeting the heat between her legs, cupping her in a way that does absolutely nothing except infuriate her.

The fury subsides as he strokes her drenched flesh and parts her with careful fingers, slipping them inside with an ease that makes him groan, but it isn’t enough, of course it isn’t. She’s impatient herself, every nerve ending in her body awake and alive and longing for what comes next, the bluntness of him at her entrance, the stretch of him pushing inside – Except that isn’t what she feels. Instead he eases his slick fingers out of her then trails them up, brushing over a place he’s touched before even though she’d thought he probably shouldn’t. *I could take you here, did you know?* It echoes in her head as clearly as though he’d spoken it aloud again.

She had been shocked then, and is – well, she’s still shocked now, truthfully. But perhaps less so than before. That initial reaction has dulled enough that she can recognize that the way he’s touching her feels… Better than she would have expected, if she’d ever thought about it, which she certainly hadn’t. Still, the way his finger glides over her, circles around her… She’s sensitive there, and the sensation only builds on everything else.

There is some apprehension when he exerts a little pressure, gently nudging one digit just inside, but it doesn’t hurt, and when he begins to tease her in front with his free hand she practically stops caring altogether. That single point that he’d shown her seems to create a synergy of all the pleasure already filling her, seems to focus it and sharpen it. When he presses deeper, when he begins to stroke her inside in counterpoint to the way he touches her in front, it all feels so good that she pushes back against him, allowing him deeper still.

“Yes, ma Belle,” he groans, increasing the speed of his movements as she gasps and whimpers underneath him. “You have the sweetest little rosette, so tight… You’ll come for me like this, won’t you, with my finger inside you? Come for me.”

He leans close as he says it, close enough that his lips brush the shell of her ear, and she is powerless to do anything other than what he demands. All the embers he’d fanned so carefully flare and ignite, his touch and his words and his mouth the flashpoint that sets her so beautifully ablaze. She shudders below him as the pleasure races through her, spreading like fire in her veins, and he works her through it, stroking her firmly in front while pressing in further from behind. Her body contracts around him, and it’s so completely strange, so foreign, but it feeds the fire just the same. She cries out again and again and allows it to consume her.
Later, she will wonder precisely how he manages it, will even regret she wasn’t there to witness it, from a purely mechanical, scientific point of view, but somehow within the time it takes her to recover Etienne manages to arrange himself behind her while keeping his finger buried inside of her. Exhausted and drained, she is just barely conscious of him positioning himself at her entrance before he impales her to the hilt in one easy thrust.

It was precisely what she had expected ten minutes ago, but now she is surprised. Surely with all the… Preparation… He’d had something else in mind?

Perhaps he notices her tensing or perhaps he reads her mind, but he leans close again to murmur to her, voice low and husky.

“Didn’t I tell you I will want to take my time with it, Belle? I’ve not the patience now.” He underscores the truth of this with several deep, hard thrusts. Despite the exertion, despite the fact that he must be close himself, she can still hear the smirk in his tone. “Disappointed?”

“No…” she answers on a moan, with less conviction that she’d intended.

“But you like it, don’t you, the thought of my cock inside you that way.” Not a question. As though to forestall any denial, he curls his finger, adds some kind of pressure to accent the way he pounds into her, and she sees stars – not her imaginary ones but literal points of light behind her eyes.

“I don’t – Ah I don’t know,” she gasps. “Do you?”

It is perhaps the most disingenuous thing she’s ever said, because she knows perfectly well what his answer is. But by god, his voice – All throughout dinner she’d kept wishing he’d shut his mouth, but now… Now she wants to hear him. The things he says… Even when she doesn’t understand them, they affect her.

“Do I like it?” he demands, rough voice something between outraged and amused. “Do I like the thought of opening your rosette like a flower… Stretching you with my cock until you beg me to fill you with my come? I suppose it holds some small appeal, Belle.”

He grips her hip hard with his free hand, fingers digging into her flesh, holding her still so that she can do nothing more than take him as deep as he wants her to with every thrust. When combined with the accompaniment of his finger still buried inside, she can feel the ecstasy building again even without him touching that sensitive spot above her entrance. When his rhythm begins to falter, she knows he’s as close as she is.

“I will be your first, Belle,” he snarls. There’s a wildness to his voice, a tightness that tells her he’s barely holding on. “Your first everything, do you understand? The first to take you in every possible way – The only – Oh god – ”

Without warning, his teeth sink into that place between her neck and her shoulder even as he twists the finger inside her and presses his – his cock – to the very depths her body will allow. She can feel him coming inside her, the strong pulse of heat filling her, and it’s all she needs to send her flying again. She gasps the only word that makes sense – his name – and the light behind her eyes expands until everything whites out to nothing.

When she comes back to herself he’s already gone, the splashing of water in a basin coming from his dressing room suggesting that he’s cleaning up for bed. She’s chilled without the heat of his body over hers but filled with too much lassitude to do anything about it. Instead, she stays where she is and lets her mind drift, first to her dream, then to the reality of the winter rose garden and what happened there. Some time is lost somewhere as she thinks about it, because the next thing she’s
aware of is the mattress dipping as Etienne slides into bed next to her.

“Belle,” he murmurs, reaching out to touch her shoulder. “Belle, you’ll freeze. You *are* frozen. Get under the covers.”

“Hm? Oh.” He makes a compelling argument and she does as he suggests, all while moving as little as possible.

He huffs a laugh at her attempts to wriggle under the counterpane, then turns her over and pulls her into his arms once she manages it. It’s not unpleasant; despite the definition of his chest and arms, he makes for a perfectly acceptable pillow, and he radiates heat like the gigantic hearth in the palace kitchens. So she settles against him happily enough, even finding the energy to smile a little as he looks down on her. It’s too dark to see whether he smiles back. Still, she feels him run one fingertip down the bridge of her nose and over one cheek before following the same path with his lips—a single kiss to the tip of her nose and crest of her cheek, then a longer, softer one to her mouth, although she’s too tired to return it.

Sleep claims her for an undetermined amount of time, and only lets her go when she feels him pulling away from her as carefully as she ever pulled away from him to read. His movements are slow and deliberate and would never have awoken her, but the sudden disappearance of the warmth that had surrounded her throughout the night is impossible to ignore.

“Etienne?” She feels him pause at the edge of the bed. “Where are you going?”

“To put a rapier through Valmont,” he answers quietly. “Go back to sleep.”

Something doesn’t seem quite right about that statement, but her hazy mind can’t grasp what. A rapier is a thin, sharp-pointed sword used for thrusting of course, she knows that. Her father had once fashioned a beautiful handle for a court blade, all gilt and enamel, and had let her choose the colors… There are five basic parry positions for defense, which are numbered rather than named, and they can be applied to multiple stances and grips for a nearly infinite number of combinations. She had attempted once to work out the number of possible combinations within a single bout and then extrapolate the probability of that exact pattern of combinations ever being duplicated again in the universe but there were sadly too many variables and she had too little real knowledge of the sport to address the question with any accuracy. Pere Robert had suggested a fencing treatise, *Discours de la théorie et de la pratique de l'excellence des armes* by a Renaissance master named André Desbordes, but he’d never been able to find a copy so she’d had to admit defeat. Lately she’s heard talk of a new manual, *L'Ecole des Armes*, written in French by an Italian master… Etienne probably has one or both, perhaps she’ll ask when he returns. Aristocratic men are all competent fencers she assumes, although she’d also assume Etienne would therefore know that putting a rapier through anyone would injure them. So it makes very little sense that he’d…

She sits straight up in her nest of pillows and blankets, suddenly and completely awake. It is somewhat lighter in the chamber than she remembers it being when Etienne left, and Belle has no idea how long she’d lain there recalling every thought she’s ever had about rapiers while ignoring the fact that the Prince could be at this very moment stabbing one through his best friend’s heart—or having one stabbed through his own. And over her, which is just ridiculous. Etienne doesn’t know… Oh, she should have told him. She hadn’t thought, although she probably should have, that he’d direct all the rage he’d felt for her to Valmont instead.

Stumbling out of bed, she does something she has never done before: she rings for a servant. Even now, under such circumstances, it feels wrong. She is not to ring, she is to be rung for, but time is of the essence and with any luck at this early hour either Lumiere or Plumette will respond. This is the royal chamber, after all. Not just any servant will answer. While she waits, she searches for
something to wear. Her new gowns are all entirely unsuitable, but her uniform must be somewhere. She certainly won’t worry about Etienne’s response to her wearing it at this moment in time.

It feels strange, once she’s found it shoved under the bed and put it on, the roughspun fabric on her skin, the inexact fit. Strange isn’t the same as wrong, of course, it doesn’t feel wrong exactly just… Distant, not quite comfortable. But then the silks Etienne has given her are not quite comfortable either. She will adjust to them eventually, she supposes, and then adjust back when the time comes. It is nothing to concern herself with now.

The door to the dressing room opens just as she’s finished dressing, which is lucky, because the man who enters is neither Lumiere nor Plumette (not that she’d like to be unclothed in front of them, either). This man is Chapeau, or so she thinks – much like Etienne, he looks quite different without his wig and maquillage. But he is tall and slender and somehow elegant even at this early hour, and the pursed lips, raised nose and general air of contempt for her appearance are quite familiar.

“Good morning, Mademoiselle Brescond,” he says evenly. “May I be of some assistance?”

“Yes, please, I need to speak to the Prince. Do you know – ?”

“Where he is? Yes, Mademoiselle, but I am afraid I cannot tell you.”


“I believe His Highness was concerned that you might object to his morning activity.” Chapeau's tone is dry and slightly condescending, as though she's incredibly foolish for taking issue with Etienne waking up dawn to stab someone.

“His Highness was perfectly right,” she retorts. “You must tell me where he is, I need to explain – I need to stop him.”

Chapeau considers for a moment, then sighs. “Much as I’d like to agree – morning duels often result in grass or bloodstains, both of which are a nightmare to remove from linen and silk – I suspect His Highness will find that excuse unpersuasive.”

The valet speaking the word duel makes it real, and Belle’s desperation increases. “Please, he’ll get himself killed.”

“Doubtful,” Chapeau sniffs. “Valmont might be stupid enough to lay hands on you, but he is not stupid enough to murder the heir to the throne. It’s more likely he’ll simply die.”

“That is not an improvement! Can’t you just – ”

Her plea is interrupted by the double doors to the bedchamber flying open with impressive force, followed by the appearance of a disheveled Plumette.

“Belle, wake up! We must – Oh. You’re awake already.” She stops and examines Belle, eyes traveling from the kerchief on her head to the toes of her serviceable shoes. “That’s what you’re wearing?”

Chapeau meets Plumette’s eyes with a significant look, the two of them united in their scorn of Belle’s choice of clothing.

“Is this the conversation you burst into the chamber to have?” she asks, frustrated. There is a striking lack of urgency on the part of the servants which she assumes means they truly do not believe their master to be in danger. Perhaps such things are common occurrence? Perhaps he has had a glove
slapped in his face more than once, as she'd imagined before at dinner. That doesn't mean his life is in any less danger now; probability is complicated and not her area of expertise but even she knows that each engagement is a discrete event, the probability of injury no less likely simply because he hasn't been injured before (that she knows of).

“Of course not, but – Really?” At Belle’s glare, Plumette shrugs. “Very well. Lumiere is gone. He said something about standing as second for His Highness in a duel against Valmont. Did he hurt you? What happened last night?”

“Valmont kissed me.”

Plumette closes her eyes. “The Prince will kill him.”

“There is no need for that,” Belle says. “I can handle myself.”

“Can you?” Chapeau asks with interest.

“Of course. I demonstrated to Valmont that his attentions were unwelcome, and we parted quite amicably.”

Raising her eyebrows almost to her forehead, Plumette blinks at her. “Demonstrated how? A knee to the groin?”

“No, we were sitting, and my legs were hampered by my skirts. I simply held one of my hairpins to his carotid artery and explained that according to Charriere’s *Treatise of the Operations of Surgery*, severing a major artery can cause unconsciousness and death in less than a minute.”

Both Plumette and Chapeau stare at her in shock.

“You threatened to kill the Vicomte de Valmont with a hairpin?” Plumette’s voice is equal parts incredulous and admiring.

“Of course not! I shared some interesting information. The hairpin was… Unrelated.”

Plumette bursts into merry laughter, and even Chapeau condescends to look moderately amused. But an unwelcome thought strikes Belle and her sense of urgency returns.

“He could be using that information against Etienne even as we speak, Plumette. Do you know where they are?”

Plumette sobers immediately and exchanges a glance with Chapeau. The valet nods, and Plumette reaches out a hand for Belle.

“Come with me, I know a shortcut.”

Chapter End Notes

Charriere's *Treatise of the Operations of Surgery* is a real medical text, published in English in 1712. It was quite influential but I don't remember if it explicitly mentions how long it takes to bleed out after the severing of an artery. But, like, it's about surgery,
so probably, right? Both the fencing treatises mentioned are influential texts of their day as well. I recommend them if you have any interest in historical fencing, and let's be real, who doesn't?

In regards to the probability of Etienne being injured, and each duel being a discrete event, basically that just means that the outcome of any single duel is unaffected by the outcome of any duel before (um, unless Etienne died in one of those duels, then the probability of him being injured in the next duel would be 0). That doesn't mean that his skill isn't a variable, but his opponent's skill is also a variable which changes from duel to duel. Kind of the way that for any single pregnancy, the probability of the baby being a boy is (rounding up) 1 in 2. After four babies, the probability of ALL of them being boys is only 12.5%, but that doesn't actually impact the probability for any single pregnancy. Does any of this make sense? I'm a historian not a mathematician. If I'm wrong about this please let me know...

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Edit 12.17.17: My dad is doing much better, and updates are still taking place every late Monday/early Tuesday.

And now, Chapter Twenty One, in which I use a lot of fancy French fencing terms as though I know what I'm talking about, and abuse *italics*, and you all hate me by the end of it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The slate gray sky is barely lightening to sweet blush pink, just around the edges, as Etienne makes his way through the stillness of the castle. It’s only still in the west wing, of course – the servant’s quarters, the east wing, the kitchens, all must be bustling by now, but in his private wing everything is tranquil. A sleeping Prince has no use for servants until he wakes, which he never does before eleven if he can help it. Which isn’t to say that he never sees dawn break like this. He often falls asleep with the soft rosy glow streaming through his windows, and can’t help but think that he prefers seeing it that way, drowsing beneath the counterpane, to facing it with clear eyes and a clear head.

He had certainly not wanted to leave the warmth of his bed, or of Belle, at this ungodly hour. He’d *wanted* to ease Belle onto her back, wanted to spread her legs and awaken her with his mouth between them, wanted to feel her come against his face and again around his cock when he finally fucked her, and he is not used to, nor best pleased with, having to deny himself anything he wants. But he also *wants* to kill Valmont, or at the very least maim him, and arrangements have been made. All other desires must be postponed until such time as Sebastian’s blood stains his blade. Thinking of it had been enough to get him out of bed and down the hall and even out the side door, where Lumiere is waiting for him, sheathed rapier in hand.

“Your Highness,” he says, bowing so shallowly Etienne knows he means it as an insult. He has never encountered anyone else so capable of bowing with so little subservience, of conveying disapproval without making a single facial expression. The maître d’ disapproves of duels in general and this one in particular, which strikes Etienne as remarkably unfair. Lumiere at least ought to be on his side; that’s what he pays the man for, after all. But with the invaluable advantage of not being Lumiere’s master, Valmont has always been his favorite.

“You might at least pretend you’d like me to win,” Etienne gripes. “You are my second, you know. If I’m struck down it is your duty to avenge me.”

Lumiere casts him an amused glance as they trudge towards the far field designated for this early meeting. “Oh, yes, that’s likely.”

Etienne doesn’t respond, simply reaches for the rapier, drawing it while Lumiere retains the baldric. The blade whistles through the crisp morning air, perfectly weighted, perfectly sharpened, the handle
wrapped in well-worn leather. A most excellent blade for an occasion such as this.

He glares down at it as though it has done him some personal wrong.

“It’s called pistols at dawn,” he mutters, adjusting his grip en tierce to en sixte, ligne haute dehors. “Pistols, Lumiere.”

“Grass for breakfast is grass for breakfast,” the maître d’ responds, shrugging. “Doesn’t much matter how it’s served. Not that anyone will be breaking their fast on anything but bread if the Vicomte has a rapier in his hand.”

“You doubt my ability to leave Sebastian face down with a mouthful of dirt on the field?” Etienne demands.

“Etienne,” Lumiere says, his tone of exasperation nowhere near as lovely as Belle’s when she speaks his name. “Please. You’ll never touch the Vicomte de Valmont unless he allows it – for which you ought to be grateful, even if you’re not.”

“Grateful? If he had any sense of decency he’d have chosen pistols, followed by doing the honorable thing and allowing me to shoot him.”

“But he didn’t,” Lumiere points out, almost gently. “Because you’d regret it if you didn’t shoot wide.”

Etienne’s fist tightens on his rapier, knuckles turning white. “I wouldn’t have – shot wide, nor regretted not doing so. And I certainly won’t let him hold me off with his blade. I didn’t drag myself out of Belle’s arms for nothing.”

The supremely unimpressed expression on Lumiere’s stupid face makes it clear he begs to differ.

“And what does Belle think of all this? Is she starry-eyed over the prospect of you dying to avenge her honor?”

A smile tugs at the corner of his mouth, twitching it up entirely without his consent. “Belle? The only things I’ve ever seen her starry-eyed over are my set of Theobald’s Complete Works of Shakespeare and Newton’s Principia.”

Refusing to be amused, Lumiere observes Etienne steadily. “Does she even know?”

“I might have mentioned it in passing. I rather doubt she’d approve, but – ” He thinks of a single lock of hair falling out of its pins, a bruise marring creamy skin, and doesn’t feel particularly amused anymore either.

“Is she well?” Lumiere asks, the question almost a challenge, and Etienne wants to scream. That the maître d’ should accept Valmont’s word that nothing untoward happened even after seeing the evidence proving otherwise with his own eyes – it’s infuriating, not to mention perplexing. He knows beyond a doubt that Lumiere would never hold with forcing a woman – could never, after everything – and that the man is fond of Belle (in an entirely brotherly sort of way or by god he will regret it). Why then is he so unwilling to let Etienne do what must be done, for her?

“Well enough,” he says shortly.

“Well enough? Was she distraught? Crying?”

“What does it matter?” Etienne demands. “Perhaps she cried herself to sleep before I returned.
Valmont had the gall to touch her and that insult cannot stand.”

“Pour l’amour de Dieu, did you even ask her?”

Etienne slashes his rapier through the air, imagining carving a bloody X on Lumiere’s chest. He had meant to ask her, to coax her into confiding in him, to comfort her. But she’d been sleeping so peacefully, and the smooth line of her bare back had been more temptation than he’d had the strength to resist. The warm satin of her skin beneath his fingertips, his mouth, the ways she’d let him touch her... it certainly comforts him, knowing that with every first he claims for himself she becomes more and more his. And he’d been gentle, hadn’t he? More or less? But he hadn’t asked her about the winter rose garden, hadn’t wanted to break the spell he’d cast between them.

“I don’t have to ask,” he answers finally, slowing his steps as they finally reach the deserted field – deserted but for Valmont, that is. The sight of him standing there amidst the dewdropped grass in his shirtsleeves, seemingly relaxed, holding his rapier with that careless grace Etienne has always envied, is enough to fill him with rage. How dare he be so at his ease, mere hours after committing his crime? The anger is enough to distract him from the obvious, though it dawns on him eventually: Valmont has no second with him, and no physician either.

Etienne looks back to Lumiere, irritated. “Where’s de Tourvel?”

Valmont catches the words, though they weren’t meant for his ears. “You’d wish such a fate on poor de Tourvel, to tear himself apart over whom to serve as second? I didn’t bother him with this; let the poor boy sleep.”

“You didn’t bother him with a matter of honor?” Etienne demands. “Do you care so little?”

“It isn’t a matter of honor, Anjou,” Valmont sighs. “If you would only hear me out – ”

“I did hear you out. I slapped my glove in your face anyway.”

“My glove,” Lumiere mutters.

“Details!”

“Did you listen? I apologized to you, with all sincerity,” Valmont says, voice sincere all over again. “Can we not cry pax?”

“This can’t be erased with an apology, Sebastian.”

Lumiere groans at his side. “Etienne – ”

“No. I am not satisfied. Honor is not satisfied. We proceed.”

Valmont catches Lumiere’s eye and they shrug almost as one.

“Nothing for it, then,” the Vicomte says. “Ready whenever you are, Anjou.”

Etienne moves into position, standing just out of reach of Sebastian’s blade with his own rapier held straight up before him. It’s strange to stand there with him in the early dawn light, strange to feel the cold dew soaking through his worn boots, because they’ve done this so many times before – but never in earnest. The half-resigned, half-amused expression on Valmont’s face seems to suggest he isn’t in earnest now, but that is all to the good, for Etienne surely is. He imagines his friend snatching at Belle’s arm, gripping her too hard to escape. Imagines him yanking at her hair. Those things happened, he knows it, regardless of anything else, and those things alone are enough for him to
fight as though he means it, because he does. The Vicomte will understand soon enough.

“Lumiere?” Etienne prompts once he is satisfied with his stance.

“Gentlemen,” the maître d’ sighs without sighing. “We come now to settle a matter of honor. His Highness alleges insult was given by the Vicomte de Valmont on the occasion of laying hands upon – must I recount the whole? Can I not simply say allez?”

“Oh, very well,” Etienne huffs, slashing his rapier down in the most contemptuous salute he can manage before throwing himself into an immediate attack.

Sebastian isn’t expecting it, but it doesn’t matter; the second Etienne advances with a lunge, Valmont’s blade flashes to parry, faster than the eye can comprehend. Etienne knows the dangers of his friend’s speed well enough, and immediately falls into a defensive stance, but Sebastian makes no attempt at a riposte. He too is on the defense, and Etienne feels all the insult of it. It is the outside of enough to be treated this way, like a child who needs to tire himself out before being sent to bed. Compressing his lips into a thin line, Etienne unleashes a flurry of attacks en quarte, all with enough rage and strength behind them to goad Sebastian into a response. His blade whistles through the air from every angle, but is always met with Valmont’s parry en tierce. That casual, natural guarded grip is an insult all its own, near impossible to attack with and yet another sign that the Vicomte will not be offering satisfaction today. Etienne supposes that if his friend will not offer it, he must take it for himself.

He falls back into a defensive stance, mirroring Valmont’s en tierce, heaving for breath but purely for effect. Sebastian may be the… Well, the Isaac Newton of fencing, but Etienne is skilled as well. His form, his footwork and his fitness level are all impeccable, even if he does say so himself. But it suits him to lull Valmont into a sense of complacency, to make him believe Etienne has already winded himself in his rage. And there is rage, still, more than enough. The lock of hair. The bruise. Valmont’s contemptuous defensive grip on his rapier. Oh yes, he is angry enough for anything.

The Vicomte drops his shoulders, relaxing ever so slightly, and Etienne continues his campaign of confusion. He adjusts his stance, executing a passe arrière for no apparent reason. The pattern of footwork is an overly elaborate crossover retreat, and beyond unnecessary in the face of Valmont’s utter lack of anything resembling a lunge or attack. But he does it anyway, dragging his feet just enough to be noticeable, eyes glued to Sebastian’s face as his friend glances down, distracted by the poorly utilized move.

It is then that Etienne strikes, launching an attaque composée, a lunge from long distance combining a feint – which Sebastian falls for – and a swift attack – which Sebastian fails to parry. The point of Etienne’s rapier slashes down his friend’s cheek, leaving a thin red line from the arch of his brow to the edge of his jaw. Valmont parries immediately and then ripostes, goaded by the pain into an attack of his own. There is little speed and no strength behind it, and Etienne meets it with a parry of his own.

“The face, really?” Valmont demands, returning to a guarded stance.

Etienne grins in triumph. He is not jealous of Valmont’s looks, of course; he’s well enough aware that he is handsome, and there is also the undeniable advantage of being Dauphin and future King of France. But Valmont is vain, and Etienne knows this slash must sting for reasons beyond the broken skin. Besides, he finds it unlikely that Belle would have been enticed so easily into the garden by someone without the illusion of goodness in his features. She is too trusting, Valmont too charming. With any luck the cut will scar – assuming Etienne can’t sneak under his friend’s guard again to deal some more fatal damage.
Sebastian looks… Not angry, not anything like as infuriated as Etienne is, but he looks put out at least. Sulky. Irritated. Miffed. Trivial words for trivial emotions but Etienne will take anything over the boredom and amusement evinced previously. He presses his advantage with another attaque composée, feint, attack – but Sebastian is more fully engaged now, and it becomes a coup jugé as Valmont correctly anticipates and repels it with a lightning fast flick of his blade. Still, Etienne is neither disappointed nor discouraged; the fact that his friend bothered to anticipate anything shows he is being dragged into the fight whether he likes it or not.

For a moment, they simply circle around each other, feeling the newly risen sun on their sweat-soaked backs, Etienne judging how close Valmont is to becoming fully invested in the duel, Sebastian likely judging how much further Etienne is willing to push. In answer, he executes a simple but blunt coupé, raising his blade over the tip of Valmont’s, slashing it down and extending under his friend’s guard. It’s an obvious move but executed with force, enough to result in a mal paré, Valmont’s defense too weak to prevent Etienne’s blade from sinking into the muscle of his shoulder. Blood blooms like a rose on the white of his friend’s shirt, and Etienne raises his chin in a challenge.

Valmont rolls his eyes, more annoyed than pained by the hit, but he finally adjusts his grip en quarte and offers a serious and direct riposte in line with Etienne’s attack. It’s nothing more than a straight thrust, a coup droit Etienne parries easily, followed immediately by another coupé. Between the straight thrusts and simple slashes, they’re engaging much the same way they did as youths, but now Etienne recalls that even back to those days this has been Sebastian’s weakness: he’s so good he anticipates everything complicated. He could see simple attacks coming from five ripostes away if he wasn’t so busy running through potential attaques composée in his head, but more often than not he is so he doesn’t.

Etienne grins again, throwing himself into the most elementary attacks he can half-remember from his earliest lessons: thrust, parry, riposte; thrust, parry, riposte. The footwork he keeps more complex, dancing back and away from Valmont’s blade, darting close to land his simple slashes. And he does land them, more often than not. Valmont becomes more and more frustrated with every mal paré and accompanying rush of vital red. He lands blows enough himself, of course, more than capable of thrusting his point under Etienne’s guard, but it’s insultingly clear that Sebastian is not attempting to injure him. The pattern of blood on his friend’s shirt makes it equally clear that Etienne has no real wish to seriously injure Valmont, either, little though he likes to admit it. There is something satisfying about the spots of blood on Valmont’s shirt, and knowing he caused them, just as there is something satisfying about the pain from every successful attack of Valmont’s, but that pain is its own catharsis and bleeds him not just of the obvious but also of some of his anger.

It is harder than one might think, Etienne realizes, to maintain such fury against a companion one has had all of one’s life – even if he deserves it, which the new clarity afforded by pain and exertion begins to suggest he might not. But… The lock of hair. The bruise. Clearly something happened, something for which an apology will not fully suffice. Besides, if he backs off now Lumiere will be even more insufferable than he already is. Striking Valmont down, or allowing himself to be struck down, might be preferable to the silent yet somehow clearly intelligible I told you so’s Lumiere’s every look will communicate.

“Why?” he asks finally, dropping back warily but maintaining his guard, panting with every word. “I told you she was shy. Uninterested in the usual games. But you –”

“I didn’t realize you cared!” Sebastian snaps, winded as well. “You never have before.”

“I don’t care –”
Sebastian flicks his rapier as though to indicate the entire situation, the blades and blood, the sun climbing higher in the sky but still not high enough to indicate anything like a reasonable hour.

“She’s mine,” he says. “That’s all.”

“They’re all yours, Anjou,” Valmont points out even as he presses a new *attaque composée*. The feint fails as Etienne is too distracted to notice and therefore fall for it, and he parries then ripostes unthinkingly. Sebastian falls back and shrugs, though the gesture isn’t as smooth as it usually is – the match has taken its toll in aches and pains. “It’s never much mattered before. And don’t tell me it doesn’t matter now, I only look stupid.”

Sebastian’s words make more sense than they should, so Etienne ignores them completely. Instead, he (figuratively) cuts straight to the heart of the matter: “Did you hurt her?”

Valmont launches another attack, more out of irritation than any desire to cause more injury, and Etienne meets it all the while training his eyes on his friend’s face.

“I already told you I didn’t!”

“No,” Etienne says, launching an attack of his own, executing a *prise de fer* to force Valmont’s blade aside, leaving him open for a *coup droit*, though he lands it with less intent than previous attacks and falls back quickly to catch his breath. “You told me *nothing* happened, which is clearly not true. Don’t lie to me.”

Sebastian makes no riposte, as interested in catching his own breath as Etienne could ever be. Fencing this way, for so long, is no easy matter, regardless of fitness level. They’re both completely soaked through with sweat, never mind the blood, and there is not enough oxygen for talking and fighting both.

“What did she say happened?” Valmont asks finally, his guarded expression morphing to disbelief as Etienne’s silence lengthens. “You didn’t *ask* her?”

“He did not!” Lumiere exclaims from the sidelines, reminding them both of his existence – or he would have done, if even that had been enough to break the focus the two opponents direct towards each other.

“I didn’t wish to upset her further,” Etienne says, striking out with his blade in nothing even remotely resembling a formal attack. Valmont counters with an equally sloppy parry.

“Upset her? She upset me!” Valmont’s indignant expression melts away into exhausted laughter. “She terrifies me, Anjou, honestly. You are more than welcome to her. *Dormir en gendarme*, no?”

He emphasizes his advice with a beautifully executed *volte*, all graceful stance and flourishing blade, though it is completely wasted as he doesn’t lunge near enough to land the thrust.

“Terrified of Belle?!” Etienne waves his own rapier in Valmont’s general direction, barely maintaining the fiction of continuing their duel.

“I took her arm and kissed her,” Valmont admits, suddenly lunging the full measure to bring the point of his blade to rest at Etienne’s throat. He doesn’t drive the point home, which is lucky because Etienne never saw the move coming, too preoccupied with feeling sick over the thought of his friend kissing *his* Belle.

“She held a hairpin just here,” the Vicomte continues, blade indicating Etienne’s carotid artery as a compass needle might indicate true north, “and told me that according to some almanac of murder
I’d bleed out in less than a minute if she stabbed me with said hairpin.”

Etienne swats Sebastain’s rapier away with another prise de fer, speechless for a moment.

“Belle. Threatened to kill you. With a hairpin. My Belle?” It’s all he can think of to say once the power of speech returns. Strangely, despite his apparent disbelief, he has little trouble believing it; he just… Needs to speak the words aloud.

“Your Belle,” Valmont affirms, and Etienne feels a glow of warmth at the acknowledgement that murderous though she may be, Belle is his.

What happens next, happens too quickly.

The glow distracts Etienne from the fact that Valmont has resumed a guarded stance, playful now, flourishing his blade. Etienne is further distracted by the sudden appearance of two figures in the middle distance, approaching from the direction of the palace, which is to his friend’s back. He is still busy squinting, trying to determine the identity of the figures – though something in him knows one is Belle – as Valmont strikes forward in an exaggerated lunge, fully expecting Etienne to parry.

He… Doesn’t.

There is a chorus of horrified “Etienne!”’s in tandem with a sudden stabbing pain in his chest, literally in, as the blade sinks deep, and Etienne’s final thought is that it’s quite unfortunate that with all his skill Valmont can’t help but target the heart. It hurts. And then he does the sensible thing and collapses.

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes

Edit 12.17.17: My dad is doing much better, and updates are still taking place every late Monday/early Tuesday.

Fencing info: here [mostly about the Italian school but general information applicable] and here

French dueling code: here

See you next week, (hopefully) same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Edit 12.17.17: My dad is doing much better, and updates are still taking place every late Monday/early Tuesday.

And now, Chapter Twenty Two, in which things get kind of intense :O

See the end of the chapter for more notes

22

Unlike most of the people of Villeneuve, Belle has little faith in superstitions. She has little faith at all, a fact which drives Pere Robert to despair every Sunday. Oh, she attends Mass and recites what she’s supposed to when she’s supposed to, even bows her head and seems to pray, but this is partly to keep her Latin sharp, and partly to ease Pere Robert’s fears that the villagers will someday accuse her of witchcraft. They already think she is unnatural for her reading and lack of interest in the local men, he is fond of reminding her. Best not to give them any more ammunition. So he has convinced her to attend, and kneel, and pray, and sing, but has never convinced her to mean it.

The reality of Etienne lying still and pale, like a marble effigy wrapped in sheets of linen and silk, almost makes her wish she could. That she could believe in a God who would hear her prayers, that she could beg for assistance and mean it, that He could be swayed by her need. But she can’t, not really, and won’t insult a deity who might or might not exist by offering prayers empty of any faith. Instead she sits at his bedside and simply hopes. It is not the same thing.

Sometimes she drifts off to sleep, and dreams of the moment he fell. In reality she had been far across the field when it had happened, compelled by a strange sense of urgency to move quickly, to stop all the nonsense, until she witnessed the blow, at which point it seemed too late. Even from a distance she had seen the white of his shirt slowly saturate with red, seen it well enough that it had made her head swim and dimmed her vision around the edges, until only Plumette’s grip on her arm kept her upright. She reacts that way to the sight of blood – sometimes, though not always – and that is bad enough, but in her dreams she is so close she can see the look on his face as the blade pierces his skin, and that is worse, much worse. Because his face is not angry or frightened or pained, but strangely serene, almost happy.

She does her best not to fall asleep.

Everything had been chaos, after. With Plumette’s support she had stumbled along until they’d reached the men, Etienne lying on his back with the rapier still sticking straight out of his chest in a way she at least found extremely disconcerting. She’d wanted to remove it, felt an almost instinctive need to do so – the sight of it so wrong, so against the order of the universe, that she’d longed to right it – but the Vicomte de Valmont had stopped her. The blade was acting as a seal, he had explained, and was possibly the only thing preventing him from bleeding out there on the damp grass. She’d known this, of course, had merely forgotten in the turmoil. Charriere would have been quite ashamed of her.
She’d been rather ashamed of herself. The knowledge that she could have killed someone – Etienne – through her distraction had been enough for her to call her mind to order and make herself useful. Lumiere had taken control of the situation with the ease of long practice, dispatching Plumette to the castle to drag the Prince’s personal physician out of bed – “discreetly, please, mon amour” – then enlisting Valmont’s assistance in lifting and carrying Etienne. The Vicomte himself had been rather the worse for wear, white shirt stained with blood in a less fatal pattern than his unconscious friend’s, but more than enough to be going on with. Belle had looked from one to the other and nearly screamed at the sheer waste and stupidity of it.

Rather than return to the palais, which was at least half a lieue ancienne distant, Lumiere had bidden them all to the summerhouse tucked away at the edge of the tree line. It had taken careful maneuvering, and Valmont had collapsed afterwards, but the two men had managed to convey Etienne without dropping or jostling him, finally depositing him safely on a guest bed. He had neither moved nor made a single sound throughout the entire ordeal, but the shaky rise and fall of his chest had assured them he was still alive at least. For the moment. Belle had stared at him, at the rapier protruding up like Excalibur waiting for the one worthy to wield it, and had not been certain how long that would be so.

She remains uncertain as to the future, but the answer at this point is “at least two days”. Two days since the duel, two days since she had helped Lumiere hold Etienne down and still so that Monsieur de Tassy could remove the rapier then stab him all over again – this time with a glowing hot poker plunged deep into the wound to cauterize the severed veins and arteries. Even beyond consciousness, the Prince had not been beyond pain. He had strained against her grip, neck corded and muscles standing out in stark relief with agony, and she had used all her weight to press his shoulders down into the mattress. She had been only partially effective, no match for his strength; the Vicomte would have been a better choice, naturally, but he had been as unconscious as Etienne at the time.

Still, by the end, de Tassy had pronounced himself satisfied. He’d seemed remarkably sanguine in the face of the possibility of his Prince’s death, not to mention unaffected by the reek of blood and charred flesh – but then Belle had supposed that must be a requirement. He’d also seemed remarkably uninvolved in the outcome of his treatment, shrugging when asked how long the recovery might be, how to facilitate it, when they might expect him to awaken. She’d recalled then that Charriere had written of cauterization as a procedure of last resort, one that injured even as it healed and left the patient more susceptible to putrifaction of wounds, and understood that de Tassy fully expected Etienne to die.

At this point, despite all her hope, Belle half expects it as well. He remains still, bloodless and pale, but he burns, his fever climbing higher and higher. For all she has read she has little practical knowledge of healing, and knows nothing beyond the necessity of bringing his fever down – not how to do it, not really, not when cold baths haven’t worked and the wound in his chest grows redder and redder in contrast to further whitening skin. She can almost watch it happening moment by moment, as though all the color in his body is being drawn to that single point, blood on linen and silk but in reverse.

“Well?” she asks, watching as Mrs. Potts rests the back of her hand on his flushed cheek, pauses, then strokes his hair away from his forehead. That touch isn’t therapeutic but nurturing, loving, and her fingers tremble in a way that makes Belle nervous – no, afraid. The fear intensifies when Mrs. Potts doesn’t answer her inquiry. Instead, she stares at Etienne’s blanched face and traces his eyebrow and cheekbone with those shaky fingers. In that moment Belle would give anything, anything, for the housekeeper to offer a bracing cup of tea, or tell her everything will turn out right in the end.

“I don’t – ” Mrs. Potts begins, voice catching. “I don’t know what to do.”
“The doctor –”

“De Tassy will only bleed him.”

Belle has never quite understood the theory behind bloodletting. Something about balancing the humors or… Well, she doesn’t know. She does know that blood loss is what nearly killed Etienne to begin with, and can’t bring herself to believe spilling more of it will heal him. But everyone, from de Tassy to Lumiere to Mrs. Potts, clearly believes he is dying anyway.

“If it might help –”

“I’ve seen bloodletting kill more patients than cure them,” Mrs. Potts says wearily. “Etienne’s mother, for one, which is why he wouldn’t want it. I’d trust a spell or potion before I’d trust de Tassy with a sharp knife and a bowl.”

A spell or potion…

There is a sudden commotion from down the hall, sounds of a scuffle and shouting that draws closer until the footsteps halt right outside the sickroom door.

“Enough, Lumiere! I am finished lying in bed and finished with your evasions. I will see him. Now.”

“There is nothing to be gained by it, Seb,” Lumiere says, gently, and even distressed and preoccupied as she is, Belle is surprised by the familiarity between them.

“How can you say that?”

“Will you be able to leave, having seen him?”

“I don’t want to leave,” Valmont responds.

“You cannot stay here. If he should die, you might hang for it.”

The Vicomte’s retort is immediate, sharp: “If he should die, perhaps I deserve to.”

“Etienne would not agree,” Lumiere points out.

“Etienne is an idiot.” Valmont sounds on the edge of tears, or perhaps slightly past it.

“As I shall certainly tell him as soon as he awakens.”

“Will he though?” the Vicomte asks plaintively.

“I don’t know,” Lumiere answers, sighing. “I won’t make you leave yet, Seb, but don’t think I’ll let them hang my little brother, either.”

This revelation is perhaps the only thing that can interrupt the tentative plan forming in Belle’s mind. She looks at Mrs. Potts in shock, but the woman is still tending to Etienne. Even without confirmation, it makes sense, Belle supposes. Fact: Etienne himself is proof enough that aristocratic men do not always confine their exploits to their own class, and Fact: not all serving girls have the wherewithal to prevent pregnancy (not to mention Sub Fact: not all preventatives work). Does Etienne have…? she begins to wonder, then halts that train of thought as unproductive. Eavesdropping is equally unproductive but she returns to that instead.

“I’d like to see you stop them,” Valmont mutters.
“Go back to bed, Sebastian,” Lumiere orders. “You need your strength, either to flee or to beat Etienne to a bloody pulp once he recovers. I’ll help you.”

“Help me beat him to a bloody pulp?”


Belle listens as their footsteps retreat down the hallway and wonders if she should follow. She has a plan, or at least something resembling one, and will require assistance to put it into action. Still, it seems cruel to take Lumiere from his brother’s side at a time like this. She has never had a brother, nor a sister either, and can’t quite imagine what it would be like, but despite Lumiere’s illegitimate status he and Valmont clearly share a bond. It would be nice, she thinks, if someone cared about her that way, would be nice to have someone to lean on now, when she is so overwhelmed with thoughts and feelings she can’t control or understand. She won’t attempt to separate them even briefly if she can help it.

Instead, she turns her attention back to Mrs. Potts, though she too is distraught in a way Belle is hesitant to interrupt.

“I had a child once,” Mrs. Potts murmurs, running a wet cloth over Etienne’s face methodically. Her voice is distant, as though talking to herself, as though she’s forgotten Belle is present – as though she’s praying. “A sweet little boy, of an age with Etienne. He was still and pale like this when he died, just two months old… But I became the Prince’s wet nurse, and ever since then… I’ve looked after him all his life. I can’t – I can’t bear to lose him too. Please.”

The part of her mind that is always analyzing, always observing, notes that Mrs. Potts cannot possibly be talking about Chip, and further notes that Mrs. Potts is far too old to actually be Chip’s mother. But she tucks that knowledge away, something to examine later, and instead thinks about the anguish in the woman’s voice as she watches Etienne fade away. She thinks of Lumiere and Valmont, too, the way they love this spoiled, selfish man, and of the way all of this is her fault. The pain they feel now, the deeper pain they’ll feel if he does not survive… Her fault. And she…

Well, Etienne is spoiled and selfish and sometimes almost impossible to like, but she finds she likes him anyway, more or less. She feels something now, seeing him decline further and further, something she knows isn’t as intense as what the others feel, but it’s as intense as she is capable of feeling. Fear, perhaps, or just hurt. It hurts her in some small way to watch him suffer, and his death will hurt her too. Not as much as it will hurt everyone else, but she can only feel things the way she feels them, and it feels painful enough to her.

It is difficult to walk away, even if only briefly, knowing he could be gone – far beyond where she can reach – before she returns, but the longer she hesitates the less likely it becomes that anything can be done to prevent his leaving. With Mrs. Potts preoccupied with grief, Valmont and Lumiere comforting each other, Plumette finally sleeping after nearly two days without… It is up to her to do something, even if that something is likely pointless. As the only thing she can think of, she assures herself it must be better than nothing.

The sun is low in the sky, the air cold, as she makes her way from the summerhouse and into the woods. She is not quite certain where she is going. This search is never an exact science, even when setting off from Villeneuve, a path she is more familiar with. The late afternoon/early winter light is feeble as it is, and no match for the thick canopy of trees, so she searches in the dark, from an unfamiliar direction. It is then perhaps that she comes as close to praying as ever she has, her mind an endless litany of *pleasepleasepleasepleasepleaseplease*, though whom she is imploring it is impossible to say. They listen, or she’s lucky, and she finds herself in a clearing, seemingly empty but for a fallen tree.
The tree acts as shelter for a makeshift camp, protecting a fire and some ragged possessions – and
Agathe, the village beggarwoman, sometimes called healer, sometimes called witch. Belle calls her
friend, and she has few enough. Whether Agathe calls her the same is a matter of some dispute, but
she looks up from the pot she tends over her fire and meets Belle’s eyes. A woman of few words,
she does not tell Belle to leave, so Belle takes this as an invitation to approach.

“Agathe,” she begins, then stops. What on earth can she say?

The woman nods, almost encouragingly, and Belle takes a deep breath. What is she feeling? She
doesn’t know, aside from desperate.

“Agathe, I need your help.”

“You do? Or the Prince does?” Agathe asks, and Belle really shouldn’t be so surprised that the
woman already knows the reason for Belle’s visit. Overlooked and underestimated, Agathe knows
every secret in Villeneuve. At least, Belle hopes for Valmont’s sake that Etienne’s current illness is
still a secret. She’d hope the same for her own role at the castle, but isn’t stupid, despite previous
wishful thinking.

“I do,” she answers.

“Is it not the Prince who stands at death’s door now?” Agathe’s voice is low and soft but filled with
genuine curiosity. “How then might I help you?”

“It’s my fault,” she admits.

“You stabbed him through the heart?”

“No.”

“You insisted he challenge a man whose skill outstripped his own for the sake of your honor?”

“No.”

“Well then?”

“I can’t explain how, not in a way you’ll accept, Agathe,” Belle says finally, frustrated.

“You are not to blame for the path he walks.”

“I feel at fault. I feel guilt for this, whether I should or not. I feel – ” She stops again, not sure how to
finish that sentence.

“The Prince is selfish and unkind,” Agathe murmurs, stirring the pot hanging over her small fire. “Do
you disagree?”

“The Prince is…” She trails off, confused. “More than he seems. I think. Sometimes I think.”

“He taxes the village to fill his castle with the most beautiful objects, his parties with the most
beautiful people... And his bed with you. Do you disagree?”

She wants to, but she cannot lie. “No.”

“Do you believe he is worth saving?” Agathe asks. “Not to spare yourself your misplaced guilt, but
for himself?”
“Yes.”

Agathe looks mildly surprised at this. “Really.”

“Yes.”

She raises her eyebrows, shrugs, and reaches into the pocket of her threadbare skirt. The packet she withdraws certainly doesn’t look like anything special, just a small amount of something wrapped in a plain handkerchief, but Belle feels an almost instant need to snatch it from Agathe’s grasp and run back to the summerhouse.

The woman smirks, not unkindly, but very much as though she can read Belle’s mind.

“Steep this to make a tea,” she says. “How you manage to get him to drink it, I leave to you. Then pack the wound with the spent leaves.”

She offers Belle the packet, but Belle hesitates. For all the coin Etienne has offered and promised her, she has never actually seen any. The gowns he has gifted her are worth a fortune, of course, but Belle is still wearing her uniform, stained with blood and filthy after two days of hovering over Etienne. Even Agathe’s worn clothing is in better state. With a mental plea for forgiveness from the dead, Belle works her mother’s ring off of her little finger and offers it to the beggarwoman. The metal is worthless and the stones are paste, but it’s pretty and might bring a few coins if sold. It’s all she has, and she isn’t sure what she will do if Agathe won’t accept it.

“No, no,” she says, and Belle’s heart seems to dip inside her chest, but the woman smiles at her, soft and genuine. “Consider it a gift for a friend.”

“Oh, I couldn’t – ”

Agathe presses the packet into her palm and closes Belle’s fingers around it, trapping the ring in her grip as well. “You can. Let the Prince pay for it, once he’s recovered.”

“Will he? Recover?” Belle asks.

“Hard to say…” Agathe looks off into the distance, seemingly at nothing. “It’s more likely now than it was before you came to me.”

Belle nods, wanting very much to believe it. “Thank you, Agathe.”

“You’re welcome, child. Now go. Quickly!”

Belle doesn’t need to be told twice. With one last nod to the woman in the woods, she kicks into a sprint and runs as though wolves are snapping at her ankles.

Chapter End Notes

Does this count as another cliffhanger? I’m sorry if it does! Sometimes chapters just end naturally at the edge of a cliff, it’s not my fault...

Monsieur de Tassy, the physician in this chapter, is the fictional descendant of Charles-
Francoise Felix de Tassy, a surgeon who in 1686 cured Louis XIV of an anal fistula (much less fun than it might sound). His son, Charles-Louis Felix de Tassy, became First Surgeon to Louis XV. Our Louis XV, Etienne's father, is an entirely different person, but his physician is the same, and Etienne's physician is that man's son. Because I said so.

Bloodletting made sense based on a VERY WRONG theory of how disease and the human body worked. For this theory of Humors, we can blame a Roman named Galen, one of the fathers of "modern" medicine. He posited that the body was filled with various fluids called humors, and that disease was caused by an imbalance of these humors. Blood was one of them, and fevers and infections were thought to be caused by having too much blood somehow. Hence, bloodletting. This theory lasted long past the point you would probably think it should have, all the way until the Victorian era. As you may know, most diseases are not caused by having too much blood, and bleeding patients bled them of their strength, so bloodletting was likely responsible for many preventable deaths. George Washington, for example, came down with a sore throat which his doctors decided to cure by draining nearly 40% of his blood. I'm not a doctor but I feel like the 40% blood loss was probably more fatal than the sore throat... But like I said, I didn't go to medical school so what do I know? It wasn't unheard of for people to be skeptical of bloodletting however. For a lot of Western history there was this kind of tug of war between female healers and male doctors. Women often acted as midwives and healers for the less well-off, and passed down healing lore which was often more accurate and effective than what male doctors had studied. In a way, this tug of war partially led to the discovery of germ theory, or at least the discovery that hand washing prevented infection.

This was because a man named Ignaz Semmelweis noticed in 1847 that women who had babies delivered by (male) doctors at a particular hospital had a much higher rate of mortality than women who had babies delivered by (female) midwives, at 10% vs. 4%. This sent Semmelweis into a deep depression, and he became obsessed with discovering what caused the difference. After observing both the doctors and the midwives, he realized the only real difference was that the midwives washed their hands frequently. So, you'd think people would be like... Awesome, we can save some lives, yay! But actually, all the doctors were deeply offended by his insinuation that their hands weren't clean. In fact, the doctors who did wash their hands actually stopped for fear of people thinking they had dirty hands (which you may note makes NO SENSE). This basically drove Semmelweis to insanity, and he died in an asylum, ranting and raving about how doctors were all murderers.

That's mostly unrelated to the story except to say that it wouldn't be weird for both Mrs. Potts and Belle to be a little skeptical about bloodletting, and Etienne too if he blamed bloodletting for his mother's death.

I sincerely hope none of you are ever stabbed, but if you are, leave whatever you were stabbed with in place! It could save your life, seriously. Cauterization could also save your life, but only as a last resort since it stops bleeding but makes you more susceptible to infection. Also, it HURTS. So really just don't get stabbed, that's my advice.

See you all next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Edit 12.17.17: My dad is doing much better, and updates are still taking place every late Monday/early Tuesday.

And now, Chapter Twenty Three, in which Etienne has a long, strange trip (and I steal a bit from the live action Beauty and the Beast).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

23

Forever, there is nothing – not even time, or its passing, although at some point there is a sense that things have been as they are for longer than they should be. That’s the first thing he knows. The next is the heat, searing and overwhelming, all-encompassing, existing in a way he doesn’t. He is not a being, not anything except burning, or maybe a vessel for it. It surrounds him and fills him and he holds it inside and can’t let go, no matter how much he wants to. It doesn’t hurt. Nothing hurts, or maybe pain doesn’t exist where he is, if he is anywhere – there is no sense of place. There is also no confusion, because vessels don’t think anything one way or the other. He is, and holds, and burns, and that is all.

Eventually there are words: Days in the sun, when my life has barely begun... Not until my whole life is done will I ever leave you... He is singing, maybe, voice high and sweet, and his mother lies pale and still and doesn’t hear him. Her face is radiant and so clear, each feature sharper than he can ever remember them being, and it has been so long since he has seen her. It’s nice, even like this. Then his father has heavy hands on his shoulders, leading him away until somehow he is in his mother’s place on his back pale and still and she is singing to him. Days in the sun...

But it is night in the winter rose garden which is blanketed in snow even though it’s summer. The stone pillars of the folly are wrong, twisted somehow, covered in vines and white roses that bloom despite the cold – although he doesn’t feel the cold, is it cold? – and despite the ice. He lurks in the shadows and watches as an old man reaches for a flower and attempts to pluck it. The rose fights back, a protective thorn sinking into the old man’s finger, then: a drop of blood on the petals, a drop of blood in the snow. He roars in outrage with a voice that isn’t his own but is too much his own, and the old man cowers.

Then he is on his back again, fighting something heavy and invisible that wants to press against his mouth, wants to pry his lips apart. He fights but can’t breathe and must gasp only to have something molten hot forced down his throat as he struggles, or wants to struggle. He realizes as the assault ends that he hasn’t moved, hasn’t fought, hasn’t done anything except ingest whatever they’ve compelled him to. His mother rests a cool soft hand on his forehead, strokes his hair away from his face, and murmurs “Don’t fight – You have to fight.” Even wrapped in this vision or this nightmare he knows this makes no sense, and also that his mother is dead.

He has a fleeting moment to wonder if he is also dead before he is sitting in his dressing chair being prepared for a ball. Plumette fluffs powder over his face to set his maquillage and draws a beauty
mark near his smirking lips even as Cogsworth glances at his pocket watch and says “Master, it’s
time.” A regal nod to Lumiere has the maître d’ leaning close with a candelabra, the flickering
chandelier dancing over his perfectly symmetrical features in the mirror. Suddenly, there is a sharp
pain in his chest and his visage morphs into an image of Belle, radiant like the sun in yellow and
riding away from the castle under cover of darkness. Her long skirts stream out behind her until she
fades away to reveal a reflection that isn’t his own but is too much his own – a hideous Beast caked
over with oily cosmetics, impeccably powdered wig perched between two curling horns.

“I can fix this,” Lumiere – now a literal candelabra himself – says, and Etienne doubts it.

“Wouldn’t it have worked already, if it was going to?”

“He’s still alive. Who says it isn’t working?”

“If he would only open his eyes…”

“Open your eyes,” his mother suggests, and he does.

He is lying on his back in a room he doesn’t recognize. It is not ornate enough to be within the
palais, but well-appointed to the extent that he knows it must be one of his holdings – one of his
neglected hunting lodges, perhaps, or a summerhouse. His body aches from head to toe, every
muscle stiff and sore, and he wonders if he fell off his horse before dismissing the possibility as
absurd; he is far too skilled a rider. Still, every breath he takes is painful, not because of the breathing
itself but because of the rise and fall of his chest, where there is clearly something very wrong. He
attempts to inhale more shallowly but the pain persists.

“‘Love can transpose to form and dignity,’” Belle recites as if to herself, and he turns his head with
great effort to look at her. She sits at his bedside with late afternoon sunlight picking out gilded
strands in her dark hair as she tugs her fingers through it, ethereally lovely even though her face is
drawn and lined, the delicate skin under her eyes bruised with lack of sleep. “‘Love looks not with
the eyes, but with the mind, and – ’”

“‘And therefore is winged cupid painted blind,’” Etienne attempts to respond, but between his
parched throat and general weakness the words are lost, replaced by faint rasping noises that trail off
into a jarring cough.

Belle looks up sharply, focusing on his face, and he doesn’t even want to consider his appearance
but finds that he must. If he looks half as awful as he feels, it’s a miracle Belle doesn’t run screaming
from the sight; she springs from her chair and rushes the few steps to his bedside instead.

“Etienne?!” She sounds incredulous and… pleased, and he’d smile at her if he thought he could
convince his mouth to move that way.


“Don’t try to talk,” she says. “You’ve been ill nearly a week. We weren’t sure…”

She trails off, and he hears the words she does not say, that they weren’t sure he would survive.
Honestly he isn’t convinced it’s a settled thing quite yet but there’s no point in saying so – if he even
could. It feels strangely inconsequential in this moment, as though all he needed was to see her one
last time, as though her voice speaking his name confers all the absolution of the last rites. Of course,
in the next moment he wonders just how much laudanum he’s been given, for him to think such
absurd thoughts. But it does feel good to look at her, to see her concern for him – although he does
not like the distress that lingers in her face.
“I have to call for the others, they’ll want to see –” She turns to complete her task, but the thought of her leaving is intolerable. He forces his hand to move, to catch weakly at the cuff of her uniform – he supposes it’s a sign of his illness that he merely notes that she’s wearing it, rather than being offended by it.

“It’s impolite to keep good news to oneself,” she chides over her shoulder, easily pulling free. He frowns, because he has never heard that before and suspects she must have made it up, but in the time it takes for him to think it through she’s already gone.

When she disappears, so does his strength. Perhaps it is simply that he no longer has any motivation to keep his eyelids open, but he can’t resist their sudden heaviness, can’t deny their need to slide closed. The darkness he finds there is a relief because it’s exactly that – darkness, not nothingness, an absence of light rather than an absence of anything. He could do without the strange sensation that his bed is spinning, however. It prevents him from sinking deeper into the unconsciousness that beckons, unconsciousness he senses is safe to immerse himself in and not a gateway to something more permanent.

“Etienne, are you still awake?” Belle whispers, and he realizes with some surprise that he is.

“Mmmhmm,” is the best he can manage for an answer, though he pairs it with the superhuman effort of opening his eyes again so he hopes she appreciates it.

She does, if the small but painfully beautiful smile on her face is any indication. He’d like to bask in it, like to wrap himself up in it and let it warm him, but she is unfortunately not alone.

“Etienne!” Lumiere and Mrs. Potts exclaim, almost as one, and Plumette follows them to his bedside. For whatever reason, she never calls him anything if she can help it, not to his face. The three servants hesitate then, possibly due to his appearance – which he again imagines must be dire. But they hardly look better, nearly as haggard as Belle, though not nearly so beautiful with it.

Without warning, Mrs. Potts throws herself at him, as much as one can while standing over an invalid. She wraps her arms around his neck and presses her face to his shoulder, and he can feel the heat of her silent tears soak through the clean nightshirt he wears. He finds the strength to move his hand again, twitching it out to brush her side and attempting to imbue that light touch with his affection and gratitude. She has always mothered him, even when he still had a mother, and more once he didn’t. His own mother would be pleased, he has thought sometimes, to know there was someone scolding him in her stead.

Lumiere leans close next, embracing him and Mrs. Potts together, and he supposes the maître d’ will deny it to his grave but there are tears in the man’s eyes even if they do not fall. He sees that Plumette’s do, unabashedly, when she peeks over the others’ heads to beam a watery smile down at him. The profoundness of their relief moves him more than he’d care to admit, more than he’d care to have known himself, filling him with warmth and fondness he hopes he doesn’t need to admit – because he won’t – for them to comprehend. It’s entirely worth being smothered by three sobbing messes of human beings.

Still, something niggles at the back of his mind, some missing puzzle piece.

“Valmont?” he rasps, and Lumiere gives him a significant look, the significance of which completely escapes him.

“He wasn’t certain you’d wish to see him,” the maître d’ explains.

“Do,” Etienne responds as affirmatively and briefly as possible, and it is this of all things that goads
Mrs. Potts into raising her head. She glares down at him with a slightly soggy version of her accustomed expression.

“Not now,” she admonishes. “You need your rest.”

It is yet another mark of his illness that he allows his servant to dictate this to him. He doesn’t agree, precisely; he rather suspects he loses consciousness, rendering any rebuttal moot. All he knows is that suddenly the room is empty of everyone save him and Belle, a circumstance he certainly approves of. He should tell her to sleep, probably, tell her to call for a bath, to eat, but the fact is that he’s too weak to string that many words together, and anyway he isn’t quite ready to relinquish her company. Perhaps he is less ill than he was, as everyone’s relief suggests, but he still feels as though he’s been trampled over by one of his teams of six perfectly matched carriage horses, and he never did find out what happened to his chest. Her presence distracts him from the discomfort he still feels there, and he finally drifts off to sleep.

The following days are a blur of pain and lethargy, the latter caused by the laudanum given him to dull the former. In his mind the cloying medicine is inextricably linked to his mother and her final illness, and he doesn’t like the way it makes him numb, the way it makes everything so slow and hazy, the way it makes it seem like Belle at his bedside is another fever dream. But he likes pain even less, so he tolerates it for… Some length of time. The narcotic itself warps time until it’s impossible to know how long he has been under its influence, but once Belle seems satisfied by his rate of healing he insists on tapering off of it. He almost welcomes the remaining ache once he begins to feel it; it assures him at least that he is still alive.

Valmont finally comes to his sickroom after increasingly pointed comments to Lumiere about the Vicomte’s absence, followed at last by an unambiguous command to produce him within the hour Or Else. By now he is aware that Valmont is technically responsible for his injured state, although he isn’t certain whether he knows this because he remembers it or because of the delight Lumiere took in recounting the near-fatal duel with unwonted glee. Now that he is out of danger Lumiere feels safe mocking him for it, he supposes. Any time he is inclined to reprimand the maître d’ he remembers the tears in the man’s eyes that first day Etienne regained consciousness and can’t bring himself to do it. By contrast Valmont when he appears is… Quiet, guilty, with no ease or joviality once he sinks into Belle’s chair.

By now Etienne has asserted himself in some respects and sits propped up in bed, pillows supporting his back. Wrapped in his shot-silk banyan and with his hair finally combed and attended to, he feels much more himself despite the continued weakness and the stubble which has more or less become a horribly unfashionable beard on his face. But Chapeau is in a huff because he wasn’t allowed to attend to his master during Etienne’s illness, and Etienne has no intention of allowing Lumiere anywhere near him with a straight razor. The temptation might be too much. Still, that detail aside, he knows he looks infinitely better than when he first awoke. Sebastian however looks terrible. He was injured too if memory serves, but that alone doesn’t account for his pallor or the dark circles under his bloodshot eyes.

He waits and waits for his friend to speak, but the days of being confined to his bed have made him impatient, so he probably doesn’t wait long. It just feels like forever to him until he is finally forced to break the silence.

“Well, it certainly took you long enough to come view your handiwork.”

It’s meant as a jest but Sebastian pales. “Your Highness, I never intended – It was an accident, and I never wanted – You know I never wanted –”

Etienne rolls his eyes, an expression the Vicomte misses due to having looked down at his hands in
“Valmont, do shut up,” he says, not without affection, and his friend obeys – possibly the best thing about being who he is. “Every member of the court has wished me dead at least once, and a fair few of them have put some actual effort into it. I rather doubt you’ll be the last. And I did give you cause.”

(He adds this last grudgingly, almost wishing Lumiere were present, if only to see that his master is capable of admitting mistakes in the rare case he ever makes any.)

The Vicomte considers this, then shrugs. “Fair. And it’s your fault anyway. I’ve told you again and again that you must maintain your focus during a bout but you never listen to a word I say.”

“I try not to,” Etienne agrees, grinning. Valmont grins back and the tightness in Etienne’s chest eases. He hadn’t liked seeing his friend in such distress, even if he did somewhat deserve it.

“Does this mean you’ll not have me hanged from the neck until dead?” Valmont questions casually. “I had worried about it, before.”

“I make no guarantees for the future, of course, but you’re safe enough for now.”

Valmont nods. “Likewise I make no guarantees of not attempting to kill you in the future.”

“Fair,” Etienne allows. “Of course, had you succeeded this time my father might have had something more to say about it…”

His friend sobered suddenly, leaning forward. “It was a very near thing, Anjou. Lumiere was practically begging me to flee across the channel – ”

Etienne snorts in a way that is probably most inelegant but it is only Valmont with him, after all. “As if you could abide the food – or the women.”

“ – and I was practically prepared to acquiesce. I swear, if not for Belle…”

“If not for Belle?” Etienne asks, confused to the point that he forgets to insist Valmont refer to her more formally. “What do you mean?”

Considering she was at his bedside when he first awoke, he had naturally supposed she’d helped care for him during his illness to some extent – a thought which engenders feelings he doesn’t quite recognize and therefore ignores. He knows she is intelligent and wouldn’t put it past her to know something of healing, but… Had she really taken such an active role in his revival?

“No one knew what to do,” Sebastian explains. “Even Mrs. Potts had given up hoping for your recovery – or at least expecting it. I was still unwell, you understand, and I don’t know the details of it. But I do know Belle went off into the woods and returned with some kind of medicine, and it… It worked. It was rather miraculous, really.”

Etienne absorbs this information, uncertain of how to react or how this news makes him feel. Pleased to be alive, of course, but Valmont’s use of the word miraculous makes him nervous for Belle’s sake. He understands that there was no miracle, only science, but her neighbors and fellow villagers are more likely to cling to outdated superstitions. He only hopes they, like the rest of the court, know nothing of his injury and believe him to be in seclusion with his new mistress – which is more or less the truth. Beyond that… He feels as though something is shifting, as though something is slipping through his fingers, but he doesn’t understand what. His head pounds – he is too ill for so much thinking.
“I didn’t know,” is the only response he makes, when it becomes clear Valmont expects one.

“She really is a funny girl – a beauty, but a funny girl,” the Vicomte muses, and Etienne finds himself alternately amused, annoyed, and offended on Belle’s behalf. “She was so calm, no hysterics, no fainting. I think she was shaken at first but after she handled everything with as much detachment as any hardened battlefield nurse, or so I imagine, never having met one.”

Etienne reflects that this is not surprising; he has come to realize that Belle is not emotional in general, and certainly not over him in particular. The best he can say of her feelings is that she doesn’t seem to dislike him, though she also seems able to easily dismiss him in a way no other woman ever has. She is not impressed by anything about him except his library, or rather a very small fraction of it, and perhaps a very little by his ability to give her pleasure, or so he hopes. His revelation of what he had done for her father had hardly solicited any reaction from her. Why should he expect his seemingly imminent death to do otherwise? He feels suddenly, desperately unhappy at the thought.

Valmont looks at him with entirely too much understanding, considering that Etienne doesn’t understand anything himself.

“She can’t be, don’t you see?” his friend asks.

“Don’t I see what?”

“Anything – although the answer is apparently no,” Sebastian mutters. “She had no need to remain here, to help care for you, yet she did. When everything looked so bleak, she remained. When everything went beyond bleak to desperate, she alone was able to help you – all with that air of detachment. Hardly the actions of someone so detached. Even you must realize that.”

Etienne considers being offended by the Vicomte’s pointed insult, but decides to be cheered by his analysis instead. He remembers the look on her face when he first awoke, and the fact that every time he’s awoken since she’d been close to hand, and he suddenly feels somewhat better, almost as though he might soon be able to rise from bed. But not too soon… Once Valmont leaves, Belle will return to read to him again.

Chapter End Notes

Ha! See? Not a cliffhanger! I told you I wasn't doing it on purpose...

Laudanum was a tincture of opium and spirits originally created by Paracelsus, a 16th century alchemist. He discovered that the alkaloids in opium are more soluble in alcohol than water. He also threw in a bunch of weird and expensive stuff like crushed pearls and ambergris (ew), so his formula never really took off. It shows up in a different form in the 1660s when an English physician created his own proprietary tincture and began hawking it as a panacea to cure just about anything. The thing is, it kind of was! It killed pain like a dream, soothed wracking coughs and even helped with diarrhea, which was a common and fatal symptom of many diseases at the time (cholera, dysentery, etc. mostly killed via dehydration due to diarrhea). Basically it was one of the only truly effective medications available at the time and people freaking loved it. But, you know, it is a tincture of opium and spirits and therefore a hardcore narcotic and highly
addictive.

As the centuries progressed laudanum use and addiction became a serious problem, at least until morphine was first synthesized - at which point morphine addiction became a much bigger problem. You might be interested to know that Heroin was first marketed by Bayer partially as a safe and effective way to wean addicts off of morphine. Unfortunately, they didn't realize that heroin when processed by the liver turns into the equivalent of double morphine so... Oops. Opioid use and abuse, both of the illegal and prescription variety, remains a major issue today. Laudanum is actually still available as an uncommon treatment for diarrhea, and occasionally used off-label to treat neonatal withdrawal symptoms, but morphine and its various derivatives are more effective painkillers.

See you next week, NEW BatB time (late Monday/early Tuesday, don't forget!), same BatB channel!
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Thank you as always for your continued support, not just of this story but of me <3 I know I owe you all a ton of comment responses and will prioritize that this week... So, y'know. Don't stop commenting, I love reading your thoughts <3

And now, Chapter Twenty Four, in which Etienne is recovering nicely, thank you.

24

It’s neither so difficult nor so painful, sitting by his bedside, not once Etienne’s recovery begins – his true recovery, when it is clear he actually is recovering, not just taking his time about dying. That’s what it had felt like, before. It had been laid out before her like the most elegant of mathematical proofs in which every calculation only makes the final result more certain, more inevitable. She’d watched him sink in on himself and into himself, deeper and deeper until the next logical step must be a grave, and wondered if he already had one foot inside it.

Now he seems to have both feet firmly planted on the ground, or rather in the bed, and is not particularly happy about it, or anything else.

“'Two households, both alike in dignity, in fair Verona where we lay our – ’”

“Please Belle, must you? Am I not in enough pain already?” Etienne demands, glaring at her from his royal nest of pillows. Despite that he decries his bed as horribly uncomfortable, he does not look particularly pained, but rather bored, petulant – entirely like himself.

In the early days of his recovery he had been stripped, defenseless in a way that unnerved her, bare and vulnerable like a shellfish without its shell. For some reason she had thought that new, complacent Etienne was not necessarily an improvement over the old. But then he’d weaned himself off of the laudanum, forever banishing that strange soft simulacrum, and now Belle curses herself for a fool.

“I thought you wanted me to read to you,” she says, exasperated.

“Yes, but not that,” he answers, as though one of the great masterpieces of all time is trash on a par with or slightly below the book of dirty sonnets she’d found in the summerhouse reading room.

“Actually, Romeo and Juliet is my favorite play.”

Etienne rolls his sky blue eyes, annoying her enough that she hardly notes their color. “Why am I not surprised?”

She knows there is no point but can’t help but be offended. “I’m sorry?”

“It’s just all that heartache and pining and – ugh!” He shudders in a way that she would like to think
is simply for effect but which is likely in earnest. “There are so many better things to read.”

“Like what?”

“Perhaps I will show you,” he says. “If I’m ever allowed to leave this hovel, that is.”

Belle sighs, torn between frustration and something else, something gentle and warm, at the return of this version of Etienne: the spoiled Prince in all his glory. Much as she sometimes wishes Lumiere would make good on his constant threats to drive his lowly fist into the Royal Face, she can’t help but view it as a good sign – if he were still dying, surely he wouldn’t be capable of complaining with such energy. Still, if he thinks the sumptuous summerhouse is a hovel, she can’t bear to imagine what he’d think of the cottage she shares with her father.

“What?” he asks, perhaps reading something in her expression.

“I was just wondering if you’d ever actually seen a hovel,” she answers tartly. “Our cottage is one of the largest in Villeneuve, and I think the whole thing would fit in this room.”

He canters his head to the side, observing her for a moment. There is a stillness about him which suggests she has piqued his interest somehow, though the how eludes her. “You never speak of Villeneuve.”

“There isn’t much to say.” She shifts in her chair, uncomfortable with the intent way he stares at her. “It’s a small provincial town like any other.”

“Tell me,” he orders.

“But – why?” she asks, puzzled. “If you don’t want me to read *Romeo and Juliet*, I can choose something else.”

He dismisses her suggestion with a shrug. “Later, perhaps. For now you will tell me about the village.”

“It – well – I don’t know what you want to know, Etienne. I spend as little time in the village as possible.”

“Really?” His expression is curious and she wonders if he imagines she’s ever had the wherewithal to travel. Does he know nothing about the lives of his subjects? Does he not understand how far out of reach something like that would be?

“Not – I don’t actually leave. I’ve never really left.” She almost tells him how much she wants to, but that isn’t what he asked. “I read. Pere Robert has few books, but enough to make our small corner of the world feel big. *Romeo and Juliet* takes me to fair Verona, *Candide* to South America…”

“Do many in your village read?”

“Just Pere Robert,” she answers. “The boys whose families can afford to send them to school learn, but as far as I can tell they don’t enjoy it. I try to teach the girls when I can. There’s never enough time.”

“Hence your laundry machine,” he says with a smile.

“Yes.”

“And what do the villagers think of all this reading?”
Belle looks at him blankly, so confused by this whole line of questioning. He must truly be perishing of boredom, to bother with any of the details of her life. In a way she almost sympathizes. She’s never been as ill as he was, or even as he is now, but it can’t be easy lying still in bed for hours on end with only her to read to him as entertainment. But are the details of her life any more entertaining? She rather doubts it.

“The villagers say that I’m a funny girl, but I’m not sure they mean it as a compliment,” she answers finally.

“You are a funny girl, Belle,” Etienne informs her, smile widening into the one that makes the corners of his eyes crease. “But I mean it as a compliment.”

“Thank you – I think.”

His smile fades to a thoughtful look, his eyes trained on her as if he can see into her or through her. They linger, and she experiences a completely foreign flash of anxiety about her appearance. All she can think is that her lank hair is unwashed and unstyled, pulled back into a haphazard bun and finished with a band to keep it out of her eyes, that the uniform she already knows he hates is wrinkled and dirty, that she must be tired, that it must show on her face. She’s never given much thought to her appearance before, but – well, it’s why he chose her. She wonders if seeing her like this makes some kind of difference, and if so what she thinks about that.

If Etienne’s thoughts are progressing along the same lines, he doesn’t mention it. “Where would you go, if you could go anywhere?”

Her mind whirls, but she gives the only answer she can: “Everywhere.”

“Ah, I see. You want adventure.”

“More than I can tell,” she admits, feeling the familiar longing rising up within her. Her voice softens and her thoughts turn inwards, until she’s musing almost to herself. “I’m not sure why – or how I even got the idea. No one in Villeneuve has traveled, save a few. No one else can afford it, between rent and taxes – ”

It takes no more than a split second to realize exactly what she’s said, exactly whom she’s said it to, and freeze. Somehow their conversation and his quiet attention had lulled her into speaking to him as she imagines she would a friend… But he’s not a friend, and much as she likes him despite knowing she shouldn’t, she also knows that he is unpredictable. She likes him least when he’s angry.

“I didn’t mean – ”

“Taxes,” he says, amused as he leans back into his down-filled pillows, each encased in linen and silk. “Are they so onerous then?”

He waves a languid hand in her direction when she makes no answer, and she can no longer prevent herself from speaking. “Don’t you know?”

“In truth the amount we gather from individual villages seems a pittance to me. It adds up enough to be useful, I suppose – ”

“Useful? Is that the word?” she demands before she can stop herself. This is the Etienne she finds insufferable, the aristocrat with no apparent thought for his people. This is the Etienne that makes it impossible to believe the one she likes even exists, or exists inside the same person.

He shakes his head at her naivety. “It costs money to live like this – to give the expected parties, to
buy books and art and – other beautiful things. But do I not offer some value in return? Do I not employ villagers, and maintain roads, and… Whatever else it is I do?"

She feels, as she so often does, that she must be feeling something but isn’t sure what. Anger? Hurt? Disappointment? It just feels like emotion, a wave of emotion without name, and it sweeps her along with it even though she doesn’t understand it, can’t dissect it.

“‘Other beautiful things’. I suppose I’m one of them? If so, your villagers are starving so you can have me in your bed.”

“You are not a thing, Belle,” he says, and he sounds genuinely hurt, so sincere she knows he must think he means it – which only means he’s deluding himself, and makes it all the worse.

“I know,” she says, which isn’t much of a response. But she feels overwhelmed, in need of a place to be alone, to organize her feelings into thoughts, and that need distracts her from everything else. “I should go. Lumiere had some things to discuss with you I think.”

“Belle – ”

“Goodnight, Your Highness,” she murmurs.

“Will you return before you sleep?”

“Tomorrow.”

He scowls at her. “Allow me to rephrase. You will return before you sleep.”

“Tomorrow,” she repeats. “Goodnight.”

She closes the door softly behind her, cutting off whatever he might be saying to convince her to obey his command. It’s wasted, of course – she hardly even hears him. Her own thoughts are too loud. Instead, she makes her way down the hall to her own room and hears Agathe’s voice, asking the same question over and over: “Do you believe he is worth saving?”

It’s a complicated question, on a number of accounts, and she acknowledges this as she throws herself on her own bed. She lies on her back, arms crossed behind her head, staring up at the canopy (blue and gold brocade, in this particular room in Etienne’s hovel) and attempts to organize her thoughts.

Fact: Etienne is not a nice person (as evidenced by… Just about everything), and Fact: something about him makes it easy to forget that (to wit: everything else). But it doesn’t necessarily follow that he is a bad person, either. Belle knows she has a tendency to see only black and white, but in reality she is well aware that Fact: most people see varying shades of gray to any moral question. Therefore, Fact: the question of Etienne, his goodness or lack thereof, has no easy answer. (But then, Fact, tangentially related: she has always loved complicated questions.)

Frustrating though it may be, she can only answer Agathe’s question as she sees it, and Fact: she still believes he was worth saving. It’s just that Fact: she doesn’t quite know why. It’s strange, not understanding why she believes something – other people confuse her endlessly, Etienne most of all, but she rarely confuses herself. It does not escape her notice that this phenomenon coincides with her agreeing to remain at the castle, allowing her to place the blame firmly on the Prince’s wide shoulders, precisely where she’s certain it belongs.

It occurs to her then that her conclusion is not quite right. Perhaps she doesn’t entirely believe Etienne as he is was worth saving, but Etienne as he could be… Fact: Etienne as he could be is
worth saving.

This thought lingers in her mind throughout the rest of the day, making its presence known as she eats a solitary dinner on a tray in her room and refuses Lumière’s request – Etienne’s demand – that she attend the Prince as he prepares for bed. It drowns out the insistent tinkling of the little silver bell someone made the critical error of giving Etienne as he abuses without compunction. It echoes in the empty spaces not filled with the towering words of Christopher Marlowe (The Famous Tragedy of the Rich Jew of Malta in the 1633 Heywood edition – good, but nowhere near as good as Merchant of Venice) as she reads into the night.

It even accompanies her back down the hall as she returns to Etienne’s bedside, though she has no idea why she does so. Habit, perhaps; since his illness, she has spent part of every night watching over him. Tonight he seems very still – too still? Is he breathing? She tells herself he is, he must be, because their last conversation was remarkably unsatisfying and she refuses to believe it will be the last they ever have. But then she has spent too many nights standing just where she is now, waiting for and perhaps expecting the moment when the labored rise and fall of his chest would become just the fall and then nothing. That lingering fear calls her ever closer as surely as Etienne’s stupid silver bell, and she stands there longer than necessary, just watching him inhale and exhale, inhale and exhale…

She exhales herself, releasing the breath she didn’t realize she was holding. It’s strange, that she should feel so anxious when everything is well, must be well. Everything is better than well. She does not have Etienne’s death on her conscience, for which she is grateful, and his continued existence ensures her father’s continued treatment and her continued access to his books and workroom. Everything has worked out as satisfactorily as she could ever have hoped, so it makes little sense that her throat should close and her heart should race over a stupid unfounded worry. Perhaps she’s simply tired.

It’s as good a reason as any to explain why she remains, why she can’t stop looking down on him in the near-dark. His expression is not peaceful, a result of the pain or their disagreement, she isn’t sure which. The way his brows draw together gives him a tense, angry look, as though he’s still glaring at her in his sleep. She wants… Well, it’s strange, but she wants to touch him, to reach out and stroke that vertical line above his nose, smoothing it away with her fingertip – or perhaps leaning forward and kissing it away. He had kissed her forehead once, she remembers. It had been nice. But she has a suspicion any physical contact will merely complicate things which are already complicated enough.

Even as she thinks this, even as she tells herself to leave him be, she extends her hand to caress his cheek – lightly, of course, and just to feel the now clean-shaven texture of his skin. He’s warm beneath her fingers, just the right degree of warmth. Regardless of her – anger? – with him, it’s still such a relief after the endless days of touching his forehead only to feel it burning. Bizarre urge somewhat satisfied, she moves to withdraw, but is surprised to feel his hand cover hers, pressing it more firmly against the side of his face.

“Belle,” he murmurs, eyes slitting open and catching every last bit of light to flash faintly blue in the dark. He no longer seems to be glaring at her even though she has very recently defied him and just now awakened him for no real reason.

“I’m sorry,” she says, though which offense she is actually apologizing for is unclear. “I was just – checking on you. Before sleeping. I always check. Or I did, before – because you were ill – but I suppose it isn’t necessary now – ”

“Are you still cross with me?” he asks, voice low and almost plaintive.

“I don’t know what I am,” she answers when the silence stretches too long.
“Fair enough. But are you tired? Come to bed.”

“Etienne, you are in no condition to –”

“Goodness, Belle, the places your mind goes,” he drawls. “Do you have designs upon my person? I’m flattered you think so highly of my stamina, but I meant to sleep. Come to bed to sleep.”

She can feel her face heat and color, surely as hot and as red as his own was at the very height of his fever, and is grateful he can’t see it.

“I have a room of my own,” she tells him.

“I might need something in the night,” he responds. “And I know how you feel about my bell, ma Belle. Oh, god, come to bed before my wit sinks any lower, I beg you.”

He tugs insistently at her hand and she capitulates, because she is tired and fighting him is so much work sometimes – especially when she doesn’t really want to.

Before she can do more than slip off her shoes, he’s speaking again, voice both sleepy and imperious. “You will undress before lying down, of course.”

“Will I?”

“I just said so, didn’t I?” he responds. “Your uniform is awful. I hate it. Take it off.”

She’d had no intention of sleeping in it, but is now irritated by the idea that he’ll think she’s obeying him. “Do you have designs upon my person?”

“Mmm, if only.” Something about the tone of his voice does strange things to her, makes her throat close and heart race just as before, when she’d been consumed by anxiety for him – but this time it is not unpleasant. She is suddenly fiercely aware of how long it has been since the night before the duel, and the memories come rushing back along with a heat that burns higher than any physical fever.

She strips then, more because her skin is so unbearably sensitive that even the light touch of fabric on her body feels too restrictive than because he told her to, or even because she wants to sleep. No, she still wants to touch him, or wants him to touch her, and knows it makes no sense. He is in no condition – and she is still – something – with him. But he reaches out a hand to stroke her bare arm and she’s just – done thinking. Everything else is so complicated, but when he touches her things become so simple, at least for a little while. His fingers on her overheated skin silence all the noise inside her head.

“Come here,” he says, guiding her forward with a gentle grip on her waist until she’s leaning over him on the bed.

The positioning confuses her until his hot mouth closes around her nipple, sending a jolt through her body that seems to terminate at the apex of her thighs. The hand that was holding her in place is there now too – she realizes this as he delves into her, exploring her with a touch too hasty to be gentle but she doesn’t mind – it doesn’t matter. He presses one finger deep inside of her and she’s aware of the ease of it, the way her body is so ready and gladly makes way for him.

He notes this too – it would be difficult not to – and groans against her breast, scraping his teeth over her nipple and sucking hard until she cries out. Her head is spinning with the pleasure of his mouth on her, of his finger stroking something so sensitive inside, of the suddenness of it all – and of the uncertainty, because as much as she loves this she knows he really is in no condition to take things
As though reading her mind, he raises his head from her breast, and she can feel him trying to watch himself touch her, though she imagines he has little success in the dark.

“Ah, Belle, if I were fully recovered, the things I’d do to you…”

He withdraws his finger and she feels the loss keenly, the disappointment and the ache of unfulfilled desire.

“I could… If I were on top – ” she suggests breathlessly.

“I wouldn’t need to exert myself? You overestimate my self-control, I think. How am I to resist holding you still and fucking up into you once I have my cock inside you?”

Ah, god, she wants it – needs him so desperately.

“I know, ma Belle,” he says, and she realizes she’d voiced some part of her previous thought aloud. She finds she can’t even be embarrassed by it. “I’ll take care of you.”

She assumes he means he’ll use his hands on her, and she is not inclined to protest, but instead he wraps his arm around her waist and pulls her awkwardly close. Perhaps he intends to turn his head and – ? But no, his shoulder is still healing and he can’t turn his body that way, can’t put that kind of pressure on it. So what does he – ?

“Come here, up on the bed,” he urges, and that word is appropriate because there is such urgency in his rough voice, in his heavy breathing – although maybe that’s her, too.

“I don’t understand,” she says, because she doesn’t and perhaps she could figure it out given time but she doesn’t feel she has any – she feels she’s burning to a cinder where she stands, that she’ll incinerate to nothing if he doesn’t do something soon.

“Kneel above me. Straddle my face so I can taste you.”

There was a time, not so long ago, when she would have hesitated, asked for more direction, asked questions. Now she simply trusts that if he tells her to do it, it can in fact be done, no matter how unlikely it may seem. Besides, when he uses that specific tone of voice he is not making a request and this is one order she is happy to obey.

It’s not easy, of course. She feels awkward and clumsy as she scrambles over him, afraid to accidentally touch the bandage covering his healing wound, afraid that he finds what she wants her to do distasteful even though it was his suggestion. But none of it bothers her enough to stop her, and she places herself just as he directs, hovering over him with her grip tight on the headboard behind him.

His hands come up immediately to clasp at her hips, and he adjusts her slightly above him.

“I’ve wanted you on your knees for me for quite some time;” he muses, tone almost conversational. “This isn’t quite what I had in mind, but – ”

Instead of finishing his thought, he buries his face between her thighs, and everything fades away except the immediacy of his mouth on her. It’s different from the other times he’s done something like this, less precise, less focused – more like a kiss, with his lips pressed to her slick flesh and his tongue plunging inside her. The feel is no less sublime, however; his grip pins her firmly in place, ensuring pressure on that place she thinks of as the very seat of her pleasure, and she moves against
him to take full advantage of that. Each flex of her hips adds to the ecstasy flooding through her, until it becomes almost too much. He helps her then, guiding her in a steady rhythm matched by his tongue.

This imposes some kind of order on the proceedings, if such a thing exists. There is some structure to what she feels now, a sense not just of pleasurepleasurepleasure but of pleasure building, of pleasure leading to something even beyond that. She feels the way it all works together, the way he grinds his face into her, the way he licks inside her. It seems to stretch out forever as he takes his time with her, speeding up and slowing down until she's poised right at the edge of ecstasy with no way over – except through him.

Finally he frees her somewhat, releasing one hand’s vice-like grip on the soft flesh of her upper thigh. It gives her just enough leeway to move as she wants, as she needs, faster and faster and closer and closer – almost, almost – In the end it’s not her movements against him or even his tongue inside her that finally sends her over that cliff she’s been stranded on for eternity. Instead it’s the steady sound she hears behind her, the slight hint of movement she can see in his good shoulder and the knowledge that he’s as lost in this as she is, that he’s stroking himself to completion even as he tastes her this way.

She gasps and shudders above him, inner passage tightening around his tongue in a way she knows he can feel because he makes a desperate noise against her as he falls off the same cliff she does. Coming for him, knowing that he’s coming for her – It’s too much, indescribable. The pleasure pulses through her body in bright bursts, leaving a sense of overwhelming relief and release as it fades – all too soon.

Everything is still so complicated, but at least she feels wonderful.

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes

The edition of The Jew of Malta by Christopher Marlowe that Belle is reading is actually the first time the play appeared in print. It is therefore rare and possibly priceless. Luckily she takes good care of all books! Christopher Marlowe was an excellent playwright but it's pretty hard to top Shakespeare, alas. It's clear that Shakespeare oftentimes got ideas from Marlowe but to me it seems he always managed to do something better with them. That was kind of Shakespeare's forte after all. Barrabas in The Jew of Malta is more of a caricature than a fully realized character, while Shylock in Merchant of Venice is a much more complicated villain. Even though I don't know of anything to suggest that Shakespeare was more friendly towards Jews than most during the Elizabethan era, Shylock is still human in a way Barrabas isn't - in my opinion anyway! One thing that is not opinion: Marlowe was very popular during his day, and is still worth reading (or seeing, if you can find a production). I was recently lucky enough to see a production of Edward II that was fascinating.

See you next week, new BatB time (late Monday/early Tuesday, forreals), same BatB channel!
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

12.24.17: I somehow neglected to realize that this late Monday/early Tuesday would be Christmas Day and next late Monday/early Tuesday will be New Year’s Day. I’m sure you’re all busy with family and friends, as am I, so I will resume posting late Jan. 8/early Jan. 9 2018 (!!!)! In that time I also intend to post a little holiday gift I’m writing for you all :) So happy holidays, and Belle, Etienne and I will see you next year!

Thank you as always and ever for your kind comments and kudos! I hope I didn’t drive you crazy with my comment responses but I’m all caught up now. So please keep the feedback coming, I am happy to answer any questions! You might have noticed I changed the chapter format; this it to make it neater in the dropdown menu :)

And now, Chapter 25, in which Etienne tries to do the right thing, poorly, for the wrong reason.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

25

As the ecstasy of his orgasm recedes, leaving him dizzy and lightheaded in a decidedly non-sexual way, it occurs to Etienne that he perhaps is not as well recovered as he’d thought. He has been feeling better these last few days, yes, and today had been the first he’d actually convinced Lumiere to allow him out of bed, but the next time he is nearly stabbed to death he thinks it might be better to wait somewhat longer to resume his usual – and favorite – activities. Whatever energy had filled him upon waking up to discover Belle at his bedside seeps from him, and he collapses back against his pillow, heart pounding, lungs gasping greedily for air.

To be fair, it’s not as though he had planned this – he isn’t, despite what certain maître d’s and vicomtes might think, stupid. But he’d been unsettled by their last conversation, unhappy with the way it ended, and it had left a strange heaviness in his chest, an emptiness in the pit of his stomach despite the soup Mrs. Potts had forced him to finish. Is that really what she thinks, that she is only a thing to him? Things don’t need to be threatened and bribed and cajoled to stay where he wants them, first of all. And neither do women, usually. The Marquise de Merteuil and her ilk are not things, either, but tools, there to be used as necessary – Belle is not like that. He has certainly never felt this possessive over any of his actual possessions, any of those things he actually owns.

Such thoughts had chased around inside his head until he’d been exhausted by them, but even then his sleep had been fitful, punctuated by strange dreams he can’t quite remember. There had been something about Belle as a princess in a tower, climbing out a window to escape, and then he’d opened his eyes to see her standing over him, to feel her delicate hand on his cheek. It could easily have been another dream, especially considering how very much he’d wanted to see her there.

How things had developed from that point, well, he can’t quite say. Truthfully, he can’t quite remember. He only knows that he felt her light caress all throughout his body, that it burned the sleep from his veins, that he wanted to… Apologize, and there were more effective ways to use his mouth.
than to speak the words “I’m sorry”. It had been for her more than for him, or so he’d thought – despite his musings about fucking her, he’d thought it very unlikely that he’d even be able to get hard, much less stay that way, not as tired and as weak as he was.

One taste of her had put paid to that assumption. She’d been so hot and wet against his mouth, so tight around his tongue, so sweet everywhere, and the way she’d moved above him, the sounds she’d made – he’d had to dig his fingers into her hips to keep his hand from his throbbing cock, and when he’d finally known she was close it had taken just a few strokes to have him spilling his seed all over his stomach.

So no, he hadn’t planned it, but he’s not exactly sorry about it either. The frantic beating of his heart against his ribcage suggests that the exertion might kill him but he’s never come so hard in his life so at least he’ll have died doing what he loves.

It occurs to him suddenly that he can inhale deep lungfuls of air so desperately because Belle is no longer sitting on his face – a pity, but probably for the best at this point. Moreover, she is not beside him in bed but bent over and hunting for her clothing on the floor. The view is exquisite, of course; Belle is lovely in every way, slender and lithe but with gentle curves which are displayed very much to advantage in her current position, but the fact remains that there is no reason for her to be in that position at all. If she thinks he’s going to allow her to sleep in his bed in that hideous uniform, she is very much mistaken.

“What exactly do you think you’re doing?” he asks, and she freezes before straightening up (another pity) and turning towards him. Most infuriating of all, she clasps the hated dress to her chest, hiding her body from his sight as though he’s – well, any other man trying to ogle her.

“Getting dressed?” It’s supposed to be a statement, he assumes, but her voice rises at the end, making it a question. “My room is down the hall, I have to wear something.”

If he had the strength, he’d roll his eyes, but instead he focuses on reaching his hand out towards her. “Ah. May I see that? Please?” he asks, shocking her enough with his politeness that she presses the cloth into his grasp without thought.

He in turn presses it to his face, wiping his sticky face clean of all her sweetness, then drags it over his belly to mop up the mess he made. The cloth is rough and unpleasant and he wonders how she can stand to wear it – not that she’ll be able to, now. All in all he’s quite pleased with himself, having solved multiple problems with one elegant solution.

“Etienne!” she gasps, outraged, and he tosses the soiled dress to the floor. “How unfortunate,” he says. “I suppose you’ll simply have to stay.”

“If I had the strength, he’d roll his eyes, but instead he focuses on reaching his hand out towards her. “Ah. May I see that? Please?” he asks, shocking her enough with his politeness that she presses the cloth into his grasp without thought.

He in turn presses it to his face, wiping his sticky face clean of all her sweetness, then drags it over his belly to mop up the mess he made. The cloth is rough and unpleasant and he wonders how she can stand to wear it – not that she’ll be able to, now. All in all he’s quite pleased with himself, having solved multiple problems with one elegant solution.

“Etienne!” she gasps, outraged, and he tosses the soiled dress to the floor. “How unfortunate,” he says. “I suppose you’ll simply have to stay.”

“That’s my only dress – ”

“I know for a fact that’s not true,” he informs her. “And besides, you’d already agreed to stay. Come to bed to sleep, remember? It wasn’t a request.”

“It’s my only dress plain enough to wear to your sickroom. The others are too fine to ruin in tending to you,” she says. “And I – you’ll sleep easier without me here, surely. You need your rest.”

“I need you to stop being ridiculous and get into bed,” he retorts.

He doesn’t add that he knows he’ll sleep easier with her beside him, or that it will be far more convenient to have her close to hand now that his libido at least seems to have recovered fully even if
he himself has not. His sexual drive has always been quite high – he finds more than 24 hours of celibacy irksome, and cannot even remember the last time he went three full weeks without release, illness or no. There will certainly be some catching up to do.

She huffs a sigh of defeat and slips into bed next to him, maintaining just enough distance that they’re not quite touching. Annoyed, he tugs her closer, gathering her to his right side and adjusting her until her head rests on his uninjured shoulder. Her silky hair and satiny skin both feel like heaven pressed to him this way. His entire body relaxes at the contact, comforted and soothed.

“Look at me,” he murmurs, and she does, turning her head and tilting her face up to meet his eyes.

The angle is awkward but he manages to turn his head too, closing the distance between them without jostling his wounded side too much. He covers her mouth with his, slipping his tongue between her lips and exploring her languidly, groaning in delight when she glides her own tongue over his.

“Etienne – ” she says as he raises his head, drawing back to look down into her face.

“Can you taste yourself like that, Belle?” he asks. “I can still taste you.”

Even in the darkness he can tell that she’s blushing. “I don’t – ”

“Next time, I’ll turn you around so you can – ” He hesitates, wanting to say suck my cock but afraid she’ll find the phrasing too coarse. In the heat of the moment she won’t object, perhaps, but like this… “ – use your mouth on me.”

She gives him a resigned look, although he thinks there is humor in her eyes – it’s difficult to tell, with the room so dark. “Don’t you ever think of anything else?”

“With you naked in my arms? Not likely,” he answers.

“Go to sleep, Etienne.”

He does, his last thought being that this day has ended far better than he could have predicted after her anger with him hours before.

When he awakens he is alone, a fact which would normally irritate him but which is clearly due to the lateness of the hour; sunlight streams into his room with such force that he knows it must be near midday. His escapade with Belle had drained him more than he’d thought or expected. Shockingly, he finds himself grateful that she left him to sleep, even though it means none of his fantasies of being roused by her hands or mouth have as yet been realized. They have nothing but time.

There’s time now, in fact. He imagines laying her out on the bed with the bright daylight illuminating every inch of her bare skin, covering her with his body and watching her face as he sheathes himself inside of her – but such exertion is still out of the question. His plans from the night before, however, have definite promise… He’s already half hard as he reaches for the little silver belle she hates so much, prepared to summon her to his side, but Lumiere chooses that moment to ruin Etienne’s life (as he so often does).

“Awake at last, Your Highness?” he asks blandly, somehow still managing to sound judgmental.

“I am still recovering from a rapier wound, as you might recall,” Etienne retorts, adjusting his bedding to hide his quickly fading arousal.

“I do, Your Highness. But Monsieur Cogsworth is here for your weekly meeting. I mentioned it
yesterday, as you might recall.”

“*Merde,*” he mutters, thoroughly displeased. He does recall, and also recalls that he has been ill for nearly a month so this meeting will be particularly long, particularly boring, and particularly in the way of all his plans for Belle.

“Quite, Your Highness.”

He glares at Lumiere, who deserves it, but who is also at this moment a proxy for Cogsworth. He has never been able to convince his Head of Household to just handle the funds as he sees fit, even though Etienne is certain the old man would be better at it than he is himself. In all honesty Cogsworth probably thinks the same, but will only drone on and on about how administering his own lands is preparation for the responsibility of taking the throne etc. etc. *ad nauseam.* It apparently doesn’t occur to Cogsworth that once Etienne is King his can simply order someone more obliging to handle all the boring details.

“Oh, very well,” he huffs, still disgruntled. Lumiere ignores him in favor of removing his banyan from the wardrobe and tossing it to him.

“No time for anything else,” the maître d’ says, and Etienne shrugs. Cogsworth has, unfortunately for all involved, seen him in worse circumstances than this.

“Fine.” He maneuvers himself into his banyan, no easy feat with his shoulder still healing, but he has no intention of asking Lumiere for assistance. The expression on Lumiere’s face tells Etienne he is not impressed with this decision. But finally he is wrapped up in the familiar shot silk, and he waves one hand negligently at the maître d’. “Send him in. Wait.”

“Yes?”

“Does Cogsworth know – ”

“About the duel?” Lumiere finishes, clearly offended that Etienne would even ask.. “Of course not. We judged it best not to inform him, for fear of giving him apoplexy. As far as he knows you are secluded away with your newest paramour.”

Etienne sighs. It’s for the best, he knows; aside from anything else, Cogsworth is required by the terms of his employment to report relevant goings on to his father the King. Better he think his only son is following in his lecherous footsteps than realize his only son nearly got himself killed without having formed any useful marital alliance or having produced any legitimate heirs. Still, it rankles that the one time he has a perfectly reasonable excuse for *shirking his duties,* as he assumes Cogsworth has put it to Lumiere these last three weeks, he will get no credit for it.


“*Oui, Maître,*” Lumiere says – sarcastically, of course – and opens the door to reveal the aging, portly Head of Household with the massive main account book in his arms.

“Your Highness,” he intones, bowing with great effort.

“Cogsworth,” Etienne responds in resignation. “Make this quick, can you? I’ve other important business to attend to – as soon as possible.”

The old man looks at him askance. “Your Highness, far be it from me to criticize – ” Etienne and Lumiere both scoff, eyes meeting in a single moment of perfect amity. “ – but you have been delaying this appointment for weeks. Now, I was a young man once myself, I certainly understand
“Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear,” Etienne says, interrupting what he assumes will be a lengthy rebuke filled with references to things he’d really rather not know about his Head of Household’s sordid past – he has seen the man’s wife, after all. “Make this quick, can you?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Cogsworth answers, reluctant but with no recourse. He approaches and lowers his bulk into Belle’s chair with a creak – either of the wood or of the stays Etienne suspects he wears under his uniform. Lumiere takes this as his cue to make himself scarce, the traitor. Spreading the account book open on his lap, the old man commences his torture. “Now, the yearly crop yield has increased –”

Naturally, in the face of such boredom, Etienne allows his attention to wander. He thinks of Belle, of the way her long dark hair frames her delicate face so perfectly, of the freckles dusting her nose and cheeks. He thinks of the night before the duel, of seeing her layered in makeup like a courtier and missing those freckles so desperately. He thinks of the relief of seeing her at his bedside the night before, of the way her presence completely banished the tension he’d felt since the afternoon. But she had tried to leave again, and this morning she was nowhere to be found, so perhaps she is still cross with him –

“ – The numbers from Villeneuve are somewhat disappointing, with rental returns declining by 3.7% and tax returns declining by 5.3%, but then a fair number of villagers have –”

His attention is caught immediately by one single word: Villeneuve.

“What about Villeneuve?” he demands, and Cogsworth blinks at him in surprise.

“Your Highness? I didn’t realize you were listening.”

“I’m always listening,” Etienne lies, though he doubts the Head of Household is fooled. “Now, what were you saying about Villeneuve? What about the villagers?”

“Both rental returns and tax returns have decreased because a small percentage of villagers have moved away,” Cogsworth explains hesitantly. “For a – a negligible number of them – it has become too expensive to remain.”

He thinks again of the money generated by the village, and it still seems a negligible number to him. But if it’s negligible either way, surely decreasing the rents and taxes won’t have much of an impact either? Besides, it seems a small price to pay to be able to tell Belle, and see her smile at him in admiration. Other women always smile at him in admiration, of course, but Belle is trickier, no question.

“Decrease the rents and taxes then,” he says. “By, say, 30%?”

“30%?! Your Highness, the treasury cannot bear –”

“So increase the rents and taxes elsewhere.”

“But Your Highness, the rents and taxes elsewhere are just as high. Increasing them still further would –”

“Etienne?” Belle’s sweet voice interrupts Cogsworth, thankfully, and he looks up to see her open the door to his sickroom. He is pleased to note that she is properly attired in one of the plainer gowns he’d gifted to her, a sky blue robe à l’Anglaise embroidered with delicate white blossoms gathered over a red quilted underskirt. Her hair is pulled back into a casual knot and held in place with a fabric
band, and she looks lovely and pure and certainly not like anyone Cogsworth might expect him to be secluded with.

“Belle, come in, we were nearly finished,” Etienne says, delighted both to see her and with the prospect of escaping far earlier than he might have expected.

“Oh,” she says, freezing just inside the doorway. “Forgive me, Your Highness, I didn’t realize you were otherwise engaged.”

“Never mind that,” he tells her, gesturing her forward while Cogsworth glowers in disapproval. “Cogsworth, you have met Mademoiselle Brescond?”

Cogsworth gives her a dismissive glance and does not stand. “I have.”

“Monsieur Cogsworth interviewed me,” Belle says quietly, face pale.

“You are accustomed to rising, I presume, in the presence of a lady?” Etienne says, glaring at his Head of Household.

“Yes, Your Highness – in the presence of a lady,” Cogsworth replies, and Etienne sits up fully in bed. He can feel anger coursing through him at the insult to Belle, though Belle seems no more upset now than she had been on seeing the old man there in the first place.

“What did you say?”

“I’ll just – Return later, shall I?” Belle asks, backing away from the two men.

“No,” Etienne insists. “Come here.”

He extends an imperious hand and Belle comes to him, standing at his bedside between himself and Cogsworth in his chair. Etienne looks at her pointedly until she offers him her own hand. Cradling it in his, he raises it to his lips, brushing a kiss across her knuckles before turning it over to press another to her palm.

“Now,” he says, glancing briefly to Belle – still pale, but now with flaming cheeks – then back to Cogsworth. “Let’s try this again. Cogsworth, you have met Mademoiselle Brescond?”

The look he gives Cogsworth is pointed in the extreme, and the old man is not stupid. With great effort he heaves himself to his feet and even executes something that might be a bow.

“Mademoiselle,” he says. “I’ve heard so much about your – endeavors – since admitting you to our staff.”

As this bit of rudeness doesn’t seem to bother Belle, Etienne elects to ignore it.

“We were just discussing Villeneuve,” he says, smiling slightly, her delicate hand still enfolded in his. “I intend to lower rents and taxes by 30%.”

Cogsworth, already scowling since Belle’s appearance, or even before, truth be told, scowls further.

“30%?” Belle asks. The delight and admiration he’d been expecting is quite unforthcoming. “How? That will have a significant impact on your yearly income – ”

“Exactly,” Cogsworth says, expression a strange mixture of smugness and surprise.

“I’ll raise rents and taxes everywhere else to cover the shortfall,” Etienne answers, although hadn’t
planned on giving her this particular detail.

“You can’t,” she says, and he almost interrupts her to remind her it is not her place to tell him what he can and cannot do. But he doesn’t, because that would defeat the purpose. “The rents and taxes are too high everywhere as it is. Any increase will simply drive villagers away to the larger population centers, resulting in permanent losses for you.”

“Exactly!” Cogsworth says again, looking at Belle with new respect.

“Well what do you suggest then?” Etienne demands. “You tell me rents and taxes are too high, but I can’t lower them?”

“You can lower them,” she corrects, “if you find some other way to increase your income, or find a way to decrease your expenditures, or preferably both.”

“Exactly!”

“Enough, Cogsworth!” Etienne snaps. He is not pleased by the way this conversation has gone, not in the least. “Leave us. And leave the account book.”

“Your Highness?”

“I have no intention of repeating myself,” he says. Cogsworth, recognizing danger, closes the account book and sets it on his chair.

“And the rents for Villeneuve?” the old man asks stiffly.

“Wait for my word.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” Cogsworth says with a very formal nod before turning to Belle. Etienne tenses, prepared to defend her honor once more, but the Head of Household beams an avuncular smile at her. “A pleasure to see you again, Mademoiselle.”

He exits then, closing the door behind him, and Belle looks down at Etienne in puzzlement.

“What was that all about?” she asks, bemused.

“Cogsworth mentioned Villeneuve,” he answers, frowning. “I thought to do your fellow villagers a kindness, but it seems it is unwanted.”

“Etienne,” she says, shaking her head. “You’re too intelligent not to realize it can’t be done the way you wish. You have to examine your income and expenditures, find the best way to institute such a drastic change.”

“I have to?” A plan is materializing in his mind, one he thinks might provide the perfect solution.

“Well, someone has to.”

“Excellent,” he says. “I will leave it to you.”

“Leave it to me?” she asks blankly. “I don’t understand.”

“I will leave the whole thing to you. You will examine the income and expenditures and whatever decision you come to, I will abide by.”

“You’ll – what?”
“Unless you’d rather not, of course…”

“No! I’m – I’m happy to, I just don’t – what?”

“Belle,” he says, pulling at her arm until she leans close to him. She smells sweet, and warm, and his, and he is so finished with this conversation. “I want you to go through that account book. I want you to offer whatever relief you think fitting to your precious villagers. But most of all I want you to undress - slowly - and come to bed. Can we discuss this later?”

And he leans forward and presses his mouth to hers – as much to silence as to taste, not that he’s stupid enough to say so.

@ >`--

Chapter End Notes
This is the dress Belle wears at the end of the chapter. I chose it because it's like a fancier version of the dress she wears in the live-action movie. It comes from the Smithsonian collection and has a date of 1770-1785, a little later than our story. BUT America was just a backwater colony at that time, definitely not fashion forward, so I think we can fudge the dates a little. This particular skirt is polonaised, or gathered at the sides, which didn't become fashionable until later than our period but was actually quite common amongst the peasantry long before. In the live action movie, we saw Belle with her skirts pulled up because it made riding and other daily tasks so much easier. So basically, Belle is wearing a lovely and fashionable aristocratic gown like a peasant girl, and I love her <3

See you late Jan. 8/early Jan. 9 2018 (!!!), same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Chapter Notes

01.14.18 I’m not sure if there will be a new chapter tonight or not. Did you guys know some versions of Microsoft Word have a bug that can turn every letter in every word of a document into asterisks?!?!?! Because some totally do, including mine. Luckily I have almost everything backed up in a GoogleDoc but not the rewrites I was working on for tonight’s chapter. Don’t mind me, I’ll just be in the corner TEARING OUT MY HAIR IN FRUSTRATION. Situation resolved, posting now!

Happy New Year, friends! I hope 2018 holds excellent things for all of us, and that your holidays were glorious. As you might have noticed from my last-minute note, they kind of snuck up on me! But now it’s back to our regular schedule :) Thank you so much as always for all your comments and kudos! They definitely fuel my writing so keep ’em coming ;)

And now, Chapter 26, in which Etienne is rather justified in his annoyance, and Belle has no idea what she’s doing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

26

Though her time with Etienne has certainly not made her an expert in all things involving intimacy, Belle has absorbed some crucial information. For example, Fact: she really ought to be paying attention while Etienne is attempting to kiss her senseless. He revels in being the center of attention generally, the center of her attention specifically, and considering the circumstances – his mouth pressed to hers, his tongue teasing at the seam of her lips – it’s perfectly reasonable that he would expect her to focus on him.

It’s not that she doesn’t want to. She loves the feel of his long, elegant fingers tangling in her hair, the hold of his palm as he cradles the back of her head to keep her in place for him, the slick heat of his mouth as he presses his tongue deep into her own. The purposeful thrust of it reminds her of the night before, of his tongue pressed somewhere else entirely, and simply remembering makes something within her tighten in desire. Not even the fact that he’ll expect a bit more from her this time can take the edge off of her delight at knowing he wants to do that with her – to her? – again. And yet…

The account book Monsieur Cogsworth left behind is so close, within arm’s reach of where she leans over Etienne as he lounges in his sickbed. Even as she buries her own fingers in his thick hair, they itch to turn the pages, and her eyes closed against the aching blue brilliance of his gaze somehow see rows of numbers against the back of her eyelids. It sings in her blood just as much as the need coursing through her, the knowledge that he has entrusted all of this into her care, that he will allow her to lay his entire life open before her and will listen to her decisions. Will abide by them. She’s almost giddy at the thought, lightheaded – although that could possibly be due to the fact that one of his hands now cups her breast through the linen and silk chemise that is all she wears after she
stripped off her gown, slowly, just the way he’d wanted her to. He rubs his thumb over her nipple, the lightest brush of his fingertip, and it pebbles immediately under his touch, and it feels good, of course it feels good. This particular thing has always felt good, even before anything else did. But she still sees those numbers, still imagines the calculations she will make.

She is not foolish enough to believe his allowing her to oversee this process means much of anything to him. It is, perhaps, another way for him to keep her where he wants her (where she is now), or at least a way to avoid a task he himself clearly has no interest in. But however little it means to him, it means the world to her. How often has she heard her fellow villagers whispering about how strange she is, how unnatural her love of reading and her tinkering are? How many times has Pere Robert cautioned her not to tell the shopkeepers their business, not to make recommendations none of them want to hear? Even her own father, who loves her and cherishes her intelligence, has always felt the need to handle their finances – until quite recently – seeing it as part of his duty to care for her.

Etienne doesn’t think she’s strange or unnatural, or if he does, he doesn’t seem to mind it.

“– won’t be enough –” She suddenly realizes that he’s speaking, which means he is no longer kissing her, which she probably ought to have noticed. She also probably ought to have heard his full sentence, and understood it, and perhaps responded to it. Instead, she opens her eyes and blinks at him in confusion.

“Oh?”

His brows raise infinitesimally over eyes burning dark with lust.

“Oh?” he echoes.

Belle searches her memory of the last several seconds, hoping beyond hope that somehow she actually heard his words and simply failed to understand them, but that single snippet is all she has: won’t be enough.

“I – What won’t be enough?”

His expression falters, the lust now tinged with annoyance.

“There are several appropriate areas for her to direct her gaze at just now. His face, to fully appreciate the stubble that has returned to add intriguing depth to his appearance, for example, or his chest, bare and still somehow defined despite his weeks of illness, the scar from his wound much smaller and flatter than she would ever have expected considering the cauterization he endured. She could also look lower, trace the ridged plane of his stomach and the enticing trail of hair down to where his arousal tents the sheet concealing him from her view. He’d like that, probably. She – wouldn’t mind that. But she doesn’t. Instead, for reasons she cannot understand, her eyes flick briefly towards the account book.

It’s only a split second, but Etienne catches it, staring at the book for a moment before returning his accusing glare to her face.

“You’re –”

“I am here, naked, fully prepared to lavish you with all the attention you could possibly wish, and you’re – what? As anxious to begin your work as I am to fuck you?” Oh, he is displeased – and
perhaps hurt, though that might be her foolish imagination.

“Forgive me,” she says, with all sincerity. She is in the wrong, she knows well enough. “I just – Can’t stop thinking about – Is it true that you purchase new sheets for every bedstead yearly? Plumette told me once – That expense could easily be foregone –”

“No,” he snaps. “It can’t. I put my sheets to a fair amount of use, as I will be pleased to demonstrate.”

His voice is rough, rougher than it should be, and Belle peers into his face intently. Beneath the flush of his cheeks his skin is blanched, almost bruised around his too-bright eyes. The rise and fall of his chest under her palm as she balances herself over him is more labored than exertion or arousal would account for.

“Etienne, you’re in no condition to demonstrate anything.”

The line of his jaw hardens, becomes obstinate, and his glare intensifies.

“You didn’t seem to think so a few minutes ago.”

She closes her eyes against the discontentment in his face. He will like what she has to say next even less, but – god, if only she could lie! “I wasn’t paying attention a few minutes ago, either. I should have noticed, but I was – distracted. I’m sorry.”

“Distracted,” he says, voice flat, and she hazards a peek at him. His expression is shuttered, stony – impossible to read. It’s worse than displeasure, worse than anger, distant and cold like that very first night, after, when he was no longer making even an attempt to be charming.

“I’m sorry,” she repeats, but the words do not seem to mollify him. The sense of impotence that overcomes her suddenly is intense. Other women he has taken to his bed, aristocratic women, would know exactly what to say, exactly how to defuse – whatever emotion it is that he’s feeling. No lady of the court would ever be distracted by something so mundane as household accounts. But she is just – herself, more adept with the written word and numerical calculations than social or conversational ones. She had thought perhaps he’d known that by now. She had thought perhaps he accepted it, a little.

“You’re right,” he says finally, again in that same flat tone. “I’m tired. Leave me, and take that blasted account book with you.”

Ah, she had thought wrong.

“Etienne –”

He looks pointedly away from her. “That will be all. I’ll ring if you’re needed again.”

With hesitant steps she abandons her spot near his sickbed, reaching for the account book. The oxblood leather binding is smooth in her hands, worn from use, and she hugs it to her chest to quell the uneasiness she feels. It’s strange, thinking he’s… Hurt or upset, feeling that she knows it, without having any reason to think so or evidence to prove it. Anger she had expected and knows how to respond to. This… She doesn’t like this.

But she does like the heft of the account book, the solidity and weight of it, and Etienne clearly has no intention of speaking to her or even glancing in her direction again. She shuffles her feet and considers. Fact: she doesn’t know what to say, and Fact: she doesn’t know what he’s feeling, but also Fact: she does know what to do with the account book. All signs point to the necessity of a
strategic retreat – and so she dresses herself as best she can and makes one

He does not watch her leave.

It’s strange, because numbers usually enthrall her, the way they flow across the page during calculation, the way they build and build and build, so orderly, so logical, the way there is always an answer and she nearly always finds it. But for all that she couldn’t focus on Etienne for thinking of the account books, she finds she can’t fully focus on the account books for thinking of Etienne. The distraction is not as all-encompassing, not enough to truly hinder her, but it lingers in the back of her mind. He lingers in the back of her mind.

He also often comes to the forefront of it, particularly when she discovers expenses that simply scream his name (louder than she has ever dared). Linen and silk by the thousands of aunes, for example – enough linen and silk to wrap the palais several times over she believes, although she’s too busy to actually verify – and the cost of seamstresses to make it into sheets and shirts and whatever else. Raw carrera marble by the thousands of livres and a renowned Florentine sculptor to carve it. Maquillage in weights to rival the marble and an army of servants to apply it. Oceans of port and wine, enough to drown the entire crew of a first rate. It nearly makes her dizzy, the sums spent on such things, the thought of what good that much wealth could do in the right hands.

And yet he spends it on – nothing, nothing of any use. God only knows what he could possibly be doing to justify replacing his sheets so frequently (he has shown her much but nothing so far that would require that extravagance), or why he would require his own personal sculptor, or why he feels the need to trowel on paint that obscures everything admirable about his face.

The frustration is almost overwhelming.

But there is also a sense of accomplishment, or anticipation of accomplishment, for surely some of these expenses can be cut. In her opinion they could all be, but she knows Etienne would never agree to that. She will settle for slightly decreasing many expenses, making small adjustments he’d likely never notice if not for the fact that she will have to point them out in order to receive authorization from him. And Monsieur Cogsworth of course. He must know these expenses better than anyone, and she believes he approves of her enough to work with her. Doesn’t he? Perhaps not at first, but after? It’s difficult to tell, but he had smiled at her, and people don’t tend to smile at those they hold in contempt – except courtiers, which he is not. With Cogsworth’s assistance, and applied judiciously, such cuts could allow Etienne to maintain nearly the same ridiculous lifestyle he currently enjoys while also easing the tax burden on the lands under his administration.

She is satisfied with this preliminary conclusion, but there is still much work to be done. Somehow, she finds she has no interest in moving forward with it immediately. Instead she closes the account book firmly and pushes it away from her, leaving it on the smooth inlaid expanse of the desk she’d chosen to occupy in what seems to be a smaller study, lovely and soothing with moss green damask papered walls and a delicate chandelier (fit for a hovel, as Etienne might sneer). There will be time enough to return to it later. At this moment, she needs to think, needs to consider what is to be done about Etienne’s displeasure towards her.

That he is displeased, she does not doubt, even though perhaps she ought to simply for that lack of evidence previously noted. Yet she has decided that his sudden withdrawal from her is reason enough to believe it, and there is also the fact that she knows he hates it when anything other than him captures her interest. Overt outward signs of anger or not, she has faith in her conclusion that he is angry. When he had been angry about the dresses – it seems so long ago now! – her solution had been to thank him for them. That method was less than successful in soothing his annoyance, as she recalls. But she also recalls Plumette’s advice at the time, her suggestion of a physical demonstration
of contrition: Has he asked you to put your mouth on him?

When her friend had asked, the answer had been no. Now the situation is different. He has made it perfectly clear that he would like her to do that – that he’s been thinking about it, thinking about her on her knees for him. That knowledge makes her uncomfortable, as uncomfortable as when Plumette first suggested it, but now it also fills her with an enjoyable kind of tension. There is an ache deep inside as she thinks of it, longing perhaps? Restlessness? It’s difficult to determine exactly what the feeling is, but she knows at least that it is not negative. After all, he has sometimes done the same for her – even just last night, perhaps as his own apology for their spat, though she hadn’t considered it in that light before. There is certainly no denying that she enjoys receiving such attention. Etienne doesn’t seem to mind providing it. Surely if he can stand to do something so undignified and frankly unhygienic, purely for her pleasure, she can stand to do the same for him.

Besides, it will make him happy. She would much prefer to see his lips quirked in a smile and his eyes crinkled at the corners rather than the blankness he’d displayed previously.

Satisfied with her decision, Belle wonders whether she ought to seek out Plumette for advice. Her friend has been splitting time between the summerhouse and the castle, though she has been away more often of late, now that Etienne requires much less tending to. But seeking her out will take time, and the discussion itself will be embarrassing, and anyway she isn’t certain much advice is needed. Belle already knows how he likes to be touched. She knows the feeling of him hard in her hand, the heat and smoothness of his skin, the throbbing pulse of blood beneath, and she knows what it takes to make him spill himself for her. It can’t be so different, using her mouth instead. And if it is, if she’s doing it wrong… Well, she likes it when he talks to her.

The only difficulty will be in getting him out of bed in order to fulfill his fantasy completely; she can hardly be on her knees for him as he seems to want so desperately if he’s still lying prone in a nest of pillows. The puzzle of how to convince him to stand occupies her as she makes her way to his room. She could – trick him somehow? Ask him to show her his progress with regaining his strength? Ask for assistance in another room? By the time she has arrived no solution has presented itself, but opening the door to his sickroom reveals she doesn’t require one – he’s already standing, looking down at the cover of the book she’d read to him the day before and left on his night table. His back is to her and from this vantage point there is no indication of lingering illness; his spine is ramrod straight, his broad shoulders thrown back proudly, and he is completely steady on his feet, or apparently so.

It occurs to her that perhaps she ought to have given more thought to how to approach him, how to move their interaction towards something more intimate. She’s never had to consider this before as he always initiates their encounters. Perhaps she could simply – say it? Imagining how red she’d undoubtedly flush if forced to explain what she has decided to do for him, she pushes the thought from her mind. Perhaps not. Perhaps something simple…

“Etienne?”

“Did I ring for you?” he demands, turning towards her.

It is well past sunset now, but the room is well-lit with candles – finest beeswax, an extravagance of course – and she can see that his face is still set in that blank expression. She can also see that the dark circles under his eyes seem to have lessened, an indication that he may have actually rested as he should have once she left. His long hair is loose, brushing his shoulders and catching the flickering light, shining in shades of gold and amber – as gilded an extravagance as anything else in his world, all too suited to who and what he is. Despite his pallor, he is so austerely handsome that she can’t bear to look away, even though the intensity in his eyes would make that preferable.
“No,” she responds. She approaches hesitantly, attempting to determine the best positioning for what she plans. Steady as he looks it might be best for him to have something to lean against – the wall, the door – but how to get him there? This is all very complicated.

“Well then?”

“I wanted to apologize,” she says as she halts before him. She is careful to stand closer than one might for a normal conversation, close enough that she can catch the faint scent of his clean skin – part finely milled soap, part him – and is forced to tilt her head up to look into his face. He always stands so close to her when he is intent on seducing her, and she figures he would know how it is to be done. “For earlier.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he says, nonchalant, and he is a much better liar than she is but she still doesn’t believe him. There is a kind of tension to the way he holds himself that seems to suggest he’s acutely aware of her proximity, just as she is of his.

She reaches out to rest her hands on his shoulders, thinking a kiss might be a good way to start, but though he shifts beneath her touch he doesn’t lean down. Narrowing her eyes in annoyance, she raises herself up on her tiptoes. This makes her nowhere near as tall as he is, and rather more unsteady; she sways towards him, fingers digging into firm muscle for balance, barely managing to brush the corner of his mouth with her own. His stubble is rough against her skin, though not in a bad way, and he is warm as he should be warm, not feverish but simply alive. She allows herself a brief moment to enjoy the feel of him like this, then pulls away.

He looks less than impressed.

Her teeth sink into her lower lip as she considers. He does not seem inclined to make things easy for her, but at its very base this is nothing more than a straightforward problem, and problems have solutions. The simplest would be to drag him to where she wants him – he’s still somewhat weakened, and perhaps his own curiosity will encourage him to humor her until she can place him properly. So she slides her hands down his arms, lacing her fingers with his, and tugs him along with her.

“Belle, what –” he huffs, all irritation, then huffs again as his back connects with the door. She’d tugged a bit too enthusiastically, but she does notice that he relaxes slightly against the solid wood, his body at least grateful to be supported.

Hands on his shoulders again, she adjusts him so that he’s perfectly centered, framed by the detailed plasterwork molding of the doorway and distant enough from the latch that she won’t have to worry about it digging into him while she – does what she’s decided to do.

The expression on his face is no longer blank, but rather confused and slightly annoyed.

“Belle,” he says again. “What are you doing?”

She can feel herself blush as she avoids his eyes.

“Honestly? I don’t really know,” she admits – then kneels at his feet.

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes
I really didn't know what kind of rabbit hole I was falling down when I began researching units of measurement in 18th century France. They're just little throwaway details for authenticity (I've used a few in the past, which you may or may not have noticed), nothing complicated... Or so I thought. But apparently units of measurement in France before the Revolution were INSANE. Different cities all had their own, some called the same things but without the same numerical value, others just different names for the same distance or weight. Etienne and Belle both use Parisian units of measurement, Etienne because he grew up near Paris at court, and Belle because she was born in Paris and her father always used Parisian measurements. They're also used by the staff at the castle, but I think the villagers in Villeneuve and the surrounding areas probably use more rural units - not sure if that will ever come up, however. I just found it very interesting that something we take so much for granted, like standardized units of measurement, is actually a fairly recent innovation in some ways. If the French Revolution never occurred, I wonder how long it would have taken until units were standardized across France? Another topic to research perhaps...

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel whenever I can recover my work and/or re-write 27 whyyyyy same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Chapter Notes

As always, thank you all so much for your kudos and lovely comments! I promise I will go back through and respond to everyone tomorrow, tonight I'm just exhausted from fighting to recover my stupid file. I cannot begin to describe the level of existential despair I felt when all 90k words of this fic turned into millions of asterisks before my eyes... I will have nightmares for years. But as for your comments, I'm constantly blown away by your insight into the story and characters and love hearing anything you have to say <3

Oh, one quick note: I do try VERY VERY hard to stay consistent with my posting, and I'm nine chapters ahead so usually it's easy to post on time. However, my dad is still very sick, and sometimes random computer glitches do happen (like today, with the whole asterisks of doom thing). I'll always at least try to let you know if I won't be posting, and why. But I do suggest you also subscribe to this story, just in case I end up posting late... Or, as happened tonight, just in case I end up posting on time after telling you I might be late. I worry that some people who saw that won't check back until next week and then they'll be sad to have missed the new chapter.

And now, Chapter 27, which is long and hard with a happy ending...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

27

Even before he fully comprehends what Belle is about, lowering herself to her knees in front of him, Etienne is immediately and painfully hard. The rush of blood to his cock is so sudden that he is left lightheaded, dizzy, grateful for the solid surface behind him to keep him upright on unsteady legs. It’s just – too much, the sight of Belle on her knees for him just as he’s imagined so many times… Too many to count. Somehow the reality of it eclipses those fantasies, even despite his experience and vivid imagination. He’d never thought to imagine the way the candlelight would limn her delicate features, or the way it would shine on her smooth dark unpowdered hair and pick out shades of honey and strands of gold. He’d never thought to imagine the expression on her face – or he had, but he’d been wrong.

Unlike his detailed fantasies, her eyes are not heavy-lidded with lust and her lips are not pouting with desire. Of course they’re not; she’s Belle. Instead her gaze is narrowed in concentration, her mouth set in a determined line. Her shoulders are squared and body tensed like a soldier about to march into battle… Although what part he has to play in that comparison, it’s difficult to imagine. Truly, she is staring at the all too obvious bulge in his breeches – so conveniently at her eye level – in an almost belligerent manner, practically daring him to make trouble for her. He has every intention of doing so, of course. God, the trouble he’d like to make for her, with her…

She reaches up to cup him, her small hand so warm even through the cloth, and he can feel her trembling with nervous energy. He’s trembling himself, every cell of his body vibrating in pure
anticipation of her touch, cock twitching restlessly under her palm. All of his senses seem heightened, sharpened, keen enough that he can hear her soft inhalation of breath as she feels him swelling even further beneath her fingers and smell the hints of ink and parchment that cling to her. Some distant part of his mind hopes at least that the ink he assumes stains her skin is dry enough that it won’t transfer to his clothing, but most of him thinks he doesn’t care. Then she unbuttons the fall of his breeches and slips her hand inside to free him, and he knows he doesn’t care – he doesn’t care about anything but this, her bare skin on his. Except…

Something is wrong.

It’s a strange thought to have just now – not even a thought, really, more a slight sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach, but even that doesn’t make sense. What could possibly be wrong in a world where Belle is on her knees for him, lips parted, leaning forward to take him deep into her mouth? Hell, he’d been imagining it even when another woman had been the one on her knees… Another strange thought to have just now. He hadn’t even wanted to think about the Marquise de Merteuil when she had her lips around his cock; it makes very little sense that he’s thinking about her at this moment, when he can feel the warmth of Belle’s breath on his aching flesh.

And yet even as Belle flicks her tongue over him, even as she hesitantly covers his tip with her mouth, Etienne finds that he can’t stop. Somehow he remembers perfectly the way he’d felt then, back against another door, hands clenched and teeth set while the Marquise worked on him and he’d wished he was anywhere else. That hadn’t made much sense at the time, either, considering her skill, that thing she’d done with her tongue, the way she’d taken him in until he could feel himself sliding down the back of her throat. Technically speaking, it had been amongst the best fellatio he’d ever experienced, which is rather saying something. And technically speaking, whatever Belle is doing to him must be the worst. Her lips are wide around him, the head of his cock enveloped by the warm wetness, yes, but that seems to be all she can take, and there is no suction to speak of –

No. He forces himself to clear his mind, forces himself to focus. It’s unbelievably distasteful to him, comparing Belle to the Marquise. Belle is kind, and sweet, and his – there is no comparison. And god knows how many men he’d need to kill if Belle evinced even a fraction of the skill the Marquise had. He loves that Belle lacks anything resembling skill, loves the awkward flick of her tongue against him and the fact that she has no idea what to do with her hands. Oh, he’ll tell her, show her… Just as soon as he can stop thinking about how he’d thought the very same the last time, imagined exactly how he’d teach her as the fantasy of Belle and the Marquise’s talent brought him nearly to orgasm –

No.

He looks down to watch her moving on him, cursing himself for his strange distraction. What had her expression been like, the first time she’d seen his cock up close, the first time her lips had parted around him? These are things he’s imagined, things he’s dreamed of, and he’s missed them due to thinking about nothing of any importance. Slowly, he brings one shaky hand to cup the back of her head. He could tangle his fingers in her hair, guide her up and down, hold her in place for him, but he doesn’t want any of that – he just wants to smooth his palm over her crown, feel the silk of her dark hair, feel the relief at its unpowdered state. But even aristocratic women don’t powder their hair all the time. Dozens of brunettes, hundreds, have sucked his cock, have knelt for him just like this.

It – it makes no sense – but he doesn’t like that she’s one of them. Doesn’t want her this way, on her knees, face barely visible so that she could be anyone – anyone with no idea how to suck him off, anyway. Her lack of finesse reminds him that it’s her, but her clumsy attempts will certainly not be enough to finish him. If he teaches her, tells her what he wants, tells her what to do, and if she listens... He could come in her mouth, just the way he's pictured so many times, and it’s not that he
doesn't want it. God how he wants it! But as many times as he’s pictured it, he’s had other women actually doing it, and as he has spent the past two weeks picturing this constantly that is rather saying something.

"Stop," he chokes out. "Belle, stop."

His throat is so dry, he isn’t even certain his words are intelligible, and the fact that Belle doesn't stop immediately tells him perhaps they weren't. He feels a sudden sense of panic that maybe she won't, though not because anyone has told her to do this to him and told her not to stop, and maybe he doesn’t want her to after all, but he knows he does but it feels good and… His head is spinning.

"Stop."

She pulls back and her distressed eyes meet his.

"I'm doing this all wrong, aren't I?"

He doesn't answer, instead making himself as decent as he’s capable of. Inconveniently, he’s still so hard it's almost painful, and adding the constriction of his close-cut breeches doesn't help. But his head is still spinning and his heart is still pounding, blood throbbing in his veins with nameless and unwarranted dread. She stopped, of course she stopped.

"Just stand up," he snaps. "This isn't – You don't have to do that."

She rises awkwardly, placing one warm hand flat on his thigh to steady herself as she does so, and oh his body is so displeased with him. Closing his eyes he reprimands his cock for utterly refusing to stand down, not that it does any good, and when his eyes open again she's standing before him. He feels suddenly and strangely trapped by the positioning and shoves past her to escape. His feet return him to where he'd been standing when she'd entered the room, looking down at the book she'd last read to him. Even in the candlelight he can pick out a few words, though it doesn’t calm him.

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to apologize," she says in a quiet, wounded voice.

All of his confusion, all of the fear he has no reason to feel but feels anyway, coalesces and shifts into much more familiar rage as he turns on her.

"You wanted to apologize?" he demands. "What, you thought if you sucked my cock I'd forgive your earlier behavior? A perfectly reasonable exchange."

"That isn't – "

"You're not a whore, Belle," he scoffs, more a commentary on her lack of skill than a statement of his beliefs or of fact, although it's those too. That's just not how he means it in this moment when he wants only to lash out. "You shouldn't try to act like one."

Any other woman would be cowed by his anger, or hurt by his words, or both. Any other woman would cry. Belle just blinks, tilting her head to the side and staring at him – or through him, he's not sure which.

"Did you not offer me money to come to your bed? Did I not accept?" she asks, rhetorically he assumes. But he has no desire to be reminded of her reasons for coming to him. Surely they are beyond that now. He is beyond that now, at least, perhaps further beyond than he'd quite realized.

"I made you unhappy earlier," she continues. "I thought this would make you happy instead."
"It didn't."

Disappointment shows briefly on her face – which is exquisite as always, her color high, her lips swollen and shiny from being stretched around his cock, and yes, his body is very displeased with him – but then she shrugs.

"It shouldn't be any surprise that I'm not good at it, but I have taken your direction well in the past. If you would just tell me – "

"Tell you what? Exactly how to suck me off?" He doesn't know why he feels so compelled to upset her, to offend her, but he thinks perhaps his crudeness might suffice.

"Yes," she responds, utterly unperturbed. "That."

Somehow, her straightforward response makes him even harder, and his breeches feel so tight that he almost has no choice but to free himself – though he refrains, somehow. Barely. He just – needs to sit down, that's all, so he lowers himself to the edge of the bed and attempts to will his erection away (shockingly, his will is not quite so strong).

"I've never had to tell anyone before," he says, cruelly. "They always know exactly what to do. The last one was, what, two days after I first fucked you?"

The second he says it, he wishes he could take it back. It's true, of course, but he hadn't enjoyed it and had felt strangely guilty for it and had certainly never wanted her to know of it. But it's too late, so he just stares at her, waiting for some response.

"Well?" he prods when there isn't one.

"I don't know what you want me to say," she says.

"Does it upset you?"

"Should it?"

"I don't know," he says, because he doesn't. His other women all knew about one another and while there was always rivalry none of them were ever genuinely hurt by any of it, as far as he knows.

"I mean, why should I?" she rephrases. "I barely knew you then. I'd hoped you'd find someone else to distract you."

"What?" he asks, and now he's the one who is upset. "Why?"

She smiles slightly. "I told you, I barely knew you then."

"And now?" Somehow, he feels that her answer is so important.

"I don't know," she murmurs, considering. "I don't think I would like it."

The surprise with which she says so is unflattering, but the words are something, he supposes. He sags back against the scattered cushions, lying so that his knees are at an angle and his feet are on the floor, drained. He isn't certain whether it's weakness lingering from his illness, or weakness lingering from long before.

"Etienne, what's all this about, really?" she asks quietly. "I think you're angry but – I'm not sure you're angry with me. Are you?"
"I'm not," he tells her. "I'm – angry with myself. I didn't like seeing you like that. You're not a whore – "

She opens her mouth to speak, and he glares at her before she can get a word out.

" – and I swear to you, if you recite me some definition by heart and claim it applies to you, I'll – Just don't. You're not, and I don't want you on your knees like one." He can't help but laugh, then. "I cannot believe I just said that, but there it is."

Belle moves to his bedside, resting her hip against it and looking down at him. "You've done something similar for me several times."

"That's not the same."

"I don't think you were on your knees at any point," she continues.

He can't help but grin wickedly at her, although his heart isn't quite in it. "Maybe next time."

She smiles and shakes her head. "That's not what I meant."

"Then what – "

Before he can guess what she's going to do, she's grasping at his legs, exerting pressure to turn him in place and lay him out fully on the mattress. Even in his weakened state she could never maneuver him this way if he didn't allow it, but she has that determined glint in her dark eyes and he thinks it's probably not worth arguing about. He acquiesces and even assists until he's stretched out on the bed and she seems pleased with her handiwork. She joins him then, kneeling between his legs and hovering over him.

"Better?" she asks.

"Belle – "

"I'm not on my knees," she points out, raising her delicate brows at him.

Well – No, she isn't, and the look on her face – He's already as hard as he's ever been, as hard as he could ever get, and there isn't that strange ephemeral sense that something is deeply wrong when she rests her hands over his hipbones through his clothing. His body certainly thinks this is better, and his mind is almost inclined to agree.

"You don't have to," he says, because he's an idiot. No, a gentleman. Yes, that's what he meant.

"When you do this for me, do you do it because you have to?" There is nothing belligerent in her voice, just simple curiosity.

"No, of course not." He's a Prince. He doesn't have to do anything he doesn't want to, not anymore.

She cups him again through his breeches, and he knows she can feel him throbbing and twitching under her touch just as clearly as before – more clearly, because he's harder now than he was then. He doesn't stop her. Belle seems quite determined and now that she's on the bed with him, now that he's sitting up slightly and able to see her face, her determination pleases him greatly.

"You have to tell me what you like," she reminds him. His breath catches and he nods – she smiles. Her smile is too sweet, too pure, for what she's doing, but she's Belle so it's not surprising. She's too sweet and too pure for any of this but that apparently isn't going to stop her, and neither is he.
With great concentration, she unbuttons the fall of his breeches again, a little line forming between her brows as she attempts to determine which of the internal silver repoussé buttons he actually managed to do up. He wonders if she's thinking what he is, that he managed far too many of them, but then she's finally releasing him from the prison of his clothing and he has more important things to think about. Her hands feel very small wrapped around him, palms still lightly callused in a way he ought to find distasteful but somehow doesn't. He keeps his eyes on her face as she strokes him gently, watches as her pink tongue darts out to lick her lower lip.

"What do you think?" he can't help but ask, mostly to tease her but partially out of curiosity. She's never really seen a man this way before, he knows (and is delighted by the knowledge), so he can't help but wonder...

"I think that classical statues and anatomical diagrams have left me woefully unprepared," she says, glancing up to meet his eyes.

If not for the fact that she's still stroking him he thinks he would laugh. But she is, just the way he'd shown her, and he sucks in a breath as she leans forward to lap at the droplet of clear fluid beading on the tip of his cock. The light flick of her tongue is torturous, the knowledge that she's tasting him finally even more so, but the way she darts her gaze away – that is not acceptable.

"No," he groans. "Look at me."

Hesitantly, she raises her dark eyes to his once more, and even in the candlelight he can see the way her cheeks flame with embarrassment. But she'd insisted he tell her what he likes, and he loves this. Despite her embarrassment she manages to maintain that contact, and he holds it even as she returns to using her tongue on him. It's warm and wet as it slides over his aching flesh, first flattened over the weeping head and then moving in long smooth stripes from base to tip. She'd figured something out before after all. It's not satisfying in any way, the brushes too light and fleeting, but it brings all his nerve endings to life, so sensitive and longing for that momentary contact until the fact that it isn't enough becomes too much to bear.

"Open your mouth," he orders breathlessly, nudging at the seam of her lips, wishing he could push in deep, bury himself to the hilt in her throat until he can feel the ring of her mouth pressing against the base of his cock. But he can't, of course he can't. Not this time. Next time, however...

"Take me in – Yes, like that, yes – "

His words break off as she obeys him and he watches her lips part around the head of his cock. It feels almost like fucking her, the slickness, the heat, but the sight of her like this... It's obscene in the best possible way and he groans, loving that it's clearly not easy for her to encompass him.

"More – As much as you can – " He interrupts himself with a gasp as she moves forward and he slides deeper into the welcoming wet heat of her mouth. Somehow he's already panting heavily, trembling even though she's barely done anything,

It's all he can do to keep himself from thrusting up into her – but he doesn't want to scare her, doesn't want to hurt her, doesn't want her to change her mind and leave him like this, so desperate for her attention. So he forces himself to remain as still as he can, despite his shaking, to wait for her to bring him in at her own pace, even if that pace is slow enough to drive him mad. But she continues, pouce by pouce, until her warmth surrounds a little less than half his length. The wide eyes and lips pulled taut around him clearly say she can't handle any more and as much as he'd like her to take it all he does get a sense of satisfaction from the fact that she physically can't. He is only human, after all, even if he is ordained by God himself as future ruler of France.
Before he can provide any more instruction, she begins to move her tongue over him again, licking and swirling, and a moan tears from his chest as bright sparks of pleasure dance across his skin. They only intensify when she wraps her hand around what she can't fit in her mouth and begins to stroke him again. He's slick with saliva and her palms slide easily over him, pumping from the base of his cock up to meet her lips where they're stretched around him then down again. The rhythm is not quite right, a little awkward, but it's her so he doesn't care.

The way she approaches this whole situation makes him think (strangely) of her laundry machine, her enthusiasm for it, the experiments she intends to conduct. She’s bright, curious. She learns from her mistakes and builds on her triumphs. Under current circumstances that means she listens to his breathing, his moans, focuses on the spots and techniques that elicit shaky blasphemy. When her tongue presses against the sensitive spot at the base of his head and he cries out, she lingers there until he thinks he might be able to come from that alone. When she actually seals her mouth around him and sucks he sees stars and knows he will be able to come from that alone – as long as she doesn't stop.

“Yes, just like that, ma Belle,” he hisses as the suction surrounds him and the pleasure seeps into his veins, flowing through him, as necessary and vital as the blood it laces – as though his heart could beat for that only, as though he could live forever with it flooding him.

Despite his best intentions, he realizes his fingers are buried in her hair – not just buried but tangled, the long strands wrapped around his hand giving him complete control over her movement – and despite his best intentions he uses it, tugging and pushing to guide her up and down his length, urging her to take more and more each time. She doesn’t resist, moving as he wills, sucking and stroking his cock, caressing him with her tongue. He can feel the ecstasy building inside of him, the small muscles in his back tensing and tightening, and knows that if he increased the speed of her motions he could be finished in mere moments. Soon enough he’ll have to, won’t be able to resist, but for now he wants to draw it out, wants to revel not only in the pure sensation of imminent orgasm but also in the knowledge that this is another first he has claimed for himself.

He doesn’t know why it matters with her, when it has never mattered before. He just knows he loves that everything she does for him now, she is doing for the first time, that when he finally comes in her mouth, that will be the first time too. She’ll never have another man like this without thinking of him, never taste another man without remembering the way he tastes – Or maybe she’ll just never have another man, because she’s hishishis and with the utter clarity of almost-ecstasy he knows he will keep her with him. He isn’t certain how he’d ever imagined it could be otherwise.

“I’m so close,” he gasps, because it’s polite, even if he’s also pushing her down, sliding deeper into her throat. It feels too good, better than anything, especially considering that she takes it somehow, and he has plans for next time, yes.

Still moving her, still guiding her, he rises slightly, adjusting his position just to absorb the sight of his Belle with his cock stretching her perfectly shaped lips wide around his shaft, cheeks hollowed as she sucks him. He reaches down and strokes her cheek with his free hand, ceases his motions just long enough to cup her chin and tilt her face up.

“Look at me. Now.”

She lifts her gaze to his again, rekindling that connection he’d insisted on before but lost track of in everything that followed. Her eyes are fathomless and dark, reflecting all the candlelight back at him, and he’s too far gone to really understand what it does to him, looking into her and really seeing her, knowing that she’s the one who has done this for him. He holds her gaze as he moves his hand down to encompass her throat, her pulse under his fingers, palm flat. She blinks, and – god only knows
how, considering what her mouth is doing, but she’s still blushing.

“I’m going to come in your mouth.” His voice is rough, breathless, almost a snarl, but he’s far too close for any niceties. He’d thought, once, that he might do the gentlemanly thing at this moment, set her away from him and finish on his stomach, but who is he kidding, really? Certainly not himself.

“God, Belle, let me – let me –”

He guides her back down once more, twice more, slowly – torturing himself more than her, so close, too close – tugging at her hair until only his swollen throbbing head is still between her lips, until he knows she’ll taste him, until he knows she’ll have to.

“Suck,” he orders, and she does, and that’s all it takes.

The slick heat of her mouth, the heat in her eyes, the very sight of her like this for him and the blessed suction she exerts at his command – it all unites to form the key to releasing the pleasure she’s built in him, the pleasure he’s held back longer than he even imagined possible. He doesn’t need to anymore, so he lets go, nearly sobbing with relief as his cock pulses just inside her lips, the thick head pressed to the flat of her tongue and coating it with his seed. She doesn’t try to pull away as he spills himself inside her mouth, but his fingers tighten in her hair to hold her in place all the same.

“Swallow it – *Fuck, Belle – Swallow –*”

His words are incoherent, frantic, but she either understands or reads his mind because he can feel her throat working under his hand as she obeys. It enhances the already consuming pleasure of release, sharpens it, draws it out until he’s exhausted by it and finally *finally* spent.

Chapter End Notes

One thing I’ve noticed in some historical fics with sex scenes is that some present day writers seem to be under the impression that people in the past were more conservative with their sexual practices (not just mores, which in some times definitely were quite restrictive). I’ve seen this in fic set in the Middle Ages, Regency, Edwardian Era... Oral sex, especially, for some reason is considered more "modern". Okay. Look. TRUST ME, humans figured out the things that feel good a VERY long time ago. The oldest known dildo is 20,000 years old. Oral sex is mentioned with approval in the Bible, in the Song of Songs. The Ancient Romans actually had a specific word for "I will face-fuck you": *irrumabo*. Although to be fair it was an insult, but still. Our ancestors got up to some kinky things, is the point. I'm only mentioning this now because this chapter doesn't really have any other historical notes to make so... Humanity: Giving and Receiving Blowjobs Since 300,000 BC. Tell all your history teachers. Tell all your friends. A squid in disguise said so.

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

02.11.18: Thank you so much for your patience! 29 is up now!

And now, Chapter 28, in which Etienne is kind of a dick and Belle handles it with aplomb.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s almost disorienting, how quickly everything changes. One moment all she knows is motion, sensation – Etienne’s long fingers clenching into fists in her hair, his movements guiding her in an overwhelming rhythm, his solid flesh throbbing in her mouth and her grip as she does her best even if she doesn’t quite know what that entails, not really – and then just… Nothing. Well, not nothing; he shudders under her, and gasps, and floods her mouth with the heat of his release, and that’s something, obviously. But then everything is so still. There’s just the sound of his labored breathing and the movement of his chest as he gulps in air, the beating of his heart almost as loud in her ears as her own, and utter stillness as all the tension leaves his body and he melts down into the mattress.

To go from so much action to complete inaction, so suddenly… Yes, it’s disorienting, if for no other reason than it forces her back into her own mind. Generally speaking she spends a lot of time there, she knows she does, observing, analyzing, cataloguing. Before meeting him she had never imagined she could be otherwise. And yet sometimes, with him, she forgets to observe or analyze, or simply is not capable of it – another thing she never imagined. This, what she has just done for him, she will eventually be able to examine and dissect, but… Not now. Not just yet. Not when she can still remember the helplessness in his piercing eyes as he spilled himself for her; not when she can still taste him.

She rests her forehead on his hipbone and presses her lips to his thigh, remembering that he’d once done something similar for her after methodically taking her apart and it had felt so… Comforting, in a way. Perhaps it feels the same for him because he strokes his palm lightly over her hair as he exhales and somehow relaxes just a little more.

“Come here,” he murmurs, voice low and thick, so different from the desperation of earlier.

Raising her head, she meets his eyes, and he smiles sleepily at her. It’s his most compelling smile, quiet and crooked, not trying to be anything but what it is. Without his maquillage she has always found him “not unattractive”, more or less, but like this… With his long hair tousled and stubble enhancing his features, his cheeks flushed and eyes practically glowing blue with the candlelight, and that soft, relaxed smile… Oh, like this she finds him very, very attractive.

With a small smile of her own she acquiesces, crawling up beside him and then resting her weight on her arm to look down into his face. For a moment she simply stares at him, at the subtle lines near his eyes that she’d once found impossible to believe were from smiling, until something darkens in his gaze. He reaches for her and she is struck by the beauty of his hand, the shape of it, the strength and
yet the elegance of it. Then he’s caressing her cheek, cradling her face briefly before brushing one finger at the corner of her mouth. She has no time to wonder why as he presses it between her lips, and she understands the intensity of his expression when the sharp, salty flavor of him hits her tongue.

Her face heats with embarrassment although she can’t quite figure out why, considering that he’d already poured himself into her mouth and down her throat just moments before. It’s not even as though she’s ashamed, because she isn’t; all things considered, swallowing the way he’d half ordered, half begged her to make significantly more sense than any other alternative, if only to avoid the mess. But it’s just so indecent, the look on his face, the anticipation as he waits for her to suck his finger clean. She obliges him, lapping at his fingertip and thinking that the taste might not be pleasant but it is not unbearable either.

Before she can muse on this further he removes his finger from her mouth and replaces it with his lips, surging up to kiss her more passionately than she’d have expected given his exhaustion. He plunges his tongue deep without hesitation, tangling it with hers until she wonders if he’s trying to find a hint of himself in her. *Indecent*, she thinks again, but doesn’t protest or resist. She – doesn’t mind it, not really. She likes it when he kisses her.

He pulls back after a moment, resting his forehead against hers and panting heavily still, again.

“*Fuck, Belle,*” he groans, and she can’t help but laugh.

“That was… Perfectly adequate, I assume?” she teases, and he kisses her again, quick and hard.

“Yes, perfectly. Should you wish to improve, I suppose I might be able to advise you… Help you practice, that sort of thing.”

“Very magnanimous,” she answers wryly.

“Yes, I thought so.” He sags back again, grinning and smug until his grin turns wicked once more. He pulls her closer, voice going low and husky. “Now tell me, did you like sucking my cock? Like the taste of my come in your mouth?”

His words make something tighten deep inside of her, something that makes her clench her thighs together and realize how restless she is, how unfulfilled after everything. But his question is somewhat perplexing when she truly considers it – as she does, cocking her head to the side and thinking.

“Am I supposed to?” she asks finally, wondering even as she voices the question whether it’s the wrong thing to say.

It might be, but he laughs anyway, throwing back his head in unrestrained mirth. “Are you *supposed* to? God, Belle, the way you murder my confidence!”

“I didn’t mean – ”

“I’ll have to take that as a challenge, Belle,” he tells her, still grinning, still wicked as he reaches for her. They’re both on their sides now, facing one another, and he pulls her flush against him until she can feel the heat of him through all the clothing they both still wear. His eyes remain locked on hers as his fingers grasp at the silk of her gown, bunching it up around her waist - overskirt, underskirt, so much fabric, but he manages to find his way under it, fingertips skimming up her thigh as an afterthought as he races towards his goal. Then his hand is between her legs and he’s smirking at her, unbearably smug the way only he can be.
“Shall I ask you again if you liked it?” he demands, parting her folds and stroking gently before sinking one thick finger easily into her. She gasps, arching against him, and he rubs something sensitive deep inside. “I don’t think sucking me off would get you this wet if you didn’t.”

She’d like to be able to refute him, but she can’t lie, and anyway she can’t form a coherent sentence – or phrase, or word – not with the way he’s touching her. When he leans close and brushes his lips over her throat, presses hot kisses in a trail to the shell of her ear and bites at the lobe, thoughts of even attempting to respond completely evaporate from her mind.

“I liked it,” he murmurs in her ear, the heat of his breath sending sweet shudders through her that only intensify the pleasure building between her legs. “You looked so good with your lips wrapped around my cock, and your mouth is almost as hot and wet as your cunt.”

A moan claws its way out of her throat as he adds another finger, though it’s not as easy this time. She must be wet, knows she is because he said so and she can hear it, but it’s been so long since he’s had her this way that her body briefly resists accommodating him. It doesn’t hurt, not at all; it actually feels good, the stretch as he slides the second finger inside, the even greater stretch when he spreads them and opens her further.

“Etienne,” she gasps, lifting her hips to force him deeper.

“Not nearly so tight, though,” he muses thoughtfully. “Next time I’m going to fuck your face, Belle, going to hold you still and watch you take my entire cock down your throat again and again.”

God, his voice! She wishes she could tell him what it does to her, wishes she could plead for him to continue, keep talking, keeping telling her… She understands most of what he’s saying this time, filthy as it may be, and imagining it… It had been impossible for her to take so much this time, though he’d managed to fit more and more as things progressed, but the thought of him thrusting into her mouth the way he does when he takes her… It makes her head spin, remembering just how it felt to have him so hard and throbbing and nudging at the back of her throat.

She whimpers, digging her fingernails into his shoulders, and he chuckles darkly – if breathlessly. The movement of his fingers inside her is heavenly, but she wishes he would touch that spot in front, the one he’d shown her that brings her such pleasure. She needs him to, she thinks, she needs him to, but clearly is intent on torturing her.

“I could make it easy on you, you know,” he continues, breathing heavier, still stroking her inside but it’s not enough. “I could come with my cock so deep and you wouldn’t even have to swallow – but I won’t, no, not when you’re still not sure if you like the taste of my seed. I promised to help you improve, did I not?”

“Etienne!” she finally manages to sob, hoping he can hear her desperation, hoping he can understand it – and he very well may, but he isn’t finished driving her insane quite yet.

“Besides, I loved watching you swallow my come, whether you liked the taste or not. I want to fill you with it, cover you with it – next time I’ll pull out of your mouth at the last possible second and spend myself all over your face – ”

She isn’t quite sure how she feels about that – it’s indecent, of course, perhaps more indecent than anything else he’s suggested so far, but then she supposes that’s why his voice catches and he groans, finally sounding nearly as tortured as she is. For a moment she thinks perhaps he’s broken his own control with his words, perhaps he will give her what he must know she needs, but then he removes his fingers from inside of her, leaving her suddenly achingly empty.
“Don’t!” she begs, but he just shoves his fingers into her mouth, forcing her to taste herself—far sweeter than him, which strikes her as apt considering how cruelly he’s behaving now.

His free hand struggles desperately with her skirts, pulling them even further up until she can feel air caressing her bare skin, and she shivers when it meets the wetness between her thighs. He tries to use the same hand to free himself—it ought to be easy, as his breeches are still undone, but his fumbling seems ineffective until he yanks his fingers from the heat of her mouth to assist himself. She would help, really she would, but she’s too busy writhing against him, pleading with her body for the friction she needs to come undone. Ignoring her desperation, he grabs her thigh and pulls her leg over his own, adjusting the angle until he can finally push into her.

It—well, after so long it hurts, but the sensation of pain is relative. It’s nothing like that first night, when she’d felt as though she’d been torn open. This is more like a sudden, unexpected stretch, one she isn’t quite ready for but which in her aroused and highly sensitized state also feels somehow exquisite, pain that feels so good it’s somehow pleasure. He curses, and kisses her, and doesn’t give her time to adjust at all but she doesn’t even want it, or wouldn’t if she was able to think about it. She isn’t. No, not at all, isn’t able to think about anything except him filling her, plunging deep at an awkward angle but it doesn’t matter. It’s almost completely what she needs and she revels in it, revels in the way her body sings and desire floods her veins and all of her muscles tense in anticipation. There’s still that sense of something lacking, that innate understanding that if he just touched her right where she needs him the whole world would disappear in a haze of blinding pleasure—the whole world except for him. But she trusts that he won’t leave her this way as he once would have. That knowledge grants her the barest sliver of patience.

“Fuck, Belle, I’ve missed this,” he pants against her lips. “You feel so good.”

She’s missed this too, she realizes, missed it and worried it would never happen again—irrationally, since all danger to his health has obviously passed, but… She’d feared for him greatly. It had been a very near thing. It’s a relief in more ways than the obvious to feel him thrusting hard inside her, aroused and solid, vital and undeniably so alive.

“Etienne, please,” is her only response, because she knows better than to say anything else that is on her mind.

“No,” he snarls, pulling back to meet her eyes. His are that painful blue again, piercing like mirror shards reflecting the sky, and not nearly so glazed with passion as she’s certain hers must be. She wants to damn him for his control even as she knows it’s slipping. “You’ll come with me or not at all—and I’m not close, ma Belle, this won’t be quick.”

Later, she’ll blame it on desperation, sexual frustration—anything—but the truth is that she can’t stand the tone of command in his voice in that moment, can’t stand the thought of waiting just because he said so. She could touch herself, of course, and she considers it, but after hearing him issue his order she wants to make him regret his smug assurance, his assumption that she will obey.

“Won’t it?” she responds, smiling in a way he ought to recognize as she copied it from him.

Before he can respond, she grips the front of his shirt for leverage and pushes. He’s not expecting it and is surprised enough that she succeeds in rolling him onto his back so that she sits astride him. One of his hands reaches for her instinctively, gripping the curve of her hip to steady her and hold her in place, impaled to the hilt on him. He’s so much deeper than before—she’s so full of him—and it occurs to her that perhaps she didn’t think all the implications through fully, not that she cares.

For his part Etienne stares up at her in shock before his gaze drifts down over her body and becomes heated. She’s still fully clothed, as is he, but her dress is in disarray, bodice pulled down low enough
that the pale pink of her nipples just peeks over the edge of the fabric. He hooks one finger on the fabric and pulls it down, baring her breasts for him, and she leans forward to press herself into his hand more firmly as he cups her. This shifts the angle between them yet again, and suddenly the pressure he’d denied her is gloriously present as she rubs against him.

“‘Yes,’” she sighs, blissfully. “Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t stop, please – Etienne, please – ”

He takes pity on her, finally. The hand clamped at her hip tightens and presses her down, holding her perfectly in place as he thrusts up into her and urges her to grind into him.

“Just like that,” he assures her as she moves, and he’s right. Just like that is perfection, the feel of him so deep inside of her, the friction of his body precisely where she’s needed it all this time, his fingers pinching and rolling her nipple into a stiff point. Every movement only adds to the tension inside her, only pulls it tighter and tighter as she forgets every word she’s ever known except his name. And then the tension snaps and even that flies out of her head, leaving her with nothing left to moan except wordless sounds of overwhelming pleasure.

She can feel herself contracting around him, his thickness buried inside of her enhancing the pleasure flowing through her, and then he’s groaning and pulling her down hard against his chest to force her lips against his, and his tongue is as deep in her mouth as he is inside her, and she can feel the heat of him coming and filling her just the way he said he wanted to, and that heat at her core enhances everything further as he loses himself in her – and she loses herself a little too.

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes

You might find it strange or unlikely that Etienne could just stick his hand up Belle's skirt - or the Marquise's skirt, or anyone's skirt - and have nothing impede his progress, but the fact is that Western women didn't wear anything resembling panties until somewhat later than our era - despite live-action Belle's bloomers*. In a time before Belle's laundry machine, having yet another item of linen to clean made little sense, especially when that particular item of linen would have required frequent washing to keep it hygienic. A woman's chemise and petticoats provided enough protection, as far as they were concerned. Now, I know what you're thinking... What about that time of the month? Here's the thing about history: it was mostly written by men, and even the women whose accounts we have mostly didn't mention things of that nature. So we mostly have no idea about what women did during their periods, even as late as American westward expansion. One prevailing theory holds that women just bled into their petticoats, mainly because there's no evidence of anything else. Of course, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and I can't imagine freebleeding being comfortable or acceptable but... They had different standards then. Marie Antoinette, for example, before being led to the guillotine, squatted over a chamberpot to urinate in full view of everyone waiting for her (everything concealed by her voluminous skirts, of course!), and no one thought that was weird. So who knows.

Oh, another fun tidbit: when undergarments did finally come into being towards the end
of the 18th century, they were at first considered to be only for prostitutes and women of loose morals. Really not sure where the link between the two came from but... History is weird, you know? Because of that association, it took awhile for the undergarments to catch on, but even once they did they weren't like what we're used to today. Have you ever wondered why we say "a pair of panties" (or "pair of knickers" or whatever if you're a Brit) when it's just one undergarment? Originally they were two separate legs that tied at the waist. Obviously this means there was an opening in the crotch, again bringing up the question of wtf women did during their periods... The world may never know.

*The costumes in the live action BatB were overall quite historically accurate, but the bloomers under Belle's peasant garb were to make it possible for her to ride astride without resulting in the movie being NC-17, or having a "Basic Instinct" moment.

Okay, after that exceptionally long historical note, I do have some bad news: I will not be able to update next week. As you know, my dad is sick, and he's having his kidney removed sometime in the coming week. Luckily you only need one, so hopefully everything will be fine, but we don't have an exact day yet and whenever it happens I'll be pretty busy handling everything. So I'm sorry to interrupt our updates so soon after the holidays but it can't be helped. Keep your fingers crossed for my dad! Overall the news is really good, even though removing a kidney sounds pretty drastic...

See you late Feb. 5th/early Feb 6th, same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your patience with this chapter. I'll be going back answering a TON of comments over the next week, don't think I've forgotten about you please. I appreciate all your insight, feedback and support so much!

And now, Chapter 29 (FINALLY), in which Etienne is even more delusional than usual, which is really saying something tbh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

29

One week later, Etienne stands in the doorway of the Saint-Cloud Suite, suffused with a strange feeling of… Not déjà vu, exactly. But he spent so many weeks ill in bed, looking up to see Belle standing in the doorway of the guestroom in the summerhouse, that this reversal is quite disorienting. He wonders if he had looked as still and pale by candlelight as Belle does, if she had felt this sinking in her chest to see him thus, if she’d felt this desperate urgency to fix things somehow. Though both Lumiere and Plumette have assured him her illness is innocuous, words cannot express how little he likes seeing her this way. It surprises him, how little he likes it.

There is also guilt, of course, layered under everything else, and that surprises him too. It is not an emotion he is overfamiliar with. He has neglected her shamefully since his return to health and the Palais Villeneuve – a return somewhat less triumphant than he would have liked or expected. Not so long ago, his forced sequester in that hovel of a summerhouse with only a near-virginal serving girl and occasionally Valmont or Lumiere for company would have driven him quite spare with boredom. Yet now, returned to his rightful place and opulent chambers, he finds himself almost missing it. The inactivity had been irksome, yes, and being stabbed nearly to death had certainly not been pleasant, but… It had been nice, having no role to play, having no one to please but himself – and Belle, once he’d recovered well enough.

That freedom is a thing of the past, sadly. The weeks of his absence naturally resulted in mounds of letters to answer, decisions to be made, audiences to grant, and on and on and on, enough to keep him busy from sunrise to sunset – not that he ever rises with the sun, but he probably ought to. Belle still does, meaning she’s been gone every morning by the time he awakens, off to conduct experiments for her laundry machine, or perhaps consult with Cogsworth – when Cogsworth isn’t torturing his master, that is. He hasn’t quite had the heart to request (demand) that she eat with him and his remaining courtiers again. Now that the weather has cooled a fair few of them have abandoned his castle for Versailles, through with flattering and appeasing him and ready to flatter and appease his father. Still, enough remain that he feels obliged to entertain them, especially after his abandonment of them. When he returns to bed, Belle is always asleep.

She does not seem to mind waking up to his face between her thighs or his cock inside her, but satisfactory though all of that may be, it’s not quite the same as spending time with her. Perhaps, if he’d conversed with her beyond bedroom talk any time in the past few days he would have noticed
she wasn’t feeling well, would have been able to send for Monsieur de Tassy, would have at least known about it sometime before retiring to find his own bed empty. He has never had a mistress before – Belle might claim he doesn’t have one now, but he does whether she realizes it or not – but he feels very much as though he has failed her.

Yet another feeling that surprises him. He might even have been worried about it - If not for the fact that he is already so uncharacteristically worried about something else.

Quietly, he approaches her bedside, stepping just so in order not to wake her. Her delicate face is drawn in the darkness, graceful cheekbones highlighted in starker relief than usual, or so it seems to him. The freckles spangling the bridge of her nose, the ones he knows he ought to find off-putting but somehow never has, are also more prominent with the accustomed warm golden tone of her skin bleached white. The sinking in his chest transforms itself into a strange twisting ache.

He doesn’t mean to touch her. He certainly has no intention of waking her, but finds his fingers trailing lightly over the line of her jaw nonetheless. Perhaps Lumiere and Plumette knew what they were talking about, after all; her skin is soft and smooth and cool, not burning with fever, for which he is grateful. It goes some way towards assuaging his concern.

“Etienne?” she murmurs, her voice thick with sleep, and her eyes open slowly to meet his. She does not smile as he does, however. “What are you doing here?”

Though it’s a question, the tone of resignation in her voice suggests she already knows – and does not like – the answer.

“Looking for you. I came to bed and you weren’t there, so I – ”

“So you came to find me,” she finishes, that same resignation coloring every word. “I’m ill, Etienne.”

“I know,” he says. “Lumiere told me.”

“If you think – If you expect me to – ”

“If I expect you to –?” he trails off in confusion before understanding suddenly dawns. “You think I would expect – When you’re ill? You think that’s why I’m here?”

“Yes?” she answers, uncertain now, though her uncertainty appeases him not at all.

“You think so little of me?” he demands. He is already upset, of course, and it upsets him further that he sounds more wounded than angry. He’s both… Perhaps the former more than the latter.

“Then what are you doing here?”

He pauses, attempting to formulate an answer despite the mostly foreign emotions filling him. It would be nice if he could tell her he was worried about her and mean it; it would be the answer most likely to make her feel guilty for misjudging him. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t be the truth, not entirely. Once learning she was unwell he was concerned, yes, but before that he could think only that the bed felt far too large without her in it, that he was cold without her curled up warm in his arms. And yes, that he wasn’t quite exhausted enough to sleep just yet, that he wanted her under him. He had been annoyed, perhaps even angry, that she was anywhere other than where she ought to be.

“You can be ill in the west wing just as easily as here,” he says finally. “My bed is more comfortable.”
She smiles then, wryly. “I know how you feel about blood on your sheets, Etienne.”

Blood on his…?

Etienne, as he is forever telling Lumiere, is not stupid. He is certainly not lacking experience with the fairer sex. He knows perfectly well that his favorite activity can lead to certain unintended consequences – he knows perfectly well how babies are made. Moreover, he is much more careful about such consequences than the average member of the nobility. His father, for instance, has enough acknowledged bastards scattered across his kingdom that Etienne knows the unacknowledged ones are probably legion. By His Majesty’s example he knows that getting an illegitimate child on a woman of aristocratic birth is an unholy headache, not only a personal act but a political one. Suddenly the woman and her family have undue power and privilege, with titles and riches being showered upon them, not to mention upon the child. Every woman of the court would like nothing better than to bear him a child and set themselves up for life – reason enough for him to avoid it, as he certainly has.

Women of the lower classes are another story. They generally know how to prevent pregnancy in their own way, and even if they don’t, well, it doesn't much matter; they lack the leverage to cause any trouble over a royal bastard. Therefore, it's perfectly acceptable, even encouraged, to spill himself inside them... But the only thing he has ever wanted to be is nothing like his father, meaning his encounters with such women are few and far between. For this very reason he loves coming inside Belle – it's perhaps the only aspect of sexual congress he almost never gets to experience. He remembers that first night, filling her for the first time and thinking how glad he was that he didn't have to pull out, not with a serving girl like her.

Again, he is not stupid. He is not unaware that Belle came to him completely innocent, and he supposes if he had ever given the subject any thought, it would have occurred to him that her knowledge of pregnancy prevention was probably nonexistent. It's just... He's never really given the subject any thought, not with her, not until this very moment in time. Clearly, if she's bleeding, he has not impregnated her. It is a relief, of course. He had not been worried about it, but only because he had not been thinking about it. If he had, he would have certainly been anxious that nothing of that nature occur, if only because he has plans for Belle’s immediate future and none of those plans include a swollen belly or squalling brat. Heaven forefend.

And yet... There is something almost pleasing about the thought of her eventually giving him a child – charming like him, odd like her, with Belle’s dark hair and his own blue eyes. With their combined beauty their child couldn't fail to be beautiful as well, and with Belle's sweetness and intelligence, she'd be a mother similar to his own. He would give her a chateau, of course – something homey rather than opulent, like Chateau de Gudanes. Somewhere she could build a laundry machine for her staff, and have her own workroom, and a library in which to teach their child to read the way his own mother once taught him. Should the child be a boy, Etienne would create him a comte – no, a marquis, better – and if a girl he'd arrange some splendid match for her. Etienne can only assume he’d be a terrible father, but so long as he saw them but rarely he's certain Belle would do an admirable job of raising their child. Children? It's lonely, being an only child, he knows that well enough.

Belle is also an only child, he believes – at least, she’s never mentioned any siblings, only her father. She too knows what it is like, to always be alone, and would certainly agree that two or more would be preferable. And for all her strangeness, she certainly could take no issue with this eventual vision for the future. Who could, with a beautiful chateau and titles and riches – not to mention his company every now and again, and the company of their sure-to-be-beautiful-and-brilliant-like-their-parents children? There would be no arguments over whether or not she was his mistress then. She would stay with him and they would all be very happy – even him, when he was able to visit, anyway.
“Etienne?” Belle’s sweet voice forces him out of his reverie with a suddenness that leaves him dizzy. That pleasing future had been so real, so immediate, and to find himself abruptly returned to the present is – disappointing. Alarmingly so.

“Yes?” he snaps, though his anger is directed at himself, not her, not really. What on earth is wrong with him? Still, she raises her brows in surprise.

“Is that all?”

He scowls in confusion. “Is what all?”

“Is that all you wanted, to – to check on me? If so, I’d like to sleep,” she says, hesitantly. “I really am not feeling well.”

“No, that’s not all,” he informs her. “You will return to where you belong, in my bed.”

“But the sheets – ”

He smiles blandly at her. “Ruin as many sets as you like. There are more where they came from – unless you and Cogsworth have already put a stop to everything that brings me joy.”

“Not yet,” she mutters darkly. “That’s not – ”

Before she can finish her sentence, he snatches the coverlet back, revealing her lying in bed in nothing but a rough, ragged shift – from home, he supposes, or perhaps part of her uniform. The linen is clean; whatever she’s wearing underneath is protecting everything well enough. What do women wear, during that time of the month? He’s never had cause to wonder, and genuinely has no idea. But it’s an idle curiosity, and not one he pursues, instead focusing entirely on scooping her up into his arms.

“What are you doing?!?” she demands, grasping instinctively at his shoulders, and he grins at her. She’s light as a feather in his embrace, cradled easily against him, and her body is so warm and soft as he holds her.

“Returning you to where you belong. You may protest as much as you like once we are back in the west wing,” he says as he strides across the Saint-Cloud Suite. He’d left the door open, for which he’s grateful – it wouldn’t be difficult to adjust his grip on her to open the door had he closed it, but she’d probably snip at him about it and teasing her is much more enjoyable.

“Put me down. Please.” Her voice is anxious. “You’re going to drop me.”

“You weigh nothing,” he reminds her, maneuvering carefully through the hallway in spite of his mirth. “Do you not remember our time in my office? No? Ah, how you wound me. Perhaps a reminder is in order, once you’re feeling better…”

Her cheeks flush deep pink – of course she remembers, who could forget? – even as she narrows her gaze at him, and the combination of embarrassment and annoyance amuses him into uttering a short bark of laughter. As her lips thin in response, he gets the impression she’d cross her arms with irritation if only she didn’t need to have them twined about his neck.

“Come, Belle, don’t be angry,” he cajoles. “It’s not so difficult to share my bed, is it? I’ll even read to you if you like,” he adds, remembering something she had said what seems like eons ago now, that he had a nice voice, that she’d like him to read to her.

“Will you?”
“If you ask nicely.”

“Romeo and Juliet?” she asks hopefully – hopes he dashes at once.

“No. Something with knights and swords and things, not one of your romances.”

“Am I not in enough pain already?” she drawls in an uncanny imitation of his own voice, and he laughs again.

By now they have reached his suite of rooms in the west wing, and he has only to flick glance at one of his silent footmen for the man to rush forward and open the double doors to Etienne’s chamber for them. He pads across the Savonnerie rug, steps carefully up the dais and places her ever so gently on the bed. Her arms are still about his shoulders, holding him fast instead of allowing him to pull away, so he does the only logical thing and presses his mouth to hers.

Her lips part immediately and he takes full advantage, sliding his tongue between them to find her own, stroking it languidly with his. Belle melts into him and he melts into her but there’s no urgency – as she’s feeling unwell, there’s nowhere in particular for such a kiss to go; the kiss itself is the destination. Although he is neither so selfless nor so concerned about her that it doesn’t occur to him that her current condition precludes very few of his favorite activities, if only she were feeling well, and perhaps she will be feeling better sometime in the near future…

Before such thoughts can get out of hand, he pulls back, smirking at the slightly dazed expression on her face.

“Get under the covers,” he orders, taking her wrists in his hands to unwrap himself from her embrace. “I’ll bring something to read – something suitably masculine, thank you.”

Etienne darts into his office and retrieves his copy of Voltaire’s Zadig, ou la Destinée, which does not quite fit his parameters – it does in fact contain romance, although there are also armored duels and swords and such. But Belle had said she liked Voltaire and he imagines her country priest is not likely to have this novella to hand, not with its pagan influences.

By his reckoning it takes less than one minute to make his selection, but on his return to the bedchamber he finds her curled into a ball under the coverlet, face blanched again and tight with pain. There is a strange, answering pain in him, as though it hurts him to see her hurt, which is ridiculous, and also a sense of helplessness, which is more ridiculous still.

“Belle?” he asks, annoyed to hear the concern in his voice. There is nothing really wrong with her, after all – and he has no idea what is wrong with him.

“You should take me back to the east wing,” she says, breathless, as though whatever pain she’s experiencing takes great strength to hold at bay. “I’ll keep you up like this.”

“Shall I ring for some laudanum?” He ignores her assertion that he should return her to the Saint-Cloud Suite. She belongs in his bed and that is where she shall stay – tonight and for the foreseeable future.

“No, thank you, I just – ” She sucks in a hissing breath and he thinks perhaps he will ring for some, regardless of what she says.

“If not laudanum then what? There must be something for your present relief, Belle, this is ridiculous. You deal with this every month?” He’s never given it much thought, but it occurs to him now that being a woman must be a tedious business at times such as these.
“It’s not always quite like this,” she says, exhaling slowly. “Heat helps, sometimes, a rag soaked in hot water…”

Etienne considers what will happen to his sheets if she wraps herself up in a rag soaked in hot water. Not for the sake of the sheets, of course, but rather for his own; he does not want to be stuck in a wet bed all night. Perhaps he ought to return her to the east wing after all. No, of course not, he wants her where she is, but…

An idea occurs to him then, though he’s not certain it will work. But if heat is all that is required, he has certainly noticed that Belle seems to become cold quite easily. He wakes sometimes to find her pressed against him, buried under every coverlet and blanket on the bed, while he himself sleeps with nothing but a sheet over him and still feels uncomfortably hot. It’s worth an attempt to warm her himself, he decides, especially if the only other alternatives are a cold, wet bed or a cold, empty one. And it’s not as though he finds holding her to be particularly onerous, after all.

Decision made, he shucks off the plain shirt and breeches he’d donned to retrieve Belle, smirking at the color that rises to her cheeks, replacing that dreadful chalk white, and the way her eyes flit about the room, trying to focus on anything but him. He’d be offended except he can see that she is failing, more or less, that her gaze skims over his bare skin as though she can’t seem to help it. When he pushes his breeches down she actually squeezes her eyes closed tight, to his endless amusement. He finally crawls into bed beside her, nudging her onto her side so that he can fit himself to her. It’s difficult, preventing his body from reacting to the feel of her soft warmth nestled against his cock, especially when he’s fucked her like this before and knows how easy it would be to open her for him, push himself inside her. If not for the fact that she is so clearly in pain, he might attempt to talk her into it, but as it is he imposes as much control on his anatomy as he can. If his plan works, she’ll feel better soon enough, and he can press his advantage then. To this end, he drapes his arm over the gentle dip of her waist and rests his palm flat against her lower abdomen, spreading his fingers wide for the most complete coverage.

“Ohhh,” she sighs, leading back into him, and he permits himself a satisfied smile.

“Better?” he murmurs into her ear before placing a kiss just below it.

“Yes.”

He presses his lips to that spot just below her ear again, then again, then lower, flicks out his tongue, sucks gently at her pulse, and she gasps softly. It occurs to him then that he could easily lift the hem of her shift and slip his hand between her thighs. He doesn’t adore the thought of blood on his hands, but if he touches her precisely enough it wouldn’t be much of a problem, and anyway it would be worth it. It would be quite selfless of him, really…

“You know, there are other ways to relieve pain,” he tells her, voice wicked, free hand catching at her shift – until her hand catches at his.

“Go to sleep, Etienne,” she says, firmly enough that he knows she won’t be talked out of it.

“Oh, very well,” he grumbles, only the slightest bit resentful. Perhaps in the morning…

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes
The "gold standard" historical medicinal birth control was a plant called silphium used in the ancient Mediterranean and Middle East. It was so good, apparently, that it was used to extinction by the second or third century BCE, so we don't actually know what it was exactly, or how it worked. Most historians think it was probably a member of the fennel family. Many also think we can't even be certain it's extinct since we don't know what it was exactly in the first place, which is fair enough, but contemporary sources do say it became extinct. Until then, it was a very important herb for obvious reasons, sometimes even portrayed on coins, and the shape of the seeds is possibly where we get our symbolic heart shape from (since that shape doesn't look like an anatomical heart at all, but it does look silphium seeds, and those seeds are linked to sex).

After the (probable) extinction of silphium and before the hormonal oral contraceptives of the 20th century, there weren't really any reliable medicinal methods of pregnancy prevention. There were herbs that increased menstrual flow and caused contractions, which were used as preventative but probably didn't work that well, and herbs that were toxic enough to cause miscarriages. The latter were more effective than the former but more likely to kill you due to being actual poisons. But even the former could be dangerous, causing prolonged bleeding, decreased blood pressure, stroke... All kinds of badness. The herbs Belle is taking are of the former variety, meaning they're likely to make her periods more unpleasant than usual but unlikely to kill her and unlikely to be all that effective in the long run. WE know that. THEY don't.

Interesting note, even the toxic herbs were sometimes taken "preventatively", as in before the woman knew if she was pregnant or not, and in those early stages any miscarriage would just seem like a heavy period, making the woman think her pregnancy prevention had worked. Today most people would consider these abortions, but historically they didn't think of it that way. I have no intention of sparking any political debate, but historically even the Catholic Church didn't consider life to begin at conception. Purposeful abortion was frowned upon, and the Church considered it a sin, but it wasn't a matter for automatic excommunication until the point of "ensoulment", which happened sometime after conception. At that point abortion (by Catholic doctrine) went from just a sin to the equivalent of murder. The Catholic Church changed its position on this in 1869.

Etienne's thoughts about impregnating aristocratic women vs. peasant women are pretty accurate in terms of the attitude of the nobility at the time. Considering it was a Catholic nation, France was oddly fine with mistresses and illegitimate offspring. There was an actual court position of maîtresse-en-titre, literally the official mistress of the King of France. Weirdly, the nobility and citizenry preferred their Kings and Princes to knock women up, because it meant they'd be able to someday father a legitimate heir and keep the country and monarchy stable. It wasn't considered shameful for an aristocratic woman to bear some prominent noble's illegitimate child, and many such children received titles and became important political players in their own right when they came of age. Illegitimate children were more frowned on by the lower classes, for reasons of morality and economic insecurity, but any lower class woman impregnated by a member of the nobility was pretty much out of luck if he didn't want to help support her and her child.

Voltaire's *Zadig* isn't as well known as some of his other works, but it is interesting and entertaining. It's about an Ancient Babylonian named Zadig who goes through all kinds
of trials and tribulations on his way to enlightenment. One of the most interesting aspects is that it contains a major story arc that was taken from the Quran, surprising considering Voltaire's atheism. Worth the read!

Last but not least, this is the Chateau de Gudanes, where Etienne seems to think Belle will not mind being stashed after giving him a bunch of babies. It's adorable.

02.16.18: Guys, I know I'm the worst, and I swear I'm not trying to be a tease. But I just looked at my chapters and realized that if I post 30 tonight and 31 as usual, I will have almost no lead left. So no extra chapter tonight. Maybe you won’t notice because it’s the weekend and you all have lives? I hope?

See you next week, same BatB time (late Monday/early Tuesday), same BatB channel!
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

It's only 8:55 a.m. on the west coast (or was when I began formatting this anyway). I am counting that as "early". Too late to answer all the comments, AGAIN, but don't stop leaving them! I solemnly swear I will answer EVERYTHING later today, since it's my day off :) You have no idea how much I appreciate them, but that's my fault because I haven't answered any to remind you lately! I will rectify the situation! Thank you as always for all your comments and kudos, it all makes me so happy.

You know what else makes me happy?!! Posting the 30th chapter and over 100k words! Thank you for sticking with this story for so long!

And now, Chapter 30 (OMG you guys), in which Belle eavesdrops and probably wishes she hadn't.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

30

All her life, or near enough, Belle has awoken at the first hint of dawn, some extremely accurate internal chronometer setting off a silent alarm inside her. She’s always appreciated this. Candles are dear, and staying up into the night burns too many; besides, there is always work to be done, first at home and then at the castle once she found employment there. Today had been no different, in that respect at least. Her eyes had slowly opened just as the sky was turning gray. It had been glowing with a gentle blush in the east as she rose from Etienne’s bed and dressed, then fully suffused with pink by the time she’d attended to her personal needs, grateful beyond telling that she’d not bled through her own linen and onto his sheets.

Never once had it occurred to her that she ought not to proceed with her day as she normally might. The pain that had afflicted her before had seemed a distant memory, the warmth from Etienne’s wide palm enough to soothe it away in the night. So she’d made her way to the north wing and her workroom, eager to return to the experiments she’d been forced to abandon earlier when the pain had struck.

Oh, but she regrets it now. For once in her life, she wishes that she’d remained in bed straight through morning and into the afternoon, curled up with Etienne’s heat to ward off the clenching ache deep in her belly. She braces herself against the worktable and tries to focus on her breathing. It has helped in the past, but the past had been nothing like this, nothing. It’s objectively fascinating, from a scientific point of view, that the bitter tea of herbs Plumette had given her and she had dutifully drunk daily could so amplify the typically mild pangs she usually experienced. The part of her mind that isn’t writhing in agony wonders exactly what happens inside her body every month, and exactly how the herbs alter it, and why – but that part of her mind is very, very small, and in no way in control.

“Belle?!" Plumette’s startled voice asks from the doorway, and Belle gives a little moan of greeting through the cresting pain. It recedes, finally, and she turns to see her friend with concern clear on her lovely face.
“Oh, cherie,” she says, full of sympathy. “It’s always worst the first month after starting the regimen.”

“Is it?” That’s good news at least. Little though Belle wants a child, she isn’t entirely certain she could face this month after month.

“Yes. You will grow accustomed, and then the effects will not be so severe.”

“Is there nothing to be done now?” Belle asks plaintively. “Not laudanum – I want to work, there’s so much to do.”

“I’ll fetch some motherwort and willow bark tea from Mrs. Potts,” Plumette assures her. “Are you well? Aside from that? I was worried when I didn’t find you in the Saint-Cloud Suite this morning.”

“I’m well enough,” Belle answers. “Etienne – His Highness – came to bring me back to his chamber last night. The moment he realized I was gone, I assume,” she adds, unable to help rolling her eyes.

Plumette looks at her intently, expression hesitant and uneasy. “And yet you’re well enough? Belle, you shouldn’t let him manipulate you into – ”

Though she herself had assumed the same, Belle is offended on Etienne’s behalf. “He didn’t manipulate me into anything. We slept quite chastely.”

Plumette blinks at her in shock. “Really?”

“Of course,” Belle answers. “I don’t think – He wouldn’t have minded – even if it might have ruined his sheets – but he could see I was in pain. He was – kind, I think. I slept better with him there.”

The expression of shock melts into one of barely restrained glee, which makes no sense whatsoever to Belle. Relief, perhaps, she could understand – though no too much. Surely Plumette can’t imagine Etienne would actually hurt her, or be capable of enjoying being with her in that way when she is in such pain. Even Belle had never thought that, not really. She’d simply expected… More sulking. But Plumette has known Etienne far longer, and ought to know better, too. Either way, mild relief or even a shrug of indifference might have been expected, but this wide smile near splitting her friend’s face in two is completely incongruous, not an appropriate response at all; despite her general inability to read and understand facial expressions, Belle knows that much.

Unless she’s missing something.

“I – Should go get your tea,” Plumette says finally, fighting her grin but losing as she exits the workroom, and Belle looks after her contemplatively.

Belle allows herself one wistful thought – what she wouldn’t give to understand her friend’s thoughts, how she wishes such knowledge came easily to her! – then turns her attention to the type of knowledge that does. Incorporating the information from the Principia, especially equations related to Newton’s laws of motion, had rejuvenated her project. They are, perhaps, the most beautiful things she has ever seen, so elegant and intuitive and completely utterly true in a way nothing else can be, fundamental and woven into the fabric of the universe. She’d known the laws themselves, of course, but to read them as Newton himself had written them, to see them in numbers flowing across page after page… And now, to use them to perfect her design… There’s something vast and humbling about the process, something almost sacred, more so than anything she has ever experienced in any cathedral.

The sheer knowledge and foresight the equations accord her is breathtaking. It would have worked either way, eventually, her laundry machine, but now looking at the calculations she has made on
scrap of paper she knows it will work without constant experimentation. She knows the exact counterweight she needs, the exact number of horses for the exact size of the laundry pool in the castle. The exact length of rope. Everything predetermined easily without having to build a single model. There will be some adjustments, of course – nothing in reality ever quite matches pure mathematics. Not all horses are the same height, for example, not all barrels weigh the same. But if she could only get her hands on her notebook back in Villeneuve, she knows she could move directly into building a full-size prototype almost immediately.

It’s a very cheering thought, and takes the edge off her pain.

She really will have to get back to the cottage in Villeneuve, sooner rather than later. Pere Robert has been tending to everything, feeding the livestock and keeping an eye on the property, but it is unfair of her to put so much on his shoulders. It was unfair of her, to have him deal with her father for so long while she herself has been living in the lap of luxury, surrounded by books and with nothing but time to do everything she has ever wanted – not to mention engaging in what she’s certain the priest would consider deeply sinful fornication (and rightly so). Besides, she is homesick, to an extent. She misses her room, her workshed, the painting of her mother young and beautiful and holding Belle in her arms along with a single perfect rose.

She misses her father. It’s about time, too, she can’t help but think – mildly disgusted with herself. Ever since Etienne’s illness, the Prince has been foremost in her thoughts, not her beloved father. Even worse, some part of her has felt relieved, not to have to care for him. She loves her father, more than anything or anyone else, possibly more than she’s even capable of loving anything or anyone else. But it’s been so hard, watching him deteriorate, tending to him as best she can despite knowing how inadequate her efforts are. In that respect, this arrangement with Etienne is the best thing she could ever have done for her father. He was foremost in her mind when she’d made her choice. But she’d be lying if she said this arrangement was entirely for him, now. And she’d be lying if she said she’d given her father more than a passing thought after being assured of his safety in the hands of Theophile de Bordeu.

Now she thinks of him, misses his smile, his wit, his affection. She can’t imagine he’d be pleased with what she has done, regardless of the fact that she herself does not regret it, but she does sometimes imagine that he’d approve of Etienne – when Etienne is being himself, that is, and not the cruel and distant Prince. Perhaps… Perhaps when she returns to Villeneuve to retrieve her notebook, she could bring some of her father’s works to the palais. Etienne has many magnificent timepieces, but none any more magnificent than what her father has sometimes created. Or even one of his music boxes. Etienne would appreciate the one shaped like a windmill, brightly enameled and opening to reveal tiny figures, the painting of her mother come to life. Her father had intended to sell it, she remembers. It would have been the once piece sacrificed to provide funds for the entire year to come, if only he hadn’t grown too ill to travel to market – if only Belle hadn’t been so loath to part from it. But how could she sell the last thing he’d ever bring to life with his own hands? There were things she valued far less, and she had sold them instead.

Perhaps… Perhaps she could visit him, at Dr. de Bordeu’s clinic. Etienne has been very busy of late. He might not mind her going away for a few days, not for such a cause. He is capable of kindness, more than most suspect, she knows that well enough.

Suddenly, she shakes her head, thoroughly irritated with herself. She is not certain how her musings about returning to Villeneuve had devolved into thoughts of Etienne, as though he is Rome with all roads leading to him. And oh, how he’d love that comparison! No. Fact: she has work to do, work she cannot do without her notebook, so Fact: she must go to Villeneuve to retrieve it. Sub-Fact: Etienne will certainly not be pleased if she attempts to leave without warning him. Weeks ago she might have thought this a sign of a controlling nature, and she supposes it is that, but now she also
thinks it might worry him, a little, were he to find her gone. He sought her out last night for that reason, more or less, did he not? That thought makes her feel… Something. Another emotion she cannot name, but she can name so few, after all. This is nothing new.

No. She needs to focus on something, anything other than him.

Before she can decide exactly what that something will be, Plumette returns with a steaming creamware mug of tea. Though made expressly for the use of servants, it is beautiful, with a machine-turned body and intricately twisted handle. Even the points where the handle meets the body are strengthened with shaped leaves and flowers. Etienne would find it unbearably rustic, she supposes, much as he considers the summerhouse to be a hovel, but she takes it from Plumette with as much care as she might fine bone china.

“Mrs. Potts swears that will set you to rights,” her friend informs her, still beaming, eyes sparkling. Belle thinks it unlikely that Plumette is still pleased about… Whatever she was pleased about earlier. Perhaps she ran into Lumiere in the course of her errand.

“Thank you,” Belle responds, sipping the dark liquid experimentally. It’s less bitter than the contraceptive tea, sweetened with honey, and Belle blesses Mrs. Potts for her attention to detail – and her kindness.

“I met Lumiere on my way back,” Plumette says. This confirms Belle’s prediction, which pleases her greatly. “His Highness requests the honor of your presence in the main gallery.”

Belle glances up from her mug with a wry smile. “Is that how he phrased it?”

“It is how Lumiere phrased it. The Prince…” Plumette shrugs. “Who knows. But I’m sure that’s what he meant, regardless of how it was phrased.”

Knowing better than to argue with her friend, Belle simply takes another sip of tea. It might be all in her mind but she does feel somewhat better, well enough that being summoned into Etienne’s august presence all the way in the east wing is only an inconvenience, not an impossibility.

It takes a few minutes to finish the tea; it tastes better than the contraceptive tea, yes, but that is not the same as tasting good. Besides, she wants to give it time to fully work. Making her way to the gallery takes a further ten minutes. Between Plumette meeting with Lumiere and Belle’s appearance in the east wing, a half hour might have passed, no more – which perhaps explains why Etienne is not alone when Belle arrives.

The ornate double doors of the gallery are cracked slightly, just enough that Belle can hear raised voices from inside. One is Etienne’s. One is a woman’s. She has no intention of eavesdropping, not really, but she is curious, and if he’s in the middle of something important she does not wish to interrupt… But no, it’s mostly curiosity that holds her there, silent, not announcing her presence but merely listening.

“ – sick of her already,” the woman scoffs, and Belle can only assume the woman is referencing Belle herself. “I know she wasn’t in your bed last night. I don’t know why you didn’t come to me. Ever since that night in the study I’ve been waiting…”

Belle does not like the tone of this woman’s voice, she decides. Not just the scoffing – that’s understandable, really. Belle is, after all, only a serving girl, and she cannot imagine this woman is anything other than aristocracy of the highest stamp. But the seductive, intimate purr with which she says I’ve been waiting makes Belle narrow her eyes and clench her fists for some reason. Ever since that night in the study… Which night, Belle has no desire to contemplate. Considering it makes her
strangely anxious.

“I am afraid your sources have misled you,” Etienne replies, and Belle almost smiles at the satisfaction in his voice. “Mademoiselle Brescond was indisposed for a short time, but I can assure you she ended the night in my bed.”

“Indisposed?” the woman demands, sounding horrified, and now it is Etienne’s turn to scoff.

“Give the word what meaning you will.”

“Come to me anyway,” the woman says, purring once more – not like a sweet little kitten or even a grown cat, but… Rather like how Belle imagines a panther or puma or some other dangerous jungle creature would, deep and low. Implying very sharp teeth. “She’s waited on the two of us to finish before.”

No, Belle does not like this woman at all. She doesn’t like her words, either, but again shies away from contemplating them for reasons unknown.

There’s a rustling, scuffling sound, one Belle can’t readily interpret but which she chooses to believe is the woman attempting to embrace Etienne and Etienne setting her away.

“There was no – finishing,” Etienne says, all disdain, and Belle smiles to herself, slightly.

“No,” the woman concedes. “But we could address that now.”

More rustling, more scuffling. It’s unpleasant, imagining what those sounds might portend. If what the woman has suggested is currently taken place, Belle does not think she wants to listen.

“Did you know that it is a crime to lay hands uninvited upon a member of the Royal Family?” Etienne drawls, deeply bored, once the sounds have concluded.

Belle allows herself a moment to wonder whether or not this is true. She recalls he said something to her once about lying to a member of the Royal Family being a crime, but she hadn’t been sure at the time if that was true either. It would not surprise her to find that Etienne makes up these laws as they suit him, though whether he goes on to fully ratify them later is something she supposes she’ll have to ask about, later. If nothing else the statement at least tells her that Etienne does not want this woman touching him any more than Belle does.

“Oh is it?” the woman coos. “Do you intend to punish me then?”

Before she can wonder what exactly the woman means by this, Etienne is chuckling – not one of his nice, happy laughs, but something dark and cruel, a sound she’s grateful has rarely been directed at her.

“Yes, though I doubt you’ll appreciate it.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that…” The woman’s voice is coy now, flirtatious, and Belle can’t quite determine why. What could possibly be flirtatious about punishment? Puzzling, deeply puzzling.

“Leave,” Etienne says, still bored, but there is a tone of command in his voice Belle at least knows never to ignore.

The woman huffs in annoyance. “As you wish, Your Highness,” she says. “We may resume this discussion at dinner, with your hand up my skirt again if you prefer – ”
“No, you misunderstand,” Etienne snaps as Belle ignores the reference to his hand and the woman’s skirt. “Leave the palais. Leave the province. Try Versailles. You’re more likely to succeed with my father than with me.”

“You don’t really want me to go,” the woman murmurs, and Belle wonders how this lady can be so stupid. Even Belle can tell Etienne means every word he says.

“I will have my guard throw you out if you prefer,” he responds, and she can almost hear the shrug in his voice. “It’s all one to me.”

“You’ll regret this, Your Highness,” the woman threatens. “Your little serving girl hasn’t the beauty or the skill to hold your attention. If you wish to debase yourself with some peasant whore, that is your own concern, but you are used to finer things and will crave them eventually.”

“Leave,” Etienne says again. “Now.”

“As you wish, Your Highness.” The woman’s voice is taut with fury; Belle can’t help but be pleased by it. “But first…”

There is more rustling, more scuffling, and then the woman’s voice again: “I await what punishment you deem fit, Your Highness.”

Belle has only a moment to wonder exactly what the rustling and scuffling entailed this time before she hears the women’s court shoes echoing on the marble floor of the gallery, growing louder and louder. Headed, in fact, in her direction, the direction of the door. There is nowhere to hide and no time to do so even if there had been some convenient alcove. The gallery is full of them; the hallways, not so much.

She has just enough time to step back, narrowly avoiding taking the heavy door full in the face, before the woman who clearly has some history with Etienne is standing in front of her. Exquisitely dressed, coiffed and powdered – exquisitely beautiful – she is everything Belle might have expected, aside from her maquillage; she is wearing a lighter daytime application, but the pink rouge of her lips is smeared around her mouth, not precise as Belle knows it ought to be.

The woman narrows snapping gray eyes at Belle, then grants her a venomous smile, perfectly framed in that smudged ring of rouge, before sweeping past her and away.

Belle enters the gallery at last, unsurprised to see a matching smear of pink on and surrounding Etienne’s thin lips.

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the cliffhanger, but don't be angry. Belle isn't stupid! Have a little faith...

Willow bark tea was a common pain remedy until a purified form was isolated and made available by Bayer in 1899 under the name Aspirin (perhaps you’ve heard of it...). Motherwort was also a common pain remedy, mainly for feminine issues - especially labor, as the name might suggest. It could alleviate the pain of cramps to some extent but was especially helpful in speeding labor. You can still buy it today, and willowbark for
tea, too, if you're into natural remedies. I don't know for sure that it was available in France during our time period, but I found this 16th century Italian drawing by Jacopo Ligozzi so I think it's a safe bet. The tea definitely would have helped with Belle's pain. This is the mug she drinks it from. I may have gone a bit overboard describing it but I just think it's so pretty! Etienne would definitely have fancy mugs even for his servants - though he wouldn't consider them fancy of course. Don't be confused by the description of "machine turning". Lathes are considered machines, and they're some of the oldest tools we know of.

Newton's laws of motion basically blew everyone's freaking minds when the Principia was first published. They're the kind of fundamental thing that are so totally important but so intuitive that no one had ever put them into words or equations before. Once given structure they could be used in infinite ways and continue to be the basis of most "real world" physics today (quantum physics is a whole other thing, basically the rules that apply on a micro scale where Newtonian physics stop working). I don't know if the average peasant would have heard of Newton's laws of motion, but I'm certain Belle would have. However, brilliant as she is, I don't think she would have come up with the proper equations without access to the Principia. Creating mathematics is very different from just being good at math (one of my close friends is a mathematician). Belle's focus is more on real world applications, which these equations obviously help with, but not to the extent that she'd spend years trying to define them in that way.

Belle's thoughts on science vs. religion reflect the schism of the Enlightenment. Somehow we go from Louis XIV ruling by Divine Right in the 17th century to Voltaire denying the existence of god less than a century later. There were many "natural philosophers" (scientists), such as Newton, who viewed their discoveries as proof of God's divine creation, others who were atheists, and others, like many of the Founding Fathers of the United States, who were deists. Basically, they believed in a god who created the universe and then just walked away, like a clockmaker or watchmaker. As they believed in a supreme being who didn't intervene in any affairs of his creation, they didn't adhere to any structured religion. Belle is an atheist at this point, whereas Etienne is more of a deist (but I don't know if this will be addressed at all, this is just FYI).

As far as I know, lying to a member of the Royal Family was never expressly illegal, but I bet they could charge you with something if the Royal Person in question wanted it done badly enough. Laying hands uninvited on anyone was assault (unless you were a woman and the person laying hands on you was your husband, ugh), and the bar for assaulting a member of the Royal Family was probably pretty low. Again, if they wanted you in trouble for it, you'd probably be in trouble for it. But Etienne has no compunction against making things sound more dire than they are to get his way!

See you next week, same BatB time (a little earlier hopefully), same BatB channel!

02.27.18 It's going to be somewhat later, actually. Got off of work late only to discover this chapter hasn't been edited yet. I'm sorry, I don't know how I missed it, but I'm too tired to do it now. So I'll be posting this evening instead, around 9 or 10 p.m. PST. Believe me, this chapter needs some work so it's worth the wait. See you in a few hours!
Chapter 31

Well, I got through a fair amount of the comment backlog! Henceforth I will not fall behind again. I'm so sorry about the extra day I needed to complete my editing; I thought I edited all of this back when my dad first got sick, but I guess I skipped this chapter and it was a mess. We're now getting close to the point where I'll have caught up to myself, so the chapters are rougher and rougher until I edit them. But I've still got a lead so not to worry! Posting should still be regular, if off by a day or so. Thank you for your patience, as well as your kudos and comments!

And now, Chapter 31, in which Etienne is confused, then very pleased, then confused again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

31

It’s strange, Etienne thinks as he stares at Belle standing there in the doorway of the gallery. His entire life, he has never had to wish for anything. Or rather, he has only had to wish for anything in order to have it, anything he’s ever wanted. He’s a Prince. This is how it should be. Now, of course, he wishes Belle had not heard any of what she might have heard, nor seen any of what she might have seen, including the maquillage he knows must have transferred from the Marquise’s face – her lips – to his. He wishes and wishes and wishes but this is something he will never have, those last few minutes erased from Belle’s mind.

Not because he cares what completely erroneous conclusions she might be drawing, of course. Why should he? He certainly will not stoop to making excuses or explanations; she has no right to expect or demand any such thing. But it will be tiresome, dealing with her questions, her displeasure. Which she has no right to feel! He sent the Marquise away, did he not? What else could she possibly desire? It certainly was not his fault that he was unable to avoid the Marquise’s last desperate lunge – which had not accomplished at all what she must have expected it to. As much as he had not enjoyed what had happened with her in his study weeks ago, the press of her lips on his now had been a thousand times worse, utterly wrong and utterly revolting.

Not that he will be telling Belle as much when she asks. It is none of her concern.

“How?” she begins, voice echoing slightly in the gallery, and he braces himself to face her, braces himself for her… Well, maybe not her tears. As far as he remembers, she didn’t cry when he was on his deathbed, so it’s not likely she’ll cry now. But whatever accusations she intends to hurl at him, he is prepared.

“Belle,” he responds, annoyed when he sounds defensive to his own ears.

“Plumette told me to meet you here.” She smiles sweetly as she approaches, the perfect bow of her mouth curving in a way he usually finds enticing but now doesn’t entirely trust, no matter how it ignites a pleasant warmth inside him. Those lips... But no. Is she lulling him into a false sense of
security? He’d rather deal with her anger and have done.

“Ah.”

“Was there something specific you wanted?”

Is it his imagination, or is there something provocative in her tone – something arch in her smile? Half of him wonders what game she’s playing while the other half contemplates the things she might assume he wanted. The fact is that there wasn’t, really, nothing specific. He’d been bored by his courtiers, anxious to escape the Marquise, and had simply wished to see her.

Now of course he is fully alive to all the possibilities the deserted gallery affords them – once she has confronted him and been firmly rebuffed. He does hope they can deal with it quickly and move on to the pleasant business of exploring those possibilities. Nothing on earth could have enticed him into the Marquise’s bed, but he can’t deny that more than 48 hours without release, especially when a fair few of those hours were spent cradling Belle against his naked body, have been rather a challenge.

“Was there something you thought I wanted?” he asks finally, when it becomes clear she expects some kind of answer.

She looks at him blankly, perplexed.

“No?” With a slight laugh, she shakes her head at him. “Do you even know why you asked that I meet you here?”

Oh, so it was his imagination then. Pity. Still, she’s here and he’s here and the gallery is deserted. It would be a crime to waste this opportunity, and even more so to waste it in waiting for her to finally come to the point and interrogate him about the Marquise. He knows Belle saw her, knows Belle must have questions – if she would only give them voice.

“Aren’t you going to ask me?” he demands once the silence has stretched out to an unreasonable length.

“Ask you… Why you asked that I meet you here? I just did.” She pauses, scanning his face and appearing genuinely concerned. “Etienne, are you alright?”

“Aren’t you going to ask me about this, Belle?” He gestures to his mouth, rubs at the paint he knows is smeared there. “Or ask me about her?”

“I hadn’t planned to,” she says with a shrug, and he is shocked to realize she is telling the truth.

“You’d simply make your assumptions and give me no opportunity to defend myself?” He had not thought her so lacking in all charity.

“Assumptions about what? Etienne, are you alright? Has your fever returned?”

She closes the slight distance between them, drawing close enough that he could pull her into his arms – an idea which has merit – but she reaches for him first… Or rather for his forehead, to lay the back of her hand gently on his brow. Even that light brush of her fingers over his skin seems to awaken his senses to her, to intensify his awareness of her scent and all her delicacy in the face of all his strength. Still, it’s not enough to prevent him from being offended by her insinuations.

“Pardon?” He tosses his head to reject her ministrations. “Of course not, I’m perfectly well.”

“Then what – ?”
“Whatever you’re thinking, it is not at all as it appears,” he says, glaring, strangely relieved to have defended himself despite his intentions. She has no right to demand explanations, yes, but he finds he thinks it’s worse that she isn’t, that she is simply accepting the supposed evidence of her eyes that he was … What? Unfaithful? It is not a matter of fidelity – which she has no right to expect – and yet if she thinks he’s been unfaithful she is wrong. Firstly because he owes her no fidelity and therefore cannot be unfaithful to her by definition, but additionally because he has no interest in the Marquise and couldn’t peel her off of him and exile her fast enough. Belle is being completely unreasonable if she thinks any different, and he will certainly tell her so.

“It isn’t?” She’s perplexed again, still, and now he thinks he detects something in her face, some confusion. “It appeared that you were rebuffing the advances of a woman with whom you have some history… The maquillage on your face led me to believe she forced a kiss on you and you sent her away. Is this… Inaccurate?”

He blinks at her.

“Oh. No. It is… Exactly as it appears. I didn’t expect you’d see that.”

She smiles at him. “I heard enough I think.”

“And you’re not angry?” he asks hesitantly. Something about this does not quite sit right with him.

“Of course not.”

“Why not?” No, it doesn’t sit right with him at all.

“Should I be?” She seems even more confused now than before.

“No, not as such, but – ”

He thinks of the displeasure he felt in witnessing Valmont’s pursuit of Belle, the rage he felt upon learning of Valmont’s advances towards her. Any other women who believed herself to have a claim on his attention would be infuriated to behold the evidence of a dalliance with her own eyes, yet Belle is totally unmoved by it. Her composure is… Disconcerting. Where he reacted by slapping a glove in Valmont’s face, she reacts with a shrug and a smile. It’s not natural, surely.

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” she tells him. “Do you want me to be angry? I – I think I would be, had you not sent her away. I told you before, if there were someone else, I don’t think I would like it. But there isn’t – is there?”

She is no longer quite so composed, but Etienne finds that the doubt he’d wanted to see suits her less than he’d imagined it would.

“How can there be?” he asks. “I spend all my time either with you or thinking of you.”

He intends it to be light, teasing - but it isn't somehow. Still, his vast experience has given him an impeccable sense of timing for moments such as these, and he knows that now is the moment to kiss her. He slips one arm around her waist, using gentle pressure to pull her soft form against his chest, and feels a sense of triumph at the small gasp the contact elicits from her. His free hand traces the curve of her cheek, brushes the hair away from her face, and he leans down slowly, holding her gaze all the while.

“Wait,” she whispers.

One slender hand skims over his embroidered waistcoat, searching along the lining until she finds the
inner pocket, delving into it until she finds the handkerchief waiting there. She retrieves it and holds it to his lips, wiping away the vile paint the Marquise left behind.

“Yes, much better,” he says once her task is completed – then presses his mouth to hers.

She’s smiling into their kiss, he can feel it in the curve of her lips under his own, and he smiles back at the novelty of it. Her mouth is soft and warm, yielding eagerly to him, lips parted just enough that he can slip his tongue between them to tease the sensitive inner flesh there, then glide it along hers. The wetness, the heat, the way she opens still further to him, reminds him of being inside her, makes him hard enough that he knows she must be able to feel it. The soft moan she gives only serves to confirm that fact. He wants…

Suddenly he feels her palm brushing tentatively over the front of his breeches. He covers her hand with his quickly, before she remembers where they are, pressing it more firmly to the growing bulge there. Rather than pull away she persists, stroking him through the fabric before attempting to unbutton the fall one-handed. He helps her – purely out of the goodness of his heart – which almost stops when he finally feels her fingers curling around him skin to skin. She knows quite well by now the way he likes to be touched, and slides her hand up and down his length slowly, torturously, eased by the slickness of his excitement. Too much excitement, really; he cannot allow this to continue, not if he wishes to avoid total humiliation.

He grabs her wrist, halting her movements, and she breaks the contact of their mouths. Her dark eyes meet his – in challenge – and hold, staring deep into him as she delicately swirls one finger around his head, teasing and spreading the moisture there.

“Enough,” he gasps urgently, tightening his grasp on her wrist, but she does it again and again, sending shudders of pleasure through him.

“Release my hand, Etienne,” she murmurs. “Let me…”

At the moment it sounds like a marvelous idea. There is hardly anything he wants more than to have her touch him like this, to make him come for her while she watches, where anyone could see. He almost wishes someone would enter the gallery and witness this, see how she belongs to him, what she’ll do simply to please him. But it would be better, far better, to bury himself inside her; that is what he wants more.

“Can’t.” His voice is tight, desperate, and she won’t stop touching him. It’s almost impossible to hold back. “Want to be inside you.”

“Release my hand,” she says again, more firmly. “I want to – Like this – Make you – Oh, you know what I want, please – ”

He will never tire of the way she is able to blush even with his cock in her hand.

“You want to bring me off like this, ma Belle?” he asks, both unbearably aroused and amused, completing the thoughts she found herself unable to fully express. “You want to make me come all over your hand, in my breeches like a green youth?”


It is not quite what he’d had planned, but who is he to deny her? Besides, it’s been long enough that he’ll recover with more speed even than usual. He backs up several paces, pulling her along with him, so that he can lean against the wall when his knees become too weak to keep him upright. The smile she gives him says she understands his reasoning, knows that she has won.
“Well then,” he says, finally releasing his hold on her wrist.

She takes full advantage of her new freedom of movement, stroking her hand up and down his shaft just slowly enough to drive him insane, swiping her palm over his sensitive tip with every movement until he’s moaning and cursing and thrusting himself into her tight grip. It feels glorious – and all the better because someone could walk in at any moment, not that he will remind Belle of this fact. He has thought in the past that women shouldn’t bother with such a service; how could they ever expect to do better for him than he can for himself? Objectively perhaps Belle isn’t, but simply because it’s her… God, he loves her hands, her fingers, the way she’s looking at him, at her hand on him.

“You like this – don’t you?” he demands, more breathless even than she. “Like the feel of my cock in your hand, ah – like the feel of me – at your mercy?”

She manages to tear her gaze from what she’s doing to him, meeting his eyes once more but too overcome to respond. Not that she needs to; her every thought shows upon her face in moments such as these. He knows she likes it.

“You’ll be – at my mercy next, ma Belle,” he gasps, before gasping anything except blasphemy becomes impossible.

All too soon he feels the pressure building inside, feels the way her every touch coaxes that ecstasy from his flesh until it’s a delicious ache within, pleasure so acute it’s nearly painful. It won’t hurt once it crests, he knows that, knows all the nearly-pain will dissolve in a rush, but until then he revels in it, closes his eyes and focuses on it to stave off the inevitable end. But Belle is relentless, increasing her speed, pressing her thumb to the base of his head until he cries out, until he can’t draw air into his lungs and is dizzy with it. His eyes are open again somehow, without any conscious decision on his part, and the sight of her determined expression, the little line between her brows as she works on him – not to mention the sight of his swollen cock throbbing in her grasp – is far too much for him to bear.

The pleasure releases from him in agonizing spurts, the white of his seed coating her hand and staining his clothing, his shirt from the hem nearly to his jabot, the liseré silk waistcoat all along the placket. Chapeau might care, but he certainly doesn’t, only cares about the heat searing through his veins, centered on his pulsing cock as she wrings every last drop of pleasure from him. The castle, the gallery, everything seems to recede from his vision except her face until he finally sags back against the wall, utterly drained and spent.

He drifts for a moment which could be hours but is likely only seconds considering that the first thing he sees when he comes back to himself is Belle sucking his come off her fingers. Even satiated as he is, the sight of them sliding between her lips makes his cock twitch, although he knows it’s more likely she’s being practical than that she’s doing it for his benefit. He doesn’t actually give a fuck why she’s doing it; the fact that she is is quite enough to have him well on the way to recovery.

“Belle,” he groans. “You’re killing me.”

“Just une petite mort,” she teases, and he groans again – this time at the weak joke.

“Please, Belle, you’re better than that.”

“Am I really?” She smiles and lifts her face for a kiss, which he gladly bestows.

“I’d say so,” he answers once he can bear to remove his tongue from her mouth.

She pulls away and looks down at him, then up at his face in dismay. “You’re a mess,” she says.
“I’m so sorry, I didn’t think –”

“It doesn’t matter,” he says, though he thinks ruefully that Chapeau really might murder him this time – his valet is particularly fond of this waistcoat. With a shrug, he removes it, then removes his jabot and soiled shirt as well. It’s uncomfortably clammy and sticking to his skin, and he refuses to wear it even a single moment longer. When it’s time to leave the gallery he’ll simply don his frock coat to conceal his bare chest until he reaches his chambers. He is the future King of France, after all; no one will dare to judge him for it.

“Was that really necessary?” Belle asks, raising her eyebrows at him, though he can see the way her eyes are drawn to his naked form. He knows well enough that he has an exceptional physique – he works hard at it, and ladies are always telling him so. But somehow words seem empty in the face of Belle’s frank admiration. He won’t deny the pleasure of her reaction was part of the reason for removing his shirt in the first place.

“I think so,” he says, stretching with studied nonchalance and smirking at the way she stares at him. Suddenly, her attention seems drawn by something behind him; she manages to remove her gaze from his body and focuses on… Something. He turns to see her standing before a statue, Apollo Crowning Himself, which he had commissioned from Signor Canova two years before. It’s a superb piece of work, a marble statue in the Classical style, featuring the handsome nude god of light standing in contrapposto as he places crown of laurel leaves on his own head. Antonio Canova is truly gifted, the god’s lean muscles perfectly defined, the hint of the vaulting of his ribs just barely suggested beneath the marble skin, the expression on his face reflective, wistful. Etienne can almost hear the gears in her mind turning as she examines it.

“Etienne –” she begins, glancing back at him. “Is this – Is this supposed to be you?”

He attempts to appear modest.

“You didn’t notice when last we were here?”

Her lips stretch in a smile and her face tenses as though she’s holding back laughter. “You… You’re supposed to be Apollo? You’re… Crowning yourself?!” Her efforts to stifle her laughter fail and in rings out like a bell, echoing throughout the long gallery.

“Yes?” he says uncertainly. “Shouldn’t I be? It’s an excellent likeness, I believe.”

“You’re crowning yourself,” she says again, gasping with her laughter. “It’s perfect. Oh god, it’s too perfect.”

“Should someone else be crowning me? Belle, why are you laughing? Belle?”

@->`--

Chapter End Notes
This is Apollo Crowning Himself by Antonio Canova. It's a half life-size statue, and the first time I saw it all I could think was that Antonio Canova must have traveled to the future, read FaD, and then returned determined to do Etienne justice in marble. Does he not look like an idealized version of Dan Stevens?! The body at least is pretty spot on. Add in the nudity and the overall arrogance and it's just... Etienne. Truly a masterpiece. I resolved then to work it in somehow and this is where it ended up. I think Belle would find it ridiculous - which it kind of is!

03.06.18: Contest is closed! Check out the notes on 32 for the answer and winners!

Okay, historical notes. You might notice in reading through this chapter that Etienne was hanging out in the gallery with his coat off. In our era this was considered "undressed", like walking around without a shirt somewhere you definitely ought to be wearing a shirt, or going to work in your bra. Etienne of course doesn't care about any of that, and if he wants to take his coat off that's what he's going to do, but I didn't want you guys to think that was acceptable or typical. Every time he goes dashing off somewhere in his shirtsleeves and breeches he's basically naked as far as society is concerned. Just thought you should know...

Contrapposto is the position our Apollo is standing in, a kind of counterbalanced stance meant to give the impression of movement. Archaic Greek statues were stiff and front facing, rather like Egyptian statuary, but this pose was eventually invented and really caught on. Like 75% (estimate) of the standing Greek and Roman statues you'll find are standing in contrapposto, and almost all Classical Revival statuary is. It's the pose. And if you think about it, models and actresses still use this for photos! It creates interesting lines in the body and adds life to marble (and photos) so it's no wonder it's still around. Next time you're at a museum with Classical antiquities, you'll notice it everywhere.

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Hello friends! Thank you so much for all your comments and kudos on the last chapter! I loved reading all your answers as to why "Apollo Crowning Himself" shouldn't have been in the story. The answer I had in mind was that it was anachronistic since it wasn't created until 1781 and our story takes place in 1764/65, but I also accepted permutations of "Canova was only 7 or 8 years old at the time", "it didn't get to France until the early 19th century", "Etienne's equipment is bigger than that" and anything else that made a reasonable amount of sense. With that in mind, the winners (determined by Google's random number generator) are...

PayYourDebts, MadameO and san_stoa! Congratulations :) Your prizes haven't arrived yet and I haven't quite figured out the best way for you to get me your mailing info, so if you have any ideas I'm all ears... If you didn’t win, don’t despair! I will have at least one more contest before this madness is over :) 

And now, Chapter 32, in which a convenient alcove is inconveniently furnished and Etienne really ought to do something about that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

32

Belle doesn’t understand what she’s feeling – not a new experience, especially lately. What do other people do about this, this confusing swirl of emotions, some contradictory, filling them until they can hardly breathe? There’s exhilaration and arousal and power still buzzing through her veins, a result of the way Etienne fell apart so beautifully for her, but those at least she recognizes. The amusement, too, spilling out of her in laughter she can neither restrain nor stifle, that is perfectly comprehensible – His Highness is many things, but in this moment he’s mostly just ridiculous.

But there’s something else, something confusing. It’s subtle, a strange sort of warmth underlying everything else, and it seems to grow and expand as she watches him watch her laugh. His bafflement, his genuine confusion… Yes, he’s ridiculous, with his arrogance and petulance and literal statue of himself as a god placing a crown upon his own head, but whatever the warmth is, she feels it anyway – in spite of the ridiculousness or because of it, she isn’t certain.

She also isn’t certain why he’s just looking at her, puzzled, instead of glaring or shouting or threatening to have her imprisoned for daring to laugh in his face. That first night, he would have. Absolutely. He might even have followed through with his threats. Now he just watches her, first quizzically with his heavy brows lowered over his bright blue eyes, and then – something else. His gaze darkens and his face takes on a dangerous cast, calculating, like he’s just biding his time, waiting until… Well, she doesn’t know. And she cannot stop laughing, no matter how hard she tries.

In the end, he’s the one who stops her. One moment she’s gasping for air – she does have to breathe sometime – and the next his lips are on hers and his tongue is surging deep into her mouth and that isn’t funny at all. Her amusement dissolves into nothing as he wraps his strong arms around her,
pulling her close until all the soft curves of her body fill in every hard angle of his. The arousal she’d felt minutes ago, gripping the hot length of him in her hand, wringing pained groans and curses from his throat, feeling the pulse of his release and watching him – tasting him – it all comes flooding back and she presses her thighs together desperately. Perhaps this is her punishment for laughing, this desire he can’t assuage due to circumstances entirely out of her control.

Except, well… He’s hard again, somehow, and she thinks to herself that she will simply have to overcome her embarrassment and ask Plumette about this because surely such a swift recovery time cannot be natural, and he’s also pushing her towards one of the many convenient alcoves in the gallery. This one contains a gilded chaise upholstered in supremely impractical cream silk velvet. Even as she’s thinking he cannot possibly be serious, he’s urging her onto her back, covering her and reaching for the hem of her dress. His lips trail from her mouth to her throat, leaving biting, stinging little kisses that make her writhe beneath him, but her own practicality wins out.

“Stop,” she gasps, too late to prevent him from tugging down the bodice of her deep purple Lyonnaise silk brocade gown. His lips latch on to one pebbled nipple as the hand not sliding up her calf carefully cups the other, and as he scrapes his teeth just so over her sensitized aching flesh she can’t quite remember why she’d planned on protesting in the first place.

Then her fingers dig into the luxurious fabric beneath her and she remembers. It is not the appropriate time of the month for her to even be sitting on cream silk velvet, much less engaging in the activities Etienne surely intends – as he should realize, considering his obsession with his bed linens. Almost hating herself for it, she releases her death grip on the upholstery, ignores the bliss flooding through her due to whatever magic he’s working with his mouth, and tugs his head away from her breast.

“Belle, what – ?”

“You can’t,” she says urgently, panting and blushing with either passion or embarrassment.

“Oh, can’t I?” Etienne drawls, every inch the haughty aristocrat who will not be denied. He drags his fingertips firmly up from her knee to her inner thigh, stroking and teasing until she’s so close to begging him to just take her. “I think you’ll find I can, ma Belle. I did say you would be at my mercy, did I not?”

“No, I mean – It’s not, right now – The timing – ”

“You are no longer in pain?” he asks, pausing just before reaching the apex of her thighs.

“No, but – ”

He bypasses her linen and delves between her legs, seemingly unconcerned with any complications, and she moans as he caresses her there. His touch is delicate, precise, but she is so sensitive she feels the light brush of his finger throughout her entire body. She can’t help arching into his hand and moaning even though she knows it certainly does not help her cause. The naked desire on his face as he looks down at her only serves to confirm that fact. She loves the way he looks with his long hair falling like a curtain around his face and that bright flush high in his cheeks, loves it –

“Then there is no impediment.” He sounds determined, and impatient, and it would be so much easier to simply give in, to allow him what she wants herself. But… The upholstery. She imagines the embarrassment of ruining yet another obscenely expensive expanse of fabric and just can’t, regardless of how good it feels when he slips one long finger inside her.

“Do you have any idea how much this dress cost?” she attempts, knowing how he loves the finery he gifted her. In fact she chose this dress because it’s dark enough that she doesn’t think any stains
would be visible, but she doesn’t mention that.

“I have a better idea than you do,” he responds, amused. “And furthermore, I don’t care.”

He continues his torture, sliding a second finger deep into her warmth and rubbing at the most sensitive part of her body with his thumb. The rhythm is slow but inexorable, and she can already feel the pleasure building inside of her, radiating from where he touches her so carefully. Convinced of her surrender, he returns his mouth to her breast, pressing kisses to the soft curve before suckling her once more – but gently, for which she is grateful. Still, she cannot allow him to –

“This chaise is covered in cream silk velvet, Etienne. Cream. Silk. Velvet,” she forces out, voice breathless and tight. He’s spreading his fingers within her, stretching her until she cries out, then crooking them to touch something deep inside that makes her lose all coherence.

“I don’t care,” he murmurs against her skin.

“I do,” she gasps. “We can’t, please – ” She’s begging now but is not quite certain whether she’s begging him to stop or begging him to continue.

He examines her face, still stroking her, his thumb circling that pulsing point of flesh and his fingers buried deep inside her. It’s too much, the way he’s touching her, the way it fans the embers of a need she can’t deny, the way he kindles it to flame and stokes it higher and higher.

“Please,” she says again, and he smiles at her.

“We don’t have to,” he responds, all reassurance, and she feels both relief and dismay. She’s just so close, and he must know that, must mean to punish her for laughing after all, but… She did tell him to stop.

He doesn’t stop.

“We don’t have to do anything,” he continues, something wicked in his voice, increasing the pace of his movements, increasing the pleasure she feels. “But you do have to come for me, Belle. It would be ungentlemanly to leave you in such a state, and I do endeavor to be a gentleman.”

“Liar,” she murmurs, wanting nothing more than to give herself to his sly, knowing caress, wanting nothing more to let go, but not quite able to. “The upholstery – ”

“If it’s going to be ruined, it’s ruined already,” he tells her, entirely too reasonably. “You might as well enjoy it.”

It’s such an Etienne thing to say, she can’t help but laugh, but then he twists his fingers inside and adds a third, and her laugh turns into a drawn out moan. With a final smirk he lowers his mouth once more to her breast, flicking his tongue over her nipple, and she finally surrenders. Her body tenses under and around him, inner muscles gripping and releasing as ecstasy sears through her, and he doesn’t stop, keeps stroking and stroking as she continues to shudder beneath him.

He draws it out somehow for what feels like hours, until she’s completely exhausted and her throat it hoarse from crying out his name – until she doesn’t even care that his fingers are tinged with red when he finally pulls away. Honestly, it’s not quite the mess she expected, nothing more than a red smudge left on his ruined shirt as he wipes it away.

Returning to the chaise, he leans over her, brushing her hair back from her face and lightly kissing her parted, panting lips.
“Belle, are you quite sure –” he begins, and she can feel his impressive length against her thigh, and it’s not that she doesn’t want it inside of her. It’s just…

“Cream. Silk. Velvet.”

He rolls his eyes but doesn’t protest, merely grabs her hands and pulls her to her unsteady feet.

“The second I have you alone somewhere less public and less foolishly upholstered,” he says, almost conversationally, “I fully intend to bend you over the nearest flat surface and fuck you until you can’t walk.”

She probably ought to be scandalized – he probably intended her to be – but somehow she isn’t. Instead, it’s all too easy to imagine, the feel of him pushing into her from behind, his hands tugging at her hair, his mouth at her throat, breath in her ear… In her imaginings, it all feels incredible, but her pride certainly will not allow her to give in so easily.

“Oh?” she asks, proud of the steadiness of her voice despite her lurid thoughts and the intensity of his gaze. God, how are his eyes so blue? “And if I object?”

“You won’t.” His voice is filled with such cheerful arrogance that she can’t help giggling in a most uncharacteristic manner. God knows he isn’t wrong. But at the same time…

It’s impossible to explain her thought process at that moment, but somehow her mind goes from Etienne doing as promised and bending her over a table somewhere, to considering where that table might be, to thinking of the table in her workroom, to remembering the plans she’d been making and how close she is to building a full-scale prototype if she could just get her hands on her notebook from home. By the time he entwines his long fingers with hers and strides across the inlaid marble floor, tugging her along with him, Etienne’s intentions towards her are the furthest thing from her mind and she is too preoccupied to keep up with his pace.

“Belle?” he asks, coming to a halt and turning to look at her with concern. “Everything alright?”

“Hm? Oh, yes, but I’m afraid all of that will have to wait,” she says, distracted. “I must return to Villeneuve now if I’m to arrive before nightfall.”

All the playfulness in his demeanor disappears at her words and his grip on her hand tightens almost painfully.

“Return to Villeneuve? I think not, Belle.” His words and expression are both so fierce, so dangerous, as he says this. “We have an agreement, do we not? You are to remain here. With me. Where you belong.”

For a moment she is confused, uncertain as to why he would be so displeased – far more displeased than rescheduling a simple rendezvous might account for – but then the meaning behind his words becomes clear.

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean – Not for good, Etienne, of course not.” She smiles at him, although there is an unwanted voice in the back of her mind whispering not just yet. “Simply for tonight. My experiments have progressed to the point that I require my notebook, and there are other things about the cottage I need to see to. I’ve neglected it all for too long.”

The tension she hadn’t noticed until now that it’s gone leaves him, and he loosens his hold on her fingers, thankfully. They ache and tingle as bloodflow resumes.

“That won’t be necessary,” he informs her. “You will tell me where your notebook is to be found,
and I will send a servant to fetch it.”

“I can’t remember where I left it,” she tells him. “It could be one of several places, none of which are easy to find. Besides, as I said, there are other things to see to. I won’t know what those things are until I arrive.”

“And how long do you imagine you’ll be gone?”

She considers. “I don’t know, it all depends on what needs to be done. One night? Two?”

“Unacceptable,” he snaps. “You will not spend a single night alone in a deserted cottage, Belle. It isn’t safe.”

“Of course it’s safe,” she says.

“No. You will either return to the castle before nightfall or you will not go at all.”

“Etienne, there isn’t enough time – ”

“Then you simply won’t go.” He glares at her as though the distance between the palais and the village is her personal fault. “I forbid it.”

“But – I need my notebook.” She can’t help the plaintive note of confusion in her tone; she had never imagined he might deny her something she truly needed. Perhaps she ought to have? But he has been… Kind, really, so kind of late. She has perhaps grown complacent, and that has perhaps been a mistake.

“This discussion is over,” he says with finality, his thin lips set so obstinately that she knows there is no point in attempting to convince him to change his mind. Unless…

“What if I didn’t go alone?” she asks.

“And just whom do you imagine might accompany you?” His voice is clipped and angry and she has no idea just what she’s said wrong but obviously there was something.

“Well – I mean, I’d thought – You, but – It was foolish, I suppose. You’re so busy…”

She knows he is, knows he has been every since their return from the summerhouse. It’s strange, really, how much she notices his absence now, how often she thinks of something to tell him without being able to, how frustrating that is. There has never been anyone she’s wanted to discuss things with, not really. Her father is more an artist than a scientist, for all that he deals with mechanical things, and Pere Robert is more dedicated to the humanities as well. They both take interest in her work but don’t entirely understand it. Not that everything she’s wanted to tell Etienne lately has been about her laundry machine. Sometimes something simply comes to mind that she wishes she could share with him, and he is nowhere to be found.

It’s stupid. It doesn’t matter.

“You want me to escort you to the village?” he asks, as though such a thing is unfathomable.

But it isn’t to her. Initially her suggestion had been out of necessity, based on the assumption that he wouldn’t object to her errand and certainly could not fear for her safety if he accompanied her, but now… She finds she likes the idea. As far as she knows he’s never been to the village, and it might be interesting, enjoyable even, to show it to him. He could perhaps meet Pere Robert, examine his small library… No, of course he can’t, what is she thinking?
“I want to go to the village,” she answers carefully. “I thought your objections might be answered if you escorted me.”

“I suppose they might be,” he murmurs. He tugs on her hand – she’d forgotten he was still holding it – and pulls her against his warm, sculpted chest. Somehow she has managed to ignore the fact that he is still naked from the waist up, displaying all the splendid lean muscle that made him such a perfect model for Apollo, but now she is very aware of it again. “Convince me. Convince me to abandon my duties here in order to accommodate you.”

She looks up into his face, makes note of his darkened eyes and slightly crooked smile, feels the heat and desire radiating from him, and she is not immune to it, no. Quite of its own volition, her free hand lifts to stroke through his hair, the silk of it cool and slippery – so much softer than her own! – between her fingers. His breath catches and she raises herself on her tiptoes to press her lips to his. One soft kiss to his mouth, one to his cheek, one to his throat directly over his pulse… She can feel him tensing, knows how close he is to wrapping her in a possessive embrace and claiming her lips with his, but she simply leans close to his ear and whispers:

“There are multiple flat surfaces at the cottage, Etienne.”

Before she can pull away, he cups the back of her head, holding her still for him as he kisses her senseless. There is nothing sweet or gentle about his mouth on hers, nothing to hide the utter carnality of his desires, just his tongue thrusting purposefully into her mouth to stroke her own in a rhythm that leaves absolutely no doubt as to his thoughts and intentions. She clings to him and answers his desire with her own – because she does desire him, desires everything he does, even the things she doesn’t quite understand.

He raises his head slightly. “There are multiple flat surfaces here at the palais too, Belle…” He’s still so close that his lips brush her own with each word, and it’s almost enough for her to put everything off until tomorrow, but… Perhaps if she waits, he won’t take her after all. She steps back, surprising him enough that he actually releases her.

“No, notebook first,” she says, laughing. “I won’t be able to focus on anything else until I have it.”

Scowling, he narrows his eyes at her, but she doesn’t really think he’s angry – or at least she hopes he’s not. “I won’t be able to focus on anything else until I have –”

“Etienne!” she cuts him off, certain there is no possible way he can end that sentence that won’t result in her on her back with her legs in the air.

“Oh, very well. Can you ride?” He gives her a scorching, knowing glance. “Horses, I mean?”

“Yes,” she answers, attempting to maintain her dignity even as memories assail her.

“Splendid. Time to go.”

She has not even a second to glance at a clock, but it can’t be more than ten minutes before he’s dressed in “simple” clothing that will not be able to hide his nobility and she’s up before him on a glorious stallion galloping towards Villeneuve at speeds she has only imagined.

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes
This is the purple dress Belle wears. It's rather fancy for daytime wear but she chose it because it would hide stains so... I'm actually somewhat surprised such a dark dress was meant for formal occasions, which usually happened at night, because dark colors were not particularly impressive by candlelight. If you think back to the opening of the 2017 live action movie, all the women dancing are wearing light colors, and even Madame de Garderobe is wearing a bright blue damask with gilt trim. Such bright colors and trimmings would catch the candlelight and draw attention to the wearer, whereas dark colors would make the wearer fade into the background. Which might actually work out for Belle, but I'm now very curious about the woman who owned the original gown... The other possibility is that the information from the V&A is incorrect, and whoever had it made just liked to overdress for the daytime. Alas, we will never know...

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel!

03.12.18 Sorry to do this as always but I’m currently dying of the plague. Or possibly a cold, it’s hard to tell, but either way I’m too drugged out on cough syrup (pneumonic plague apparently, although that had like a 95% mortality rate so it probably is just a cold) to edit anything coherently. When I try, I just keep making everything worse which is the opposite of what I’m supposed to be doing. If I’m better this week I’ll post when I can, otherwise I will see you next week. Feel free to tell me to get well soon or go to hell immediately in the comments, just as you choose.

03.19.18 I just realized, I was so out of it when I wrote my last note that I said I’d post on Monday/Tuesday (aka now) rather than Tuesday/Wednesday (aka like 18 hours from now), which is my new plan. They changed up my work schedule to keep me until 5 am every Monday night so I have to move posting day back to Tuesday/Wednesday. I know you’ve already waited a week and I’m really sorry to make you wait longer :( On the plus side, I survived the plague (although I may have picked up an addiction to codeine cough syrup). See you guys in a few hours! <3
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for your patience with this chapter! Between succumbing to the plague and everything with my dad, I've just been super wiped out, but I'm sorry you guys had to suffer for it. I'm going to do my very best to go back through and answer all your lovely comments, and also to have the next chapter up by Tuesday (new/old posting day!) as planned. Thank you as always for your support and kudos and all that good stuff :) 

And now, Chapter 33 (freaking finally), in which Etienne is wayyy out of touch with the common (wo)man. Shocking, I know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

33

It is not the wisest choice he has ever made, on a number of accounts. In the first place, he really does have duties to attend to at the castle. Etienne has never had much trouble shrugging off his responsibilities before, especially those of an official nature – the kind Cogsworth is forever hounding him to shoulder – but lately he finds himself imagining the contempt in which Belle would hold him if she knew how little care he actually took with such things. It’s a more potent source of motivation than he would have ever expected, and he isn’t exactly pleased about it, but there it is. Between that and the courtiers he is abandoning, he feels an unfamiliar sense of discomfort at not doing precisely what he ought, and not being precisely where he ought to be.

Or perhaps the discomfort is simply due to riding hell for leather with an insistent erection. His current state is not ideal, no. But there is little to be done about it, not with Belle up before him, the soft warmth of her body pressed hard to his front, his stallion Alexandre’s smooth gait rocking them together until he is almost mad with it. His desire for her has remained unsatisfied for days – well, one and a half, at least! – and their activities in the gallery, while pleasant, have hardly taken the edge off. It’s not unusual, necessarily. He has always known his drive for intimate contact is higher than most, even compared to Valmont and de Tourvel, who always do their best to keep up but tend to tire long before he does. The only unusual aspect is that his need has become so specific, requiring more than a willing female with an available orifice or two. Yet he has long given up wondering at it. Since the moment he saw her he has wanted Belle and only Belle, and that is enough. The why of it can remain a mystery so long as she is in reach.

That is the crux of his dilemma, really, the reason he’d been so willing to ignore his duties and escape with her. He had grown too used to having her around, he supposes, during their time in the summerhouse, and he is sick to death of her spending her days apart from him. The lure of a full day and night spent in her company and inside her had simply been too much to resist, especially when compared to the paperwork and political intrigue he ought to be attending to. And the idea of her alone in her village, alone in her house – alone in a world of men with his appetites and appreciation of her beauty, if not his charm and resources – no, it is not safe for her. He wants her in literal reach, next to him, or like this, in his arms. The rest of the world can go hang.
He tightens his grip around her waist, feeling her body move with his, and notes that her timing is not quite right, that she is not quite in harmony with him, with his horse.

“Are you alright?” he asks, lips near the delicate shell of her ear, as he slows Alexandre to a walk. She had said she could ride and he had taken her at her word, but the unsteadiness of her seat gives him pause. Perhaps her answer itself ought to have given him pause; how likely is it that a peasant girl would ever have occasion to ride, after all?

“Yes,” she responds, craning her neck to speak to him. “I’m simply not accustomed to riding this way.”

“With another?” He does not like the idea of her up before anyone else, their arm around her waist as his is now, no. He does not like it at all.

“No,” she says, then laughs. “Well, yes, I am not accustomed to that either, but mostly I am not accustomed to riding sidesaddle.”

“You’re not riding sidesaddle, Belle,” he points out. “You have no saddle, you’re in front of mine.”

“My legs are sideways, it’s the same thing! It’s awkward. I can’t imagine an actual sidesaddle would improve the situation.”

He considers the sidesaddles he has seen and finds he must agree with her. They have always struck him as dangerous and impractical, though he understands why they are necessary of course. Still, strange as it is to think of Belle riding astride, it’s even stranger to think of her riding at all, the more he considers it.

“How is it you know how to ride?”

“Oh, I grew up riding,” she says, smiling sadly.

“You have a horse?” he asks, shocked. Horses, even draft horses, are a luxury – expensive to buy, expensive to keep.

“Had,” she corrects. “Philippe was my mother’s, I think, before she married Papa. But we could never really afford him, and once my father became ill… I sold him to a – friend, before coming to work at the castle.”

Her voice sounds so small and forlorn, he finds himself pressing a kiss to the crown of her head to comfort her. She sighs and leans back against him, and he wonders at the strangeness of it, of offering affection in this manner, of it being accepted. But something about her explanation confuses him.

“You came to work even after the sale of the horse?” He is glad she did, of course – he feels somehow that he would have met her anyway, eventually, but it certainly would have taken longer had she not been placed directly under his nose. Still, if a horse is expensive to buy, it stands to reason that selling it ought to have delivered a windfall.

“I sold him for much less than he was worth.” He can feel her stiffen in his grasp, body tensing. “This – friend, he wanted something else and Philippe was the consolation. But I hoped I could buy him back, eventually, for the same price at which I sold him.”

“Perhaps now you can,” he suggests, though he has the feeling he doesn’t entirely understand her story, or doesn’t entirely understand what’s happening behind it – is missing a critical piece of information.
“Perhaps,” she agrees, in such a way that he can tell she doesn’t think it likely.

Before he can ask any further questions, the village comes into view. It is pretty enough, as villages go, reasonably well-kept, with lauze roofs as is common in the region. It’s strange to think that this village has been but a few lieues anciennes away – that Belle has been but a few lieues anciennes away – for the entire decade he has spent at the Palais Villeneuve. He can’t say he would ever have bothered visiting this particular small provincial town if not for Belle’s insistence. It might as well have not existed, she might as well have not existed, for all the difference it made to his life before. Etienne hopes most fervently that Belle asks him no questions about his former thoughts about her village; he has that feeling again, the one that tells him she will be disappointed in his response should he tell her the truth, and even more disappointed should he lie and she discover it. He does not think he can convincingly pretend he ever cared about her village before, or even that he particularly cares now.

“Wait,” she says, laying one slender hand on his arm. “Let’s cut around. I’m not entirely certain how I’d explain you to my neighbors, especially not dressed as you are.”

“Dressed as I am?” he asks, offended. He’d gone to great lengths to dress simply, to pass as… Well, if not a peasant, not a Prince at least, and is consequently wearing his plainest everything. Even his shirt is pure linen, rather than linen and silk.

“I’m not exactly dressed as usual, myself,” she points out. “And even if your fine clothing and fine horse wouldn’t draw attention, your face would, from the female half of the population at least.”

“Why, Belle,” he says, smirking. “I believe that was a compliment.” Naturally he doesn’t need her to tell him how handsome he is – he knows well enough, the women always say so, and anyway he is not blind – but he finds himself pleased to hear it from her, anyway.

“Don’t let it go to your head,” she answers tartly, though he thinks he can detect a trace of embarrassment in her voice.

He tugs her back against him, leaning close until her soft dark hair brushes his cheek and her sweet scent – something light and delicate, not a perfume or even soap, just her – envelops him.

“I have every intention of allowing it to go to my head,” he murmurs, lips brushing her sensitive skin, and his smirk widens as she shivers in his arms.

“Notebook first,” she says breathlessly.

“As you will,” he answers, urging Alexandre in the direction she indicated before, the one that avoids riding through her village. “Although I still maintain I could distract you from your precious notebook, should I truly put my mind to it.”

She chuckles – though doesn’t deny it, he is pleased to note – and they continue on, first in silence until he can slowly begin to pull details of her childhood out of her, then in a comfortable back and forth as he convinces her to elaborate. She volunteers little information of her own accord but always answers his questions, enough so that he can easily imagine a young Belle, curious and inquisitive and getting into all manner of solitary trouble all over the countryside. In a way, her childhood sounds rather like his, in terms of isolation at least. He too would rather have spent all his time reading in the woods, though unlike her he had the opportunity but rarely, and he can’t help but think that he would have preferred having no friends to having the sort of friends the future King of France was expected to have. Valmont and de Tourvel had been tolerable but rarely at court, and only Lumiere was ever any fun to play with, despite the age difference.
He wonders if she ever felt as lonely as he did, especially after his mother died, but somehow cannot quite find the words to ask. There is something about Belle that makes her seem – separate, alone, but in such a way that he can’t imagine it bothers her, in such a way that he can’t imagine she is lonely. Perhaps she never craved a companion in her youth the way he always had. It had been foolishness then, weakness, which his father had seen and immediately put a stop to. Etienne is certainly never lonely now.

He becomes so distracted by the conversation with Belle and his own private thoughts that he is unprepared for his reaction to her home once they arrive. It had occurred to him, of course, that her accustomed standard of living would be far, far below his own. Everyone’s is, even his father’s, for though Versailles is undeniably luxurious, the ancient sewage system does not bear thinking of, whereas Etienne had expended a great deal of money to make the Palais Villeneuve more livable once he’d based his court there. If even his father’s home suffers by comparison, naturally Belle’s would be orders of magnitude worse. And it’s not as though he has forgotten her station. She is as beautiful as – more beautiful than – any courtier, yes, but her beauty is less mannered, less polished, and her mind, her behavior… No, she is no vicious avaricious grasping noble whore; she is no Marquise de Merteuil, thank god. Still, knowing she is a serving girl, knowing she is a peasant, knowing the kind of life she must have led before she came to the castle, is not the same thing as seeing the dilapidated shack she’d once called home.

It is narrow and cramped, half-timbered, with crumbling walls of wattle and daub. Approaching from the back he notes a few small windows, though even at a distance he can tell that their glazing is extremely poor. For all that these windows look out not over the town but over beautiful countryside, he doubts they offer much of a view from their clouded panes. A haphazard collection of wooden boards which he supposes is meant to pass for a barn leans against the wall, and Etienne directs a reluctant Alexandre toward it. He is glad Belle cannot see his face, cannot read the revulsion and pity on it. It makes something deep in his chest ache to think of his Belle in such dire circumstances, such abject poverty. She is far, far too good for it, for the rundown shack and provincial town, for selling her only luxuries and scrubbing floors just to scrape by.

As he dismounts, he does his best to school his expression into something more neutral, something that will not make her ashamed to have shown him this. He reaches up for her, brackets her narrow waist with his hands, pulls her into his arms, and thinks to himself that she will never have to suffer the indignity of such deprivation again. He thinks of the inevitable future he has planned for them, thinks of how he will wrap her in silk, cover her in jewels, renovate every room of the Chateau de Gudanes until it is fit for a queen, and she will forget all about the pain and horror of her early years. She will be grateful, of course, and she will also be happy, as he will be when he is able to visit.

All too soon, Belle pulls away from his embrace, looking at Alexandre standing in the rundown shed with all the pity Etienne himself feels for her.

“Your poor horse,” she says, laughing. “This isn’t quite what he’s used to, is it?”

“No.”

“Nor you.” She doesn’t sound upset or apologetic – she sounds amused, perfect lips curved just slightly, dark eyes sparkling, and he admires her bravery, to face all of this with a smile.

“No.”

“To be fair, we’ve had little call to use it since I sold Philippe. I had planned to build my laundry machine prototype in here but…”

But circumstances have changed, emphatically for the better. He tries to imagine her building what
she intends to in such dark, dank surroundings and fails utterly. The workroom in the north wing of
the castle is ten times larger, better equipped, better lit, and he is pleased to have been able to make it
available to her.

With a shrug and another laugh, she catches at his hand, tugging him along to a side door. He is as
reluctant to enter as Alexandre was to enter the makeshift stable, but if his horse can bear it he
supposes he can. The fact that Belle laces her fingers with his mollifies him slightly as well. She pulls
him through, entering with total familiarity, but he freezes just inside the door.

The inside is worse than the outside, if such a thing is possible. At least from the outside he could
pretend that it was nothing more than an abandoned ruin, but standing where he is now it is clear that
people somehow lived here – that his Belle somehow lived here, crammed into this miniscule space,
inside walls coated with stained and cracked plaster, on top of rough stone floors with not a single
carpet to cushion her delicate feet. The entire ground level is open, a series of archways the only
demarcation of separate rooms, but everything together is smaller than the smallest room in the palais,
save perhaps the servant’s quarters. It is certainly too small for the roughhewn furniture, and the table
cluttered with what he supposes must be mechanical components combined with the low ceilings
makes him feel anxious, claustrophobic.

Belle looks back at him then, too quickly for him to hide his horror, but she doesn’t hang her head in
shame. Her expression remains amused, though soft somehow, almost as though she pities him,
which is absurd.

“Forgive me, Your Highness,” she says, and though he knows she’s only teasing he does not like
anything but his name on her lips. “I’m afraid my home isn’t suited to such illustrious company.”

“I didn’t realize – ” he begins, then halts, uncertain what he can possibly say.

“Don’t.” Her voice is soft and sad, again for him, not herself. “Don’t look at my home that way.
Despite the lack of gilt crown molding and marble statuary, I have always been happy here.”

“Have you?”

“Yes, of course. Well, as happy as one can be when one longs for adventure in a provincial town
without any.”

She gestures to the table he noticed immediately upon entering, and he looks closer, seeing what
looks like a small windmill and two half-finished clocks. The workmanship, he notes, is quite fine, as
fine as anything in the palais, and he draws nearer to examine it all.

“This is where Papa worked until he fell ill,” Belle explains, smiling again. “I used to stand beside
him and hand him his tools, watch him as he arranged delicate gears just so to tell time. Even as a
small child it fascinated me, and he was tolerant enough to answer my questions. Yes, I was very
happy here.”

“This is beautiful,” he murmurs, brushing one finger over the brightly enameled windmill, and she
joins him. He watches as she places her hands on it, watches as she somehow opens it to reveal a
scene inside. There is a painter at his easel, his tiny canvas bright with the image of a beautiful
woman holding a baby – both of whom are also present in the scene, sitting before the artist as he
works.

“Beautiful,” he says again.

“If you wind it here, it plays music.”
She shows him, winding it until a sweet melody plays. The blades of the windmill turn, and the painter’s arm moves up and down so that he seems to be wielding his brush. The mechanics of it are all quite ingenious, and he feels that covetousness he’s so familiar with, that desire to possess something unique and beautiful – a watered-down version of the desire he’d felt the first time he saw Belle, in fact. It would please him to own this, he realizes; he would be proud to display it, and as he is accustomed to only the best, that is saying something. He will buy it from Belle, he decides then, buy it for more than it’s worth, more than she would ever ask, as a kind of gift to her.

“What’s happening here?” he asks. There’s something about the repetition of it, something about the woman and child being portrayed not once but twice, that hints at a hidden story.

“It’s my father painting my mother and me. He never talks about her, or about the time before we came to Villeneuve, but he told me once we lived inside a windmill.” She laughs a little, as though she finds the thought preposterous. “I don’t know if that’s true, but it’s what he said. And look, here, this is the painting – ”

He turns as she indicates, noticing the oil painting for the first time. It’s the same as the one inside the music box, though larger and more detailed of course, the inspiration for the miniature version. A woman with cascading dark curls, intelligent dark eyes and an almost wry smile looks out from the canvas, her gaze somehow challenging, alive, as though she sits in the room with them. She cradles an infant and holds a single perfect rose, and he would have known even without her telling him so that this is Belle’s mother, that the infant is Belle herself. He has seen Belle look at him with just that expression too many times for the woman to be anyone else.

“You sound just like my father,” he says, almost to himself. “His brushstrokes are very fine, and the composition… It’s almost a Renaissance Madonna, but perhaps more in the Flemish or Dutch style. Not as dark, but in terms of subject. It lacks the splendor of the Renaissance or even artists such as Rigaud, of course. It’s more natural, more…”

He trails off, glancing at Belle to see her staring at him with wide eyes.

“What?”

“You sound just like my father,” she responds. “I noticed it before, in the gallery, but he once explained his work to me in almost those exact words.”

“As an artist I’d hope he’d know his art history,” he tells her. “And as a Prince, I have nothing better to do with my time.”

“Is it so worthless, then, to know about art? To love it? I’ve never understood it the way you do, the way Papa always wished I would.”

“My father would say so,” he answers after a long moment. “That it’s worthless I mean. Art, music, literature… A gentleman must be educated in such topics, but to love them? It’s not masculine, you see.”

“I do see,” she says quietly, and he rather thinks she might.

A shaft of light somehow forces its way through the hopelessly clouded windowpanes to perfectly catch the red and gold glints in Belle’s dark hair, and he is suddenly fiercely reminded that he wants her. He wants to bury himself inside her until the ecstasy between them washes everything else away, his father’s censure, her father’s illness, his horror at her circumstances, her pride… All of it, wants to fuck her until there’s nothing left in the world but the pair of them, together.
Two steps places him before her, a single motion has her in his arms, and then he’s kissing her just as deeply as he longs to take her, his tongue invading her sweet mouth, his fingers tangled in her hair. He feels her soft gentle curves against him, feels himself hard against her, kisses her and kisses her and kisses her until neither of them can breathe. And all the while his mind is whirling, recalling his promise to bend her over the nearest flat surface, realizing that every flat surface in her house is covered in gears and red chalk drawings, thinking that technically the floor is flat, if uncomfortable.

When he finally relinquishes her lips, if only to inhale, she looks at him with a swollen mouth and bright eyes.

“Would you like to see my bedroom upstairs?”

Chapter End Notes

So for those who don’t ride and never had a horse phase (this includes me btw), a sidesaddle is exactly what it sounds like: a saddle that allows you to sit a horse with both your legs to one side. Why on earth would such a thing exist? As with so many things that seem to make no sense, the answer is sexism. First of all, for most of Western history, women have worn long skirts. These are impossible to ride astride in unless you hike them up to unladylike levels and flash a bunch of lucky gentlemen. This was apparently frowned upon.

Riding sidesaddle solved this problem by allowing you to drape your skirts modestly over your legs. But wait, there’s more! One of the first recorded instances of a lady riding sidesaddle dates back to 1382 (!!!), when Princess Anne of Bohemia rose sidesaddle across Europe on her way to marry England’s Richard II. This was done to “preserve her virginity”, or rather keep her hymen intact, although I don’t know if it was effective or not. After that it was seen as vulgar, indecent and “loose” for women to ride astride.

My lovely beta (who did have a “horse phase”) assures me that modern sidesaddles are comfortable and safe, but this was not true for our era. They were awkward and unstable, throwing off the rider’s center of gravity and probably annoying the horse, and falls were both common and deadly. Weirdly enough, the safety improvements leading to the modern sidesaddle can be traced back to Marie Antoinette. She was a skilled equestrienne and loved to ride, flouting convention by riding astride... Until she became the Queen of France, at which point it was made clear to her that such a thing simply Was Not Done. Luckily, as the Queen of France she just had to tell her craftsmen to make her sidesaddle better goddamnit, which they did. Who knew?

In case you were wondering, Etienne named his horse Alexandre after Alexander the Great *insert eye-roll here*. But Etienne gonna Etienne, what can you do?

You might notice I specify that Philippe belonged to Belle’s mother before her marriage. Belle is 19, which means Philippe is at least 20. Horses can live up to 25-35 years, although it’s not common and a 20 year old horse would probably not be great for galloping after Maurice to rescue him and whatnot, but look. You’ve already accepted that Etienne is capable of experiencing genuine human emotions so accepting an old
horse in great shape shouldn’t be too difficult ;)

Okay, the art history stuff. As I said, the painting of Belle’s mother in the movie is a bit too modern in style for the time period and I had a hell of a time writing anything remotely plausible about it. It’s kind of annoying because they actually used a painting of the young Louis XV by Hyacinthe Rigaud as the reference for the young Prince in that family portrait (as seen here), so they were doing pretty well with authenticity. But the portrait of the grown up Prince (which is sooo Etienne) and Belle’s mother are both wrong for the period. Bah. I compared it to a Renaissance Madonna because it’s a woman holding a baby, so that was obvious, and I mentioned the Dutch and Flemish style because many of those artists painted portraits of the merchant class, so many of those paintings are more “down to earth”. Their style in the 17th century was quite dark (or rather dark but illuminated and beautifully shadowed, like Vermeer), so it doesn’t really fit, but kind of. Last but not least I mention Rigaud because he was the favorite portraitist of Louis XIV and those paintings are bombastic to say the least - the exact opposite of the portrait of Belle and her mother.

Basically, I did my best, but don’t try to drop any of that knowledge at a fancy party where people know what they’re talking about because they’ll laugh at you. If you happen to be an art history buff and have better comparisons or info for me I would be delighted to hear them!

See you in a few days, OLD BatB time (late Tuesday/early Wednesday), same BatB channel!
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

Thank you as ever and always for your kind comments and kudos! I keep falling behind on my responses but I will catch back up, I promise. Sorry for the brevity of notes just now, I was supposed to be asleep like six hours ago but I lost track of time writing ahead. Oops.

And now, Chapter 34, in which Etienne really ought to know better but apparently doesn’t, and (spoiler!) Belle refrains from murdering him - just. (And also you refrain from murdering me? I hope?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His hand is warm in hers as Belle leads Etienne up the narrow staircase to her tower room. It is small and perfectly circular, with one small window facing the village and one facing the rolling countryside. They allow in just enough of the afternoon sunlight to illuminate the room, more or less, but the turreted ceiling rises into shadow, concealing the exposed rafters. As a child she had sometimes imagined hanging a chandelier from them, although her youthful imaginings hadn’t extended to the logistics of lighting its candles. She watches in the dimness as the Prince, the literal future King of France, examines her cramped bedroom, and is struck by a wave of complete unreality. Surely it is not possible that he should be here, in her tiny room, in her tiny house, in her tiny village. Surely it is not possible that he volunteered to accompany her here, that he insisted upon it.

But he is and he did, and now he’s turning slowly as though it makes sense for him to do so, as though it’s not absurd that he is here with her and examining her meager possessions. He looks out of place in every way it is possible for one to look out of place. With his height and broad shoulders, he is too large for the room, and with his bright blue eyes and long golden hair, too beautiful for it. He is also, of course, far too well dressed for the worn stone walls and sagging mattress, far too well dressed to be anything but what he is, though he doesn’t seem to realize it. Still, as much as he clearly doesn’t belong, she likes seeing him here. It gives her that same warm feeling she’d noticed back at the castle, the same one that had made an appearance as he’d marveled over her father’s music box and analyzed her father’s brushwork. Whatever it is, it makes her want to wrap her arms around him and rest her head on his shoulder, just where it would be easiest to lean forward and brush her lips over his pulse.

Instead of doing something so completely ridiculous, she crosses to her bedstead. It had once belonged to her parents and is therefore wider than usual, too wide for the room if truth be told, but there is nothing fine about it. For all its size it is nothing more than plain boards fitted together, raised just slightly off the floor. The woolen blanket covering it is sure to give Etienne nightmares for the rest of his life as he sleeps upon his beloved linen and silk and remembers her coverlet with dread. She leans forward slightly, feeling its rough texture, and wonders if she too will find it terribly uncomfortable after the luxury she has experienced these past months. God, she hopes not. She must
remEMBER THAT THIS HOUSE, THIS ROOM, IS HER LIFE AND HER FUTURE. THE OPULENT PALACE AND HANDSOME PRINCE ARE… NOT A DREAM OR A FANTASY, BUT CERTAINLY NOT REALITY EITHER. NOT FOR HER.

BELLE IS A LOVER OF TRUTH, AND THIS IS ALL PERFECTLY TRUE, SO IT’S DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND WHY SHE FEELS SO DEPRESSED AS SHE REACHES DOWN BETWEEN THE FRAME AND THE MATTRESS TO HUNT FOR HER NOTEBOOK. SHE MUST BE LOGICAL, PRAGMATIC, NOT DISTRACTED BY – THE STARTLING YET INEVITABLE HEAT OF ETIENNE’S PALMS ON HER HIPS AS HE PRESSES HIMSELF AGAINST HER. HE’S HARD, OF COURSE, AND SHE REALIZES EXACTLY WHAT SHE MUST LOOK LIKE, LEANING OVER HER BED AS THOUGH ANXIOUS FOR HIM TO TAKE HER ON THE NEAREST FLAT SURFACE AS HE HAD BOTH PROMISED AND THREATENED BEFORE.

“ETIENNE – ” SHE BEGINS FIRMLY, PREPARED TO REMIND HIM ABOUT HER NOTEBOOK, BUT HE INTERRUPTS HER BEFORE SHE MANAGES MORE THAN HIS NAME.

“TELL ME THAT MATTRESS IS NOT STUFFED WITH STRAW,” HE ORDERS WITH SUCH AUTHORITY IN HIS VOICE THAT SHE NEARLY DOES SO. LUCKILY, SHE CATCHES HersELf.

“I WOULD,” SHE SAYS, “BUT YOU’VE ALREADY TOLD ME I’M A TERRIBLE Liar AND SHOULDN’T BOTHER.”

“MERDE,” He mutters, SO Viciously THAT SHE WANTS TO LAUGH AS SHE STRAIGHTENS AND TURNS IN HIS EMBRACE.

HE’S VERY CLOSE, OF COURSE, WHICH SHE SHOULD HAVE EXPECTED BUT IS SOMEHOW UNPREPARED FOR, AND THE URGE TO LAUGH FADES TO NOTHING. IT’S ONE THING TO TELL HERSELF SHE’LL INSIST UPON FINDING HER NOTEBOOK WHEN SHE CAN ONLY FEEL HIM BEHIND HER; IT’S QUITE ANOTHER TO BELIEVE IT WHEN SHE’S LOOKING UP INTO HIS AUSTERE FACE, GAZE DRAWN TO HIS WITH A PULL NEWTON WOULD DESCRIBE MATHEMATICALLY AS GRAVITATIONAL. MEETING HIS EYES IS ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS A MISTAKE, BECAUSE IT FORCES HER MIND BLANK OF ANY THOUGHT EXCEPT HOW IMPOSSIBLY BLUE THEY ARE, AND THAT’S AS TRUE NOW AS EVER. SUDDENLY ALL SHE KNOWS IS THAT NOTHING ELSE HAS EVER BEEN SO BLUE, AND SHE STILL WANTS TO SLIDE HER ARMS AROUND HIS NARROW WAIST AND PRESS A KISS TO HIS THroat.

SHE DOESN’T KNOW HOW TO RESIST THE IMPULSE, AND THEREFORE DOESN’T, RETURNING HIS EMBRACE UNTIL SHE CAN FEEL THE STRENGTH AND HEAT OF HIM BARELY CONTAINED BENEATH HIS TOO-FINE CLOTHING, LEANING EVER CLOSER UNTIL SHE CAN FEEL THE THROBBING OF HIS PULSE UNDER HER MOUTH. HE GASPS QUIETLY AND ALMOST SEEMS TO MELT AGAINST HER, AND THEN HE’S CUPPING HER CHIN, RAISING HER FACE AND LOWERING HIS LIPS TO HERS. IT’S NOT QUITE THE KISS SHE EXPECTED, HONESTLY. THERE IS NEED AND DESPERATION AND DESIRE IN IT, BUT HIS MOUTH IS SOFT, WARM WITH LIPS LIGHTLY PARTED, TONGUE TEASING AT HER SEAM INSTEAD OF DEMANDING ACCESS. SHE SIGHS INTO HIM, ALLowing HIM TO TASTE HER, AND THE SLICK GLIDE IS UNDEMANDING, UNINVASIVE – UNUSUAL, TO SAY THE LEAST. HE HAS KISSED HER LIKE THIS BEFORE, OF COURSE, BUT GENERALLY HE TAKES POSSESSION OF HER MOUTH – HER BODY – LIKE A CONQUERING HERO. IT WOULD BE FALSE TO SAY SHE DOESN’T LIKE IT, BUT THIS IS SOMETHING ELSE, GENTLY GL Owing TO MATCH THAT WARMTH IN HER CHEST.

HER HANDS SOMEHOW FIND THEIR WAY INTO HIS HAIR, AND SHE TUGS THE RIBBON TAMING IT UNTIL IT FLOWS FREE TO HIS BACK AND SHOULDERS. SHE CARDS HER FINGERS THROUGH IT AS HE LEANS INTO HER TOUCH, AND THINKS THAT THIS IS ABSOLUTELY THE BEST THING THAT HAS EVER HAPPENED TO HER IN THIS ROOM. HIS HANDS MAKE THEMSELVES USEFUL AS WELL, SLIPPING INTO THE PLACKET OF HER BODICE WITH PRACTICED EASE TO RELEASE THE HOOKS MOST EFFICIENTLY, AND THAT IS THE SECOND BEST THING THAT HAS EVER HAPPENED TO HER IN THIS ROOM. THE FEEL OF HIS SILKY HAIR IN HER GRASP, HIS SOFT LIPS MOVING CAREFULLY OVER HERS, HIS NIMBLE FINGERS TRAILING OVER HER BODY, IT ALL MELDS INTO SOMETHING HAZY, ALMOST DREAMLIKE, UNTIL SUDDENLY –

THERE IS A KNOCK AT THE DOOR, THE Pounding HEAVY, AUTHORITATIVE, IMPATIENT – LOUD ENOUGH TO CARRY ALL THE WAY UP THE STAIRS AND THROUGH THE CLOSED BEDROOM DOOR, LOUD ENOUGH THAT SHE KNOWS EXACTLY WHO IS THERE BEATING HIS FIST AGAINST THE HEAVY WOOD. LOUD ENOUGH THAT SHE KNOWS HE WON’T BE DOING ANYTHING SO CONVENIENT AS GOING AWAY.

“Ignore it,” Etienne commands, lifting his mouth just enough to form the words. She’s still clutching
at his hair, she realizes, and he’s still busy finding ways into her clothing.

She’s tempted to obey. She has no desire to speak to Gaston, and every desire to remain here in Etienne’s embrace, to allow him to make good upon his promises and threats, to feel him behind her, buried inside her even as she buries her face in the rough musty woolen blanket – which she knows she won’t notice when it happens. But the pounding at the door continues, each blow serving to underscore that Gaston is Not Going Away.

“I can’t,” she says. It takes a concerted act of will to convince her fingers to untangle themselves from his locks, and something akin to an act of the god she doesn’t believe in to convince Etienne to remove his hands from her still-clothed breasts – he having vanquished her bodice but not, alas, her chemise.

“Merde,” he curses again, and she is inclined to agree with him. “Who could it possibly be? Who could be aware of your return?”

“Difficult to say…” she hedges. He narrows his gaze at her, clearly unimpressed with her avoidance, but she doesn’t bother elaborating. Anything she offers will only make him more suspicious, and anyway she needs to set herself to rights before she can answer the door. Her hair she can ignore, as she never pays much attention to it anyway, but even Gaston – especially Gaston – would notice if she appeared with her bodice hanging open.

She is nowhere near as practiced as Etienne at maneuvering the hooks closing the front of her dress, but she manages to fasten enough of them that she can consider herself decently clad. Taking a deep breath to fortify herself, she turns to exit the room, only to stop short as Etienne follows in her wake.

“You must stay here,” she tells him, continuing on before he can interrupt her. “How could I possibly explain your presence? Not with the truth, and you know how well I lie. If I have any reputation left to speak of, it would never recover. Please.”

“If you insist,” he finally agrees, expression far too smug to bode well for her. He reaches for her, tracing one elegant finger just under her newly restored neckline. “I feel it only fair to warn you that in precisely seven minutes I will be removing your gown – wherever you happen to be and whatever you happen to be doing. So I suggest you plan accordingly.”

“You wouldn’t,” she responds, with more hope than sense.

“Wouuldn’t I?”

Oh, of course he would.

She doesn’t bother arguing or protesting. Honestly, part of her would be pleased to have him begin undressing her in front of Gaston – it might be the one thing that could finally drive home the fact that she is not and will never be interested in him. But it won’t come to that. She needs no extra motivation to want to get rid of her visitor as quickly as possible.

Leaving Etienne to smirk to himself in the tower room – he thinks he’s clever, and she has not the time to disabuse him of that notion – she hustles down the stairs.

“Just a moment!” she shouts, as soon as she knows there’s a chance Gaston will hear her through the door. Not a minute too soon, either – she’d half expected the poor abused wood to splinter at any moment. Thankfully, the pounding stops, and she takes a quick, calming breath before finally lifting the latch.

As expected, Gaston stands on the very top step, close enough that his wide shoulders seem to fill
doorframe. He holds himself with assurance, confidence – not quite arrogance, or if it is arrogance it pales in comparison to that which Etienne is capable of. But Gaston does have an air of conviction, utterly certain that his arrival is welcome whenever he deigns to appear.

He is handsome, of course, with the late afternoon light bringing out the sheen of his dark hair. It’s as long as Etienne’s and would probably fall just as enticingly about his shoulders, would probably frame his changeable hazel eyes just so – and she has always preferred dark hair to light. There is also a ruggedness and charm to his features that Etienne can’t match, and while they might be similar in height, Gaston’s build is broader, more heavily muscled. Belle perfectly comprehends why he is the most eligible bachelor in the village, why the women sigh over him.

And yet her skin practically sings at the feel of Etienne’s hands on her, whereas something in her recoils so violently every time Gaston has ever dared the same. It’s difficult to determine precisely why. He has pursued her with determination, but in a sincere and respectful way, more or less, with flowers in invitations to dinner and attempts to engage in (dull dull dull) conversation. There is no reason for her to feel as she has always felt, that somewhere beneath his striking façade and guileless smile, he doesn’t care. He doesn’t care that she doesn’t like it when he touches her; in fact, she suspects that’s part of what makes him want to. Etienne, for all his flaws, had held himself perfectly still inside her that first time, had waited for her permission to move, and after all he has taught her she understands better now exactly what effort that cost him. Gaston never would have expended that effort, never would have wanted to, never would have stopped – won’t stop, if he ever somehow gets the chance. She knows it to her bones.

She smiles at him anyway, enough to be polite, not enough to encourage even the most hopeful of suitors.

“Gaston,” she says. “I didn’t expect to see you.”

“Didn’t you?” he asks with a smile she assumes he must think is charming. Or perhaps it is charming – just not to her. “You had to have known I’d come pay my respects as soon as you returned.”

“How kind. But I’m only staying a day or two, just enough to keep an eye on things.”

“Ah yes, it wouldn’t do to shirk your duties at the castle,” he responds, giving her a significant look, and her heart drops in her chest. Does everyone know? Does he? If he does… Whatever respect he had for her, whatever protection that respect afforded her, will be a thing of the past. She will be fair prey for him, for anyone, and everyone will agree it’s her own fault.

“What are you doing up there now, exactly?” Gaston asks when she remains silent, and again she wonders if he knows, if he’s playing with her. “There have been so many rumors, that you’re a serving girl, a scullery maid, a librarian…”

“You shouldn’t listen to rumors,” she says, as lightly as she can. “On your last campaign the rumor was that you were dead.”

“And did you mourn me?” He murmurs this with a tilt of his head and another charming smile, as though discussing his death can be considered flirtation. Although for all she knows it can be – Belle has never quite understood flirtation.

“The entire village did,” is the only answer she can come up with.

“Yet here I am, alive and well, and here you are – a serving girl? Scullery maid? Librarian?”

She shrugs with what she hopes is nonchalance. “Any and all, depending on the day.”
“There are other rumors too,” he says, with a hesitance she doesn’t quite believe. “Less innocent ones. Not that anyone could ever think such things of you! But the Prince does have a reputation.”

“I can’t imagine what you mean.”

“I’m simply concerned, Belle. You’re a beautiful woman, alone in that castle with that rake… Without even your father to protect you.” Is it her imagination, or does she hear the hint of a threat? “We were all surprised when he went away.”

“He has been ill,” she says. “My wages go towards his treatment.” It’s not even really a lie.

“I just hope you know that you can turn to me,” Gaston responds, reaching out to grab her hand before she can avoid it. “If anyone at the castle should make you uncomfortable, even the Dauphin himself, I am at your service.”

He bows and brushes a courtly kiss over her knuckles, lingering perhaps longer than is proper, but nothing truly untoward. Still, she has to fight the urge to rip her hand from his admittedly gentle grasp.

“Belle?” Etienne’s voice echoes down the stairs, followed by the sound of his footfalls and finally his appearance just behind her on the landing. She hates that the mere sight of him bleeds her of some of her tension. It certainly shouldn’t; there’s no good explanation for him being there, and he just made everything significantly more complicated, and yet...

He looks as out of place as ever, though less disheveled than she last saw him, and he holds an exquisitely detailed chased gold pocketwatch in his hand. The expression on his face is distant though pleasant, but his eyes – they are narrowed and cold, filled with venom she has only ever seen directed at Valmont during that ill-fated formal dinner. This time it is focused on Gaston, specifically the point where his lips are still pressed to the back of her hand.

She can feel Gaston tense, his grip on her tightening, his mouth twitching into a frown against her skin. He takes his time lifting his head – entirely for Etienne’s benefit, she assumes.

“I didn’t realize you had a visitor,” Gaston bites out, now clutching her hard enough that she knows there’s no point in attempting to regain possession of her hand. If Etienne would only grab the other, they could play literal tug-of-war with her, rather than the figurative version she suspects they’re about to engage in.

“And who is this, ma Belle?” Etienne asks, the endearment pointed, and if Gaston was suspicious before he is far beyond that now. “You’ve been chatting nearly four minutes now.”

Belle could cheerfully strangle him to death with her bare hands, then go to the gallows confident in her decision to murder him, and that’s without even considering his reference to the passage of time. Nearly four minutes indeed! His possessive little pet name is bad enough – under these circumstances anyway; other times, she rather likes it – but he must know there is no way to introduce Gaston to him without introducing him to Gaston, and he must know there is no way to do that. Full stop. Or rather, there is a way, but it would be something like:

_Gaston, may I present His Royal Highness Prince Etienne-Louis Josephe Christophe Avenant de France, who has kindly given me employment on my back? Your Royal Highness, this is Captain Gaston LeGume, who has told me approximately fifteen times that I will be his wife._

Fact: she cannot see that going over well.

What she wouldn’t give for just one moment of true creative inspiration, just one convincing,
innocuous little lie she can say with all the righteousness of truth – and then the ability to actually say it that way. Instead, her perverse and at this moment useless mind offers her nothing save the recent memory of standing in the royal stables with Etienne earlier and being introduced to his stallion. She had offered the gorgeous animal an apple and then a lump of sugar, and the horse had accepted each with a regal toss of his head that had reminded her all too much of his owner.

“Gaston, this is, um, well, Alexandre,” she blurs out – then wishes it unsaid the next moment as Etienne makes a strangled little sound of protest. “My – uh, my cousin. From Aix-en-Provence.”

“Oh, your cousin.” Gaston relaxes infinitesimally, finally relinquishing her hand to offer his own to Etienne.

“Distant cousin,” Etienne says through gritted teeth, snatching up Gaston’s hand and squeezing it mercilessly. “Twice removed. Hardly related at all, in fact. And you are?”

“Captain Gaston LeGume, of the Grenadiers Royaux de Modène,” he says, emphasizing his regiment and returning the force of Etienne’s grip. “So pleased to meet another member of Belle’s family. I’m sure in the future we’ll see much of each other.”

“Not as much as you might expect,” Etienne returns, voice somehow aggressively pleasant. Maintaining his hold on Gaston’s hand, he turns to Belle. “You really must bid the good Captain adieu now, ma Belle. It’s been just under six minutes, and you did say how important timing was with this particular experiment.”

Belle doesn’t know whether to be grateful for the chance to escape all the awkwardness of the moment or humiliated by the reminder of Etienne’s plan to strip her after seven minutes. She settles for a combination of gratitude and a fierce red blush she can only hope Gaston fails to notice.

“Of course, Cousin,” Belle responds, jumping slightly as she feels Etienne’s free hand come to rest on the bare skin just above the fall of pleats cascading from her shoulders. Thankfully the sensual trail of his fingertips there is not visible to Gaston, plus the purple brocade silk is not styled à l’Anglaise and therefore does not lace up the back, but she does not put it past Etienne to create some kind of trouble once his seven minutes are up anyway. She attempts to elbow him subtly, but he’s too well-positioned behind her.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Cousin Alexandre,” Gaston says, the sarcasm even less subtle than her attempt to elbow Etienne. “What did you say your surname was? Brescond, or something else?”

“I didn’t,” Etienne says shortly, still pulverizing or being pulverized by Gaston’s hand while also managing to draw maddening little circles below the nape of her neck, bringing her alive under his touch.

“François,” Belle supplies as something of an approximation of de France. “Have a pleasant evening, Gaston.”

By silent mutual agreement the handshake of death ends, and Gaston immediately reaches for her hand once more. His feels hot and damp, she notes, a result of his struggle for dominance over Etienne. She wonders briefly who might be considered the winner, then decides that everyone involved lost – most especially her.

“A pleasant evening to you too, Belle – or shall I say ma Belle, as Cousin Alexandre does? Please keep my words in mind. You may rely on me long after your cousin has returned to Aix-en-Provence.”
“Oh, I’ll be in the area for quite some time,” Etienne says with a feral smile, and Belle slams the door shut before he can make an already disastrous situation any worse.

@>`-``

Chapter End Notes

I desperately need to grab like an hour of sleep before I have to leave for the museum, but I will add historical notes tomorrow once I’ve compiled them. There are significantly fewer for this chapter than the last, thankfully.

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel!

04.05.18 Guys, please forgive me for abandoning you with no heads up! My brother came to visit and then I had to go to Montreal right after. I was hoping to update before I left but things were just too hectic :( The extra bad news is that I won’t be able to update until I get back. So I will be posting late April 17/Early April 18. Please forgive me :( And if you happen to be in Montreal hit a Squid up! <3
Chapter Notes

Bet you thought I forgot about you, didn't you? I would never! Except that one time two weeks ago :/ I'm so sorry about that, and I hope you weren't too worried. Things just got so busy between taking my dad to all of his appointments while getting ready for my trip, and then dealing with my dad having surgery again right after I got back (it went well but there have been some complications so we'll see how it goes). I have to say, Montreal is lovely and I had an amazing time :) But I'm glad to be home and to be back to our regularly scheduled Ancien Régime porn starring Dan Stevens!

And now, Chapter 35, in which Etienne gets kind of weird, tbh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 35

He approves greatly of the way Belle slams the door in the loathsome captain’s face, of course. The sound itself, echoing throughout the house as much as anything can in a space so small, is satisfying, and imagining the anger and disappointment the other man must feel is more satisfying still. Etienne only regrets that he wasn’t the one doing the slamming; it would have given him some kind of outlet for the sudden rage and violence and – panic? – that he currently feels.

Rage and violence are perfectly understandable. He’d been full of enough of both to want to murder his closest friend over his slights towards Belle; this Gaston LeGume can hardly expect more forbearance than Valmont received. But the panic… The panic is curious. It’s been a long time since he’s felt anything like it, like some kind of animal in his chest clawing desperately to get out. There had been a shadow of it, perhaps, in the summerhouse when Belle had been on her knees for him and he’d told her to stop – there had been a hint of panic at the thought that she wouldn’t, which had lasted until she had. But this is something else. It’s –

It’s the thought of the life Belle might have had, if she’d never come to the castle. So many things might have prevented Etienne from ever meeting her, and if he hadn’t… Captain LeGume is handsome, with broad shoulders and a charming smile. He’s an officer, with steady employment and some amount of status, one assumes, in the village of Villeneuve. He has known Belle for years. He wants her, obviously. A peasant girl like her, soon to be orphaned, she would have been such easy prey for a man like this LeGume.

The thought that she might have ended up married to that man, ended up in his bed and bearing his children, is untenable. Not just because she belongs to Etienne, although she does, but because she would have hated it. The way the captain looked at her, the things Etienne could see in LeGume’s eyes – the captain is not so very different from himself, he thinks, wanting nothing more than to put his hands on Belle, nothing more than to own her. Etienne had felt the same the first time he saw her. But now, there’s more, more to what he wants and more to her than LeGume could possibly ever appreciate or deserve.

And if not for his whim to throw a party that night, if not for the fact that Belle had been standing
precisely where she was at the precise moment the figures of the dance parted, if not for the fact that he’d glanced up just then… Or more than that, if not for the fact that Belle had come to the castle at all. He’s never asked, of course, and no one has volunteered the information, but he can’t imagine Belle was particularly good as a serving girl or maid. She’s too easily distracted by whatever is going on in her head at any given time to focus on menial tasks. She might very well have decided that marrying the handsome LeGume was preferable to toiling away scrubbing the royal floors. Even now, she might very well decide… What if she decides…?

But that thought is foolish and pointless. The captain may be somewhat attractive and a good catch in this poor provincial town, but Etienne is one of the most desirable bachelors in the known world. Belle may still be less impressed with him than she ought to be – a fact he has long since decided he finds charming – but she is certainly not totally stupid.

What she is, he can see clearly as she turns towards him, is annoyed, her sweet mouth thinned flat, her luminous dark eyes narrowed on him. He supposes he can’t really blame her; she’d asked him to stay in her room, and he hadn’t. But how was he to remain hidden, like some unspeakably sordid secret, once he heard a man’s booming voice down below? It’s galling that she is so desperate to conceal their relationship, so desperate to pretend he doesn’t exist. There is no shame in being a Prince’s mistress – someone really ought to tell her so. He’d do so himself except he somehow feels she won’t believe him, or won’t agree.

Before she can speak to reprimand him – reprimand him! Tiresome though it may be, he loves that she alone would even dare – he glances down at the intricate guilloché face of his heavy gold pocket watch. Made to his exact specifications by André-Charles Caron himself, it keeps beautifully accurate time, such that Etienne feels perfectly secure in leaning close to whisper into her delicate ear.

“You have approximately 30 seconds, ma Belle,” he murmurs, ensuring that his lips brush her sensitive skin. She shivers slightly at the contact, slightly enough that he knows she’s attempting to hide her reaction – attempting and finding herself unable to.

“Etienne, you can’t just – ” she begins, trailing off into a gasp as he teases his open mouth down the slim column of her neck, pressing soft kisses to her even softer flesh, flicking out his tongue to taste the salt there. Her hand comes to rest on his shoulder, hovering uncertainly as though trying to decide whether to push him away or pull him closer.

“25 seconds,” he informs her collarbone, dragging his teeth lightly across it, and her fingers clutch at him – decision made, apparently.

“You can’t just – ” she repeats, but faintly.

“Can’t I?” He slides his own hand into the placket between her robe and stomacher, searching out the hooks-and-eyes she’d fastened all haphazardly minutes before and freeing them again. “20 seconds.”

He finally opens her bodice enough to reach inside, using his free hand to push the brocade fabric off her shoulder while cupping one full breast in his palm, and he can feel her moan reverberating through her chest as he trails his lips down. Her chemise is, regrettably, very much in the way, but it’s one of the ones he gifted her and therefore whisper fine, almost like nothing at all when he closes his mouth around her peaked nipple and sucks it gently through the fabric. It grows even harder under his ministrations, though not as hard as his cock, which strains in his breeches and reminds him of his priorities.

Lifting his head, he takes a moment to appreciate the sight of her, her flushed cheeks and parted lips,
her dress barely clinging to her arms and laid open to the waist. Her chemise, sheer enough to begin with, is rendered nearly transparent where he’s dampened it with his mouth, fully revealing the dark rose of that one swollen nipple to his lustful gaze.

“15 seconds,” he says, tugging her gown until it pools around her ankles. “Ah, forgive my impatience, ma Belle. But now we have time enough to make it upstairs.”

“Upstairs?” she asks, voice dazed, dark eyes half-opened and hazy.

“I could be persuaded to attempt the staircase,” he answers, imagining the ways he’d need to bend her body to his will to make it work… No drawback, certainly. “I am in fact persuaded that it would be more comfortable than your bed.”

“How – ?”

He’d be delighted to show her, of course, but Belle being Belle he’s not entirely convinced that her curiosity isn’t purely academic. Instead of being drawn into an erudite discussion of the physics involved in fucking her on the stairs, he laces his fingers through hers to pull her up them in his wake.

It’s impossible to say exactly what happens between the doorway to her bedroom and her hellishly unwelcoming bed. Well, no – what happens is they both end up naked somehow, but the how is rather unclear. He remembers nothing but roaming hands and yearning flesh and discarded clothing and then she’s beneath him, warm and soft, bare and blushing. She is so unbelievably sweet and perfect, her body yielding everywhere he is hard, most especially between her spread legs where he teases her slick folds with the head of his cock. He’d like to think he’s torturing her by nudging himself against her clit over and over, but in reality he’s torturing himself at least as much. God, he wants to feel her stretched around him, wants to feel her come calling his name as he thrusts deep into her.

“Etienne, please – ” she gasps, sounding as desperate as he is, except he doesn’t think such a thing is possible.

“Please what?”

“Please – please – you know what I want, please – ”

“I can guess,” he murmurs, grinding into her with just enough pressure to drive them both properly insane. “Perhaps I want to hear you say it.”

“I want – I want you inside me, Etienne, please – ”

The way she begs, the fact that she’s so willing to, somehow makes him even harder, until he’s aching with the need to fill her just as she requests – and yet he decides to torture them both a little more. He’s an idiot, as the functioning part of his brain is screaming at him, but that part is so very vanishingly small.

“Like this?” he asks, sliding one finger into her heat with an effort that almost undoes all his control. She’s still so tight, always so tight, even that single digit requiring her body to open for him, and she gasps when he presses unerringly against that place inside that he plans to hit with his cock again and again soon. He tries to ignore the fact that he could be doing so even now if not for his own stubbornness.

“No!” she answers, sounding outraged. He smirks down at her, enjoying the irritation in her expression perhaps more than he should. He also flexes his hips, nudging her with the sensitive tip of
his cock again, sliding it over her clit until she writhes beneath him, because if he must suffer then so must she.

“Or like this?” Another finger joins the first, meeting more resistance as he spreads them both apart inside of her, opening her further. It doesn’t seem possible, that she will be able to accommodate him, yet he knows she will, knows just how it will feel – like a miracle almost enough to send him to Mass.

“No! Etienne –”

“Then I’m afraid you’ll have to be more specific, Belle,” he murmurs. His gaze is locked now on her dark eyes, on the passion in them – and the comprehension. She knows exactly what he wants to hear; the hesitance he can also clearly see tells him she isn’t certain she can say it. “Is it so difficult, then, to tell me what you want? You know I’d give you anything.”

Her eyes change then, hesitance replaced by a deeply searching look as though attempting to determine the truth of his statement – but it is true; in this moment at least he thinks he’d give her anything at all, things she’s never even thought to want, things no provincial captain could possibly give her. Everything, more than she can take.

“Your – Your cock, Etienne, please – Give me –”

Ah, yes, especially that.

It wasn’t easy for her, to say that word, he can see it in the way her eyes somehow avoid his even though his face is inches from hers. It wasn’t easy for him to hear, truth be told, almost enough to make him spill before he could even fulfill her plea. Almost. Somehow he maintains control enough to reward her, and himself, to position his swollen head at her entrance and press forward just enough to feel her slick flesh part for him, enveloping his tip in ecstatic heat.

“More,” she almost sobs when she realizes he has no intention of moving deeper without some encouragement from her.

He obliges, though slowly, so slowly, slow enough that he can feel her tight sheath giving way to his invasion, slow enough that Belle is cursing and begging him by the time he’s fully buried inside her. His teeth are clenched tight to prevent him doing the same, though what he could possibly beg her for when she’s already spread wide beneath him, already giving herself to him, he can’t quite imagine. It reminds him in a way of that first night, of the almost unbearable tightness of her virgin cunt, of the absolutely unbearable pain of holding himself still inside her. Of course, now he holds by his own will, feeling her breathing under him, feeling her heart thudding beneath his chest, her walls surrounding him, his cock throbbing inside her.

That means something, being inside Belle, something beyond the impending release of orgasm, and he wonders if she feels as possessed by him, by this, as he feels he possesses her. He wonders if she understands what it means, that he’s inside of her, that he’s the only man who has ever been – will ever be – inside of her, that she’s his.

Etienne lowers his head to catch her lips with his, as much to keep himself from asking as to taste her, and her mouth is as wet and hot and open for him as her cunt, as accepting of his tongue as her body is of his cock. Tangling his fingers in her hair, he rests as much of his weight on her as he thinks she can stand, pressing his bare skin to hers from head to toe, kissing her deeply, languorously, fucking her the same. He’s not thrusting so much as rocking into her, hardly moving at all, and she’s rocking with him, legs twined with his, hips tilting just so to always keep him deep, so deep.
This is what he wants, to be embedded to the very depths her body will allow, to come there, to pour his seed into her womb until the child he’d imagined days before is growing inside her. He knows, even if she does not, that she is at the most fertile point of her cycle, her body at its most receptive for him, and the knowing arouses him like nothing ever has before, nothing.

His new desire to take her over so completely, to claim her body so thoroughly that she carries part of him within her for all to see, is not at all civilized – something primal, beyond anything, more than instinct. It would be frightening if it weren’t so thrilling, the thought of everyone knowing what’s between them just by her swollen belly, the entire court aware that she spreads her legs for him, lets him fill her with his come, belongs to him entirely. Belle must know, surely she must know, the inevitable outcome of their liaison, and she has never objected, not once in all the dozens of times he’s spent himself inside her.

They remain that way for what might be hours, days, something else – long hazy moments separate from time, moving slowly together, ascending to the very edge of ecstasy and then holding, holding – holding back, holding each other. It’s almost hallucinogenic, hovering in this in between place so long, dizzying like that strange green wormwood concoction a physician had once brought to court. He can feel her everywhere, her hair, her skin, the slick heat of her mouth and cunt, wants to press himself so deeply into her everything that keeps them separate melts away.

It’s… Disconcerting, really, these hazy thoughts and absurd desires, thoughts and desires he seems incapable of controlling now that he’s with her, in her, breathing through her somehow because however long they’ve been melded together like this, that first kiss has never been broken.

It must be, finally, when he can take no more; he lifts his head to look down into her face and returns to himself slowly, feeling himself separate from her in a way he almost regrets, despite that he’s still buried within her. Their bodies are slicked with sweat, he realizes, sliding against one another as they rock together, endlessly rocking. She blinks up at him all flushed and dazed, dark hair tousled in a messy halo, expression dreamy, lips swollen from the pressure of his. Sinking his fingers into her thick locks, he frames her face with his hands, traces the delicate wings of her brows with his thumbs. He speaks several languages and reads even more, but somehow none of them have words to fully encompass what he wants to say to her – he only knows he wants to say something but cannot.

“With me, Belle,” he murmurs finally – not at all what he wanted to say or needed to say but it’s enough, has to be. “Come with me.”

“Yes,” she sighs.

With that single word, it becomes too much, far too much – he needs to fill her, is consumed by that need as he finally begins to thrust harder, as he angles himself to hit that sensitive spot inside her and grind against her clit at the same time. She whimpers at the sensation, surging up to meet his lips, teeth sinking into his lip as he pounds into her. The slight hint of pain is perfect, delicious. It feels like floating, like flying, her sweet cunt cradling him so slick and hot as he moves inside her, sheath grasping his cock, stroking him, caressing him, driving him mad.

Finally, something breaks within them both. He can feel her shuddering beneath him, can feel the desperate rhythm of her release all around his aching cock even as he buries himself to the hilt and spills himself inside of her. It’s wrenching in its intensity and it lasts forever, her ecstasy prolonging his as her body coaxes every drop of his seed from him, demands it, and he has no wish to deny her. His entire body burns with the searing pleasure of it, of each thick pulse of his release jetting deep, as deep as he’d wanted.

She gasps his name against his open mouth – beautiful, beautiful – and he gasps hers, and he doesn’t
bother telling her she belongs to him because it must be as transparently obvious to her as it is to him.

@ >` --

Chapter End Notes

So you might notice that Etienne thinks Belle is at the most fertile point of her cycle during menstruation, which you might recognize as totally not true. However, it is true for a lot of animals, and back in the day people thought it applied to humans as well. This is unfortunate because there weren't that many reliable methods of birth control back then, and even fewer that good Catholics might use, but the rhythm method was one of them - or could have been, if not for the fact that they had women's most fertile points and least fertile points completely backwards, and were thereby abstaining from sex when they should have been getting down, and not abstaining when they really, really should have. Oops. Although to be fair, even today with greater medical knowledge the rhythm method is considered one of the least effective forms of birth control (Natural Family Planning [NFP] is more effective but also takes SO MUCH WORK, OMG... But not as much work as having a baby you're not ready for). But back then people practicing their version of the rhythm method were pretty much guaranteed to end up as parents by the end of the year. Bummer.

The "strange green wormwood concoction" that Etienne randomly thinks about during sex is a reference to absinthe, but it's somewhat anachronous, KIND OF. Absinthe was created as a patent medicine around 1792 by Pierre Ordinaire, a French doctor living in Switzerland. In 1797 he sold the recipe to Major Dubied, who set up the first absinthe distillery with his son and son-in-law. It didn't really rise to popularity until the 19th century, when it was given to French troops as a (I'm assuming ineffective) malaria preventative. Now, you may recognize both 1792 and 1797 being way after our era, but it's only KIND OF anachronous. Wormwood, one of the key ingredients of absinthe, has been used in medicinal concoctions for thousands of years. It's mentioned in the Ebers Papyrus, which dates from around 1550 BC, and we know it was used by the Ancient Greeks. So it's entirely possible that something similar might have been available to Etienne, even if it wasn't absinthe as we know it. Interesting fact, although absinthe is known for it's hallucinogenic qualities, and large doses of wormwood extract can cause hallucinations, the hallucinogenic qualities of absinthe are probably exaggerated. There's not enough wormwood extract to have much of an effect. There is, however, 75% alcohol by volume, which is definitely enough to get you really really drunk.

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel!
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Thank you again and again and again for all your kind kudos and comments! I can't believe you guys have stuck with me for 36 whole chapters of this nonsense, but I'm very grateful <3 Please forgive me for not responding to comments for like... A month. I swear I'm reading them and they really do keep me motivated, things are just a little crazy around here just now. Hopefully I'll catch up soon and not fall behind again.

And now, Chapter 36, in which Belle's Facts and logic are both flawless but her conclusion is somehow... Not.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A

36

It’s just before dusk when Belle leaves Etienne sleeping in her childhood bed and ventures out into Villeneuve, almost too late to have any hope of purchasing food at the market. Thankfully, the town center is not far, and there are several stalls still open, though the selection has been entirely picked over. Only the least appealing vegetables remain, for example, the worst cuts of meat at the butcher, the stalest loaves of bread. Not that she has any hope of His Highness actually appreciating anything she cooks for him, but she determines some kind of ratatouille is her best chance at getting him to eat something, if only because it will smell heavenly and hide how bruised the vegetables are. It doesn’t hurt that she can prepare one in her sleep – that anyone could, even Etienne. All that’s required is to dice everything up, toss it all into a pot and simmer until everything falls apart.

Procuring the ingredients takes very little time, as does the dicing/tossing portion of the preparation, and she doesn’t have to be present while it simmers thanks to the stove she built three years before. She’d based it on François de Cuvilliés’s Castrol stove, of course, with its enclosed wood fire and iron grates over holes allowing access to the heat, but she’d improved it by creating a frame for hanging the pots at variable heights, improving heat efficiency as well as allowing for greater control of cooking time. It’s the simplest thing in the world to set the pot at the perfect height to come to a slow simmer while she’s gone. Idly, she wonders if Etienne will awaken before she returns, and if so if he’ll notice the innovations she’s made. Has he ever even seen the huge Castrol stove at the palais? She rather doubts it. But either way, he’s not an idiot, nor is he at all domestic; if he deigns to notice she’s cooking something, he certainly won’t fuss with it.

She leaves the house for the second time just as darkness is falling, grateful to be able to walk much more slowly this time. The muscles of her inner thighs are sore from being spread so wide for what must have been at least an hour, and she aches inside in a way she hasn’t since that first time. This particular encounter was nothing like that one, of course, but it was also different from every other intimate exchange they’ve had in a way she can’t quite define – apart from the length, which seemed reasonable at the time but which she now thinks might have been excessive. There had been an intensity to it, to the weight of him on top of her and the press of him inside of her, to the silence he
kept by kissing her so deeply for so long. He likes to talk to her, and she likes it when he talks to her, but she had not found this last encounter wanting in any way, not even in the lack of conversation.

It had been… *Companionable* is not the word she wants, but it’s possible the word she wants doesn’t exist, that there’s no way to say that she had felt as though she were truly with him, that he were truly with her. She is so often so alone, barricaded inside her own mind with her own thoughts, even when in company – perhaps especially when in company. This had felt different, as though whatever keeps her separate from him, from the world, had melted away, allowing them to – to merge, or to – oh, she doesn’t know. She only knows she’d felt fully embraced by him, her body, her mind, her – well, her soul, if she believed such things existed, which she doesn’t. But it had been like a painting, like a masterpiece from his gallery – beautiful in a way she can’t fully understand, in a way she isn’t entirely certain she’s capable of comprehending. She wonders if he could explain it to her, were she to ask.

She wonders what it means, if it means anything.

Fact: Belle has no experience sharing intimacies with anyone but Etienne, whereas Fact: Etienne has extensive experience sharing intimacies with many different women, and therefore Fact: things that seem new and perhaps special to her are likely commonplace to him. It’s true that she has never felt anything like the strange loss of self and sense of togetherness she’d experienced during this last encounter, but it is also true that she had never experienced the physical sensation of having someone inside of her until Etienne had taken her, nor the euphoria of release until Etienne had helped her to it. And so, Fact: there is no reason to suspect that this new aspect of intimacy is any different, and Fact: there is no purpose to being disappointed by it.

Belle knows enough of Etienne’s past to recognize how foolish anything like jealousy would be. She can accept the knowledge of his physical encounters with other women without too much pain, so long as she doesn’t consider specifics. But the thought of him being with another woman the way he was with her, the way she was with him… Ah, it hurts, and she can’t help but be angry with herself for that. She cannot, must not, allow anything in Etienne’s past – or future, once she’s gone – to hurt her, because with his history it would just… Never stop hurting. No, she knows better. Their current arrangement will not last forever. Etienne will eventually grow tired of her relative innocence, not to mention frustrated by her uncontrollable and single-minded need to focus on scientific theories, books and various other things that aren’t him. She will eventually need to return to her life, to this village, this poor provincial town, regardless of how she has always longed to escape. Perhaps she shall, once her father is… But even then she will escape alone. Not with Etienne.

Before she can consider how that thought hurts too, she finds herself in front of the village chapel. There is a strange sense of unreality to standing there, this place she has usually approached with such buoyant spirits, unless she was there for Mass. It used to feel like a haven, the one place in all the world where she could find books to read and a kindred spirit to discuss them with, but her small corner of the world is larger now. Now those days simply feels distant, as though eons have passed since she last stood here, long enough that she wonders whether she ought to knock as she hasn’t since the very first time she came to visit Pere Robert outside of services. But if nothing else he has always impressed upon her that the chapel is not his house but God’s. Much as Belle doesn’t believe in him, she knows Pere Robert’s faith is sincere, and he means what he says.

She opens the door carefully, revealing the dim interior, the white paneled walls surmounted by decorative columns and arches, all below a row of leaded clerestory windows. It’s too dark now for much light to filter down through them, but a few flickering candles illuminate Christ on his cross, shadows dancing across his carved face – strangely serene, considering he’s nailed to a plank of wood, but then she supposes a Savior ought to be serene.
“Pere Robert?” she calls, before her mind can be tempted to more blasphemy.

“Hello?” his warm tenor voice calls back, and Belle smiles as her friend comes striding into the chapel from his own private rooms. But her smile fades as she sees how he freezes, how he grows almost wary at the sight of her.

Somehow, it had not occurred to her that he might not wish to see her. He isn’t stupid – he must know why she has been staying at the castle. And she isn’t stupid – she knows how the Bible and the faith both regard the work she has undertaken. But she somehow hadn’t put it all together in a way that might have warned her to be cautious of her friend and mentor. After all, he has accepted the other less than pious aspects of her character. She has never told him she doesn’t believe, but she knows he knows she doesn’t. Still he lent her books. It had not… She had not thought that this would be any different.

“Belle,” he says finally, eyes lingering on her plum silk brocade gown. “I had not expected to see you here.”

“I came for my notebook,” she answers. “Came back to the village for it, I mean. You don’t have my notebook. Oh! I have – ”

Reaching into the slit in the side of her skirt, she finds the pocket tied to her waist and hunts around inside. Pere Robert’s well-thumbed copy of Candide is heavy as she withdraws it, offering it to him hesitantly.

“It was beside my bed. I’d forgotten I borrowed it just before leaving for the castle.”

He takes it from her, handsome dark face still grave, and traces the embossed cover with his fingertips.

“I’d wondered what happened to it. And to you. Have you returned for good then?”

She takes a deep breath before shaking her head. “Not – Not yet.”

“I see,” he answers.

“Do you? Are you – Are you angry with me? I can never tell.” There are probably clues in his posture, in his face, in his eyes, but she cannot read them, not well enough.

“Angry with you?” Pere Robert’s voice holds surprise but… She doesn’t quite trust it. “No, of course not. How could you think so?”

“The way you’re looking at me – ”

“I’m not angry with you,” he assures her, again in such a way that she isn’t certain she believes him. Not because she believes he’d lie to her, but surely even priests lie to themselves sometimes. “I’m – I’m worried about you. I’m angry with the situation, and with the Prince. Not with you.”

Belle blinks at him in confusion. “With the Prince?”

“Of course with the Prince! I’d heard the stories, but I never thought he’d stoop to debauching an innocent girl employed in his own household.” Pere Robert laughs without humor. “Due to my vocation I tend to give people the benefit of the doubt – even when I ought to know they don’t deserve it.”

And suddenly, Belle understands. He isn’t angry with her, or even with the Prince, or at least not
only. He’s angry with himself. She approaches him carefully, lays one hand on his shoulder, and holds his dark gaze because what she has to say is important.

“You couldn’t have known,” Belle attempts to comfort him. “He doesn’t – with the staff, not – not usually.”

“I certainly can’t commend him for it, not when he decided to start with you,” Pere Robert snarls as he pulls away, unwilling to be comforted.

“I think he was as surprised as anyone,” she says. Restlessly, she paces the chapel, all too conscious of her friend’s eyes on her. “This isn’t – He isn’t – ”

She fights to organize her thoughts and feelings, then sighs and gives up, uncertain of how to give them voice. *This isn’t what you think. He isn’t what you think.* She could say those words but not make him believe them, and there’s more to it even than that, more she doesn’t understand. It wasn’t so long ago that she woke up in Etienne’s bed thinking of how much she disliked him, even less since she thought Etienne as he was wasn’t quite worth saving, only Etienne as he could be. Now… He hasn’t changed so much, not really, but she begins to think –

“He took advantage of you, Belle,” Pere Robert says, the cold, hard *something* in his tone drawing her attention back to the present. “God help me but I almost hate him for it.”

“He didn’t,” she protests, even though at the time she’d rather thought he had. It looks different, looking back. “And don’t, please don’t. I – I knew what I was doing. I made a choice and I don’t regret it.”

“It’s not a choice you should have had to make.”

She can’t imagine why that would matter. “Perhaps not, but neither of us can change it.”

“I cannot tell you how often I have prayed to the only one who can,” Pere Robert tells her, and she hears despair and sleepless nights in his words – and an insidious thread of anger, anger at the god he serves. “I almost hate Him, too, for never responding.”

Belle feels a sense of déjà vu wash over her as she remembers how it felt the day after her first night in the castle, to have Mrs. Potts and Lumiere and Plumette pitying her when she knew there was no cause. While her friend has been on the brink of a spiritual crisis, she has been wearing silk and reading Shakespeare and Newton. She has been spending time with Etienne and enjoying it, enjoying his intelligence and his humor and yes, the way he touches her. It makes her feel ashamed in a way not even literally selling her virginity could; that had meant so little to her. But Pere Robert’s faith means everything to him, and she can’t stand the thought that he might be questioning it on her behalf when she is in fact… Content, perhaps more content than she should be.

“I like it there,” she admits quietly, unable to meet her friend’s eyes as she makes confession in the only way she’s ever likely to. “He has every book I’ve ever wanted to read, and many I’ve never heard of. He’s given me a workroom – ”

“And silk gowns, and jewels, and gold,” Pere Robert interrupts cuttingly. “Don’t be seduced by material possessions, Belle. He’ll make you a whore.”

She looks up in surprise to find his face contorted with revulsion – at what he’s said, not her.

“Forgive me, I didn’t mean – ”

“I made myself one, if anything,” she says with a shrug, wondering why everyone seems to think
that word will break her. How can she be offended by it when it’s more or less true, for now at least?

“I didn’t mean that,” he repeats, touching her gently on the arm as she had his. She understands now why he pulled away; it’s not particularly comforting. Not that she needs comforting. “You aren’t, you could never be.”

“Etienne says that too. His Highness, I mean.”

“The Prince?” Her friend sounds shocked, as well he might, considering the circumstances. If anyone should feel comfortable with that categorization, Etienne ought to – as the man who paid for her sexual favors in the first place.

“Yes.”

“You call him by name?”

“He asked me to,” she answers. “He – I didn’t much like him, at first. But he’s less… not less arrogant. Kinder, perhaps, now. He intends to lower taxes in the village. He –”

Pere Robert shakes his head, expression grave. “Don’t be fooled by his kindness. Certain men will do anything, say anything, to get what they want.”

Belle gives him a wry look, a slight smile. “How would you know?”

“I hear Confession, Belle,” he says darkly. “Trust me, I know.”

She sighs, wishing he’d smiled back, wishing he’d laughed. “As His Highness delights in reminding me, he is in fact the future King of France. Do you imagine any court in the land would hold him accountable if he forced himself on me?”

“Did he?” Pere Robert asks, hesitant, afraid of her answer.

“Of course not.” For a moment she can’t help but be frustrated, then can’t help but imagine what it must be like for Etienne, that people are so willing to think the worst of him. Not that he hasn’t given them some cause, but how could anyone believe he’d sink so low? “But he could have, with no repercussions. He doesn’t have to do anything or say anything to get what he wants. I couldn’t deny him, even if he promised me nothing. He’s not what you think.”

“You care for him,” her friend states flatly, as afraid of her response to his words as to the last question.

Belle doesn’t bother to deny it; it’s true, after all. She never would have gone to Agathe when he was ill otherwise. But she doesn’t understand Pere Robert’s fear. She cares for him as one human ought to for another – her philosophers and his god are in agreement on that point.

“He’s my friend.” He is. He is. Except that she still aches deep inside from the force of him moving within her, except that she can still feel his hands in her hair, his mouth on hers. But none of that precludes friendship, surely. Although none of that is anything she ought to be thinking about in a chapel, in the presence of a priest and poor wooden Christ on his cross.

“Oh, Belle.” Pere Robert looks – exhausted. Defeated. Like he read her mind and knows her thoughts, those thoughts she certainly shouldn’t have been having in front of him. “You have no idea _”

“I do, really,” she says earnestly, despite not actually understanding what he’s referencing. “I know
what I’m doing. I don’t want you to worry about me. Everything is fine. I’ll be back sooner or later, and everything will be as it was.”

“There are things that could prevent that,” he reminds her. “A child, for example. As things stand, the town is uncertain about what exactly you’re doing at the castle. God only knows how long that will last, but it won’t if you fall pregnant.”

It’s the most direct reference Pere Robert has made to the nature of her relationship with Etienne, and he clearly does not believe in speaking in euphemisms. She can’t help the blush that floods her face with heat as she wonders if her friend is picturing… Imagining… But he’s a priest, surely… But how can he not, if he’s considering activities which might result in pregnancy? God, how do people stand it, others knowing such private things? How can she stand it?

“That won’t happen,” she assures him, once she can speak through her embarrassment.

Yet Pere Robert doesn’t look reassured in the slightest. The hand he’d laid gently on her arm joins his free hand in gripping both her shoulders firmly. He holds her in place, staring into her eyes, enunciating every word so clearly: “You have to be careful, Belle.”

She knows that; she isn’t stupid. And she has been careful, she has. “I told you, I am. It won’t happen.”

“Not about that,” Pere Robert says, leaving her perplexed.

About what? she wishes to ask, but doesn’t. He must think it’s obvious – it must be obvious, to anyone who isn’t her. So she nods in solemn agreement and wraps her arms around him in a decorous embrace – which is warm and comforting and nothing at all like embracing Etienne – before promising to write, now that she knows he wishes to her from her about things other than her father. And yet despite her best efforts, the expression on his face as she finally leaves the chapel is one of regret, of resignation.

You have to be careful, Belle.

Clearly, he doesn’t believe she is, or that she will be… But she still doesn’t know about what she’s meant to be so careful of.

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes

The Castrol stove, a.k.a. the stew stove, was invented in 1735 by French architect François Cuvilliés. It was the first design that completely enclosed the wood-burning fire, which cut down on smoke, increased heat efficiency and allowed less wood to be used. Made of brick or stone, it was basically a "fire chamber” with holes on top and iron grates on which to place flat-bottomed pots, as opposed to hanging cauldrons. It wasn’t until the end of the 18th century that hanging pots through holes in the grates became common practice. Belle’s improvements are a combination of that and the previous hanging cauldron set up. She could lower her pots through the grate and closer to the fire to cook faster, or raise them above the grate to cook more slowly (as she does when she leaves the house). Basically she’s like 40+ years ahead of her time, because she’s a genius and all.
Though the Castrol stove was a definite improvement over earlier stoves, it didn't actually have much of an impact on domestic cooking (Belle is an exception because she just built one for fun). As they were made of brick, they had to be built in and were not really easy to add retroactively. The Palais Villeneuve has one because Etienne had it modernized when he moved his court there, and they were quite useful for cooking for large numbers of people. But most homes stuck with an open hearth into the early 19th century. The real game changer was the advent of cast iron cookstoves, which replaced masonry designs that had to be built in. Cast iron stoves had actually been in use since the 1600s, and production really ramped up in 1728 (for SOME REASON I can't find anywhere... New process for casting iron perhaps?). But these stoves were used for heating, not cooking.

It wasn't until 1800 that the scientist Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford - who also discovered that restricting a chimney's opening increased the updraft and sucked the smoke out much more effectively - invented the first cast iron cookstove, known as the Rumford stove. Like the Castrol stove it was very large and designed for working kitchens, not domestic cooking, but it could heat multiple pots with a single heat source and the heat could be controlled individually for each pot. People thought that was pretty sweet, so a lot of research went into improving and scaling down the design. By 1834, compact cast iron designs like Stewart's Oberlin stove were patented, and the evolution of the stove was so rapid that almost every middle-class home had a modern cast iron cooking range by 1850.

Thus concludes this note containing everything you've ever wanted to know, and many things you didn't, about stoves.

See you next week, same BatB time, same BatB channel!

06.26.18: Quick update, my dad isn’t dead and neither am I! He’s still in the hospital and I lost my job (glorious timing) so it’s not like things are going WELL but they’ve been worse so that’s something. I really appreciate all your concern, kind wishes and patience. I especially appreciate the sweet notes everyone has left and private messages some have sent, and I’m really sorry I haven’t responded to any. It’s just... Crisis mode over here, still. I can’t believe it’s been two months :(.

Anyway, I suddenly have a lot of free time on my hands re: surprise unemployment so I’m really focusing on editing and rewriting... I will keep doing my best to actually produce something worth reading and post it when I can. Feel free to check every week on posting day and/or subscribe to get an alert. I’m not forgetting about you and I’m not abandoning this story, I just hate promising to update every week and then having to dash everyone’s hopes. I’ll leave a note here when I have a better idea of when exactly I’ll be posting. I’m always aiming for “next week” but so far haven’t hit it.
Not A New Chapter

Chapter Summary

Don't get too excited, this isn't a new chapter (yet) but rather some info and a contest...

Chapter Notes

His Royal Highness Prince Etienne-Louis Josephe Christophe Avenant, by the Grace of God Dauphin of France, hereby informs you that squid_in_disguise will complete Folie à Deux, by Royal Decree. His Highness gives you leave to express a reasonable amount of pleasure and gratitude for his hard-fought campaign on your behalf.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I want to start this off by thanking everyone SO MUCH for all your kindness and concern, and also by apologizing for disappearing off the face of the earth. My dad was sick, I lost my job of almost a decade out of nowhere... Things were not great. I tried to write and couldn't, and then felt so bad about not being able to update that I just tried not to think about this story at all (which was difficult because I swear Etienne and Belle are actual human beings living inside my head, it's weird). I also lost access to my AO3 account email address so I wasn't getting notifications on any comments or anything. Walking away from the story without letting you know what was going on was really uncool, especially since all of you have been so awesome to me, so I hope you can forgive me for it. A few of you even Emailed or messaged me on Tumblr, which was really sweet even if I didn't respond. Again, please forgive me. It meant a lot to me even if I couldn't figure out how to answer at the time.

Okay. With all that out of the way, I wanted to kind of update you all on the situation. My dad is out of the hospital and totally not dead, yay! We owe like $70k. Boo. I'm still unemployed. Extra boo. But one good thing that has come out of all of this is SnitchesAndTalkers and I have finally begun moving forward with something we've discussed for a long time: starting our own eBook publishing company. We've been publishing her romance novels since December, and mine soon hopefully. This will eventually include FaD, and therefore I AM DEFINITELY NOT ABANDONING THIS STORY. (I wouldn't have abandoned it in any case because Etienne will not shut up, seriously, but the possibility that I might be able to sell it adds a bit of incentive too.) I'm not 100% sure when updates will begin again, because I'm also having to work on publishing company stuff, but hopefully by mid June at the latest I'll be back to updating once a week. I'd say we're about 65% of the way through the story so there are probably about 20 more chapters to go.

One note: I seriously have hardly written anything since last year. So I'm rusty as hell and I'm really sorry if the upcoming chapters aren't up to par... I'll need some warming up I assume. So just be gentle, okay?

Oh, another thing! I told you all after the Apollo Crowning Himself contest that I'd be doing at least one more, and I figure now is as good a time as any since I really do owe you all an apology! Therefore I have three neat BatB themed gifts to give away: a silver and rose gold rose necklace, a
replica of the magic mirror from the Disney cartoon, and a PJ set (American size XL but on the smaller side of that). To win you need only 1) be over the age of 18, and 2) comment with your favorite part of the story and why you like it. You can also specify which prize you'd prefer and I'll do what I can to make sure that's the one you win although no guarantees. This contest is open to readers anywhere in the world, BUT be warned that if it turns out that shipping is prohibitively expensive I might have to choose someone else because ummm I'm still unemployed. The contest will be open until I post the new chapter sometime in the next month, at which point I will also announce the winners as well as the new posting day. So if you're not already subscribed, now would be a good time, since I don't have a specific day or date in mind as yet.

Okay, that's all for now... Thank you all again so much for your patience and your thoughts and prayers and everything. It all means a lot to me. <3 Squid

@>-`--

Chapter End Notes

See you in June, MYSTERY BatB time, same BatB channel.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!