The Gate

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Summary

Something is not quite right about the small town of Storybrooke, Maine. When Lacey French goes undercover to discover the scoop that could jump-start her career, she herself disappears into a magical world known as Fae.

With only the protection of a questionable sorcerer, Lacey must survive a year in the world of Fae’s nine kingdoms where nothing is as it seems. Amidst magic, romance, mythical creatures, and courtly intrigues, Lacey learns sometimes it’s not always just the monsters who can change.

-Winner of Best Adventure Fic in the 2016 T.E.A’s-
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

11/30/18: Hi! Welcome to this story- Quick note to any newcomers- this story is intended to be multiple books in an overarching series. If you are here for an epic adventure in the style of the 10th Kingdom, you are in the right place.

I always thought the Lacey storyline was interesting- a flawed woman and a flawed man who brought out the worst in each other was an interesting take on the Rumbelle arc. I was a bit disappointed when they abruptly brought it to an end when Mr. Gold needed his Belle back instead of exploring that side of Belle.

You can of course argue that it was a nasty curse designed to bring up her worst attributes just like Snow was reduced to a meek lonely slip of a woman- the very thing the Evil Queen wanted her most to be- but what if the cursed persona was based on a small part of herself she hid away to survive? Doesn’t that make them even more interesting?

So, I decided to try and write a tale about Lacey who embraces her flaws as virtues to get what she wants and how her life changes when she stumbles into a world with very different rules.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Book One

The morning Lacey's French entire life changed was uneventful until a quarter past ten. It was late October and the blustery wind whistled against the office windows of The Looking Glass, the city's oldest, independently owned and operated newspaper. Belle was on her second cup of coffee, trying to decipher the scrawling comments the senior editor had left on her latest article. As usual, he missed the forest for the trees, striking out the most salient details of the story in favor of repeating the same old facts from the previous articles. No one read the paper for things they already knew. Debating whether she dared to submit the article as written, Lacey raised her coffee cup to her lips when a hand descended onto her shoulder.

Jerking in surprise, the cup slipped and coffee cascaded into her lap. Lacey jumped up but the damage was done. Her suede skirt now sported a rather prominent coffee stain. She muttered a few choice curse words before a box of kleenex appeared under her nose. "Here, let me."

Jack Gaston, the paper's health writer and most eligible bachelor, grinned dimly at her. "You really ought to be more careful, Lacey."

Lacey gritted her teeth but she accepted the kleenex. She patted at the stain. It was a lost cause but it gave her something to do other than wring Gaston's neck. He continued to stand there, completely unaware she was plotting his painful and imminent demise.

“Working hard or hardly working?” he asked with a nod towards her computer screen.
"Working," Lacey replied as she balled up the kleenex and tossed it. "So, as much as I’d love to chat, I really have a lot to do."

"About that, you have a second?" He didn't wait to see if she did or not. He flipped out his phone and began to talk through his latest article, something about rock climbing and testosterone. His voice quickly grew monotonous as he droned on, seemingly oblivious to her annoyance.

With his jet black hair swept back with a perfect curl on his forehead, Gaston was devastatingly alluring. Add his pouty lips that were always pulled back in a toothpaste commercial smile, he was almost impossible to resist even though it was common knowledge he had slept with half the women on staff at *The Looking Glass*. It had been noted that most of his conquests tended to be more productive post-coital than the weeks they spent trying to get his attention. So, management tended to look the other way.

But behind the pretty face, he was a misogynist, a bully, and a complete idiot. Unfortunately, Gaston seemed to like a challenge. He became Lacey's very own personal shadow in the office. He showed up at her desk throughout the day, asked her out to dinner, brought her pastries from the cart downstairs, all which she allowed. After all, easier to stay on his good side. So, Lacey flirted. The problem was Gaston didn’t seem to understand the concept of flirtation as an art form.

Lacey twisted her chair around, fixing him with a pointed look. “Did you need something in particular, Gaston?”

“I may have been asked to deliver a message for you,” he admitted, moving to seat himself more firmly on her desk.

Lacey rolled her chair back a few feet away from him, “and what would that would be?”

He grinned, his perfect teeth gleaming in the fluorescent lighting of the office. “Reese was looking for you. I told him you were in the middle of working an article-”

“Wait-what?”

If the paper's editor was looking for her, it meant-

Lacey leaped for her notepad, tugging at her stained skirt. “You are just-!” Lacey muttered through clenched teeth. She darted around him and out of her cube.

“Charming?” Gaston supplied as he followed after her. "Quick thinking? Your very own knight in shining armor?"

“Unbelievable,” Lacey corrected. Her damp skirt changed against her thighs but she ignored it as best she could as she hurried down the hall. She had never been called to the chief editor's office before. It could only mean-

A few people had to jump out of her way as she turned the corner at a sharp angle. Gaston continued to trail behind her like an unwanted shadow. Luckily for them both, he stopped short at the kitchen area where a new intern was bending over to clean out the dishwasher, her skirt unintentionally riding up. “Best of luck,” he called out absently, already running a hand through his hair as he eyed his new target.

The editor's office was just down the hall from the kitchen, a running office joke. Arriving at the closed door at the end of the corridor, Lacey paused for a quick glance at her rumpled blouse and stained skirt. Reaching down, she flicked open two of the top buttons before shimmying her skirt down to fit neatly across her hips. Lacey had never personally met with Reese but she doubted he
would notice a coffee stain with this kind of cleavage on display. Satisfied, she knocked neatly on the door before entering.

Mo Reese was the editor, owner and overall spiritual leader of *The Looking Glass*. He had started the paper as a young man and had lived to see it grow into a major paper of the city. His tendency to lean towards investigative reporting over the growing syndicated columns had made it popular but over the past few years, slow news cycles and larger syndications had thinned out the paper’s once prestigious numbers. Sitting with his back to the large windows which framed his desk, an older man was bent pouring over column printouts. He was holding up today’s paper in one hand and comparing it to the one on his desk. The light streaming in the window behind him made his white hair glow in a translucent aura, giving him a hazy halo. When he failed to glance up at her arrival, Lacey swayed uncertainty in the doorway. After a moment, she stepped in, letting the door fall shut with a large thud.

Still, nothing.

After another attempt at capturing his attention with a well-timed cough failed, Lacey finally put on her brightest smile and approached his desk. When he finally noticed her, she was standing near enough to touch him. "Ms. French, I assume you heard I was looking for you." He returned his attention to the columns, waving a hand at her to sit down.

“What did you want to see me about, sir?” Lacey used her writing pad to hide the stain on her skirt. Fighting the urge to fidget, she waited patiently as he continued reading. It was freezing in here; goose pimples rose up across her arms.

After a moment or two of uncomfortable silence, Reese looked up. He blinked at her for a moment as if he had forgotten she was there before he cleared his throat. “Ah, yes. French.” Lacey nodded, forcing herself to fix a firm smile on her face at the older man. “You’ve been here for about five years now, is that right?”

She straightened her shoulders, sitting up a little more straight in her seat. “Yes, sir. In four months, it will be five years.”

“Uh huh,” he agreed, absently, checking a piece of paper as he continued. “Says here you started as an intern, worked in sales for a bit before moving over to work for the personal pages?”

“Then was promoted to the research desk, I work mainly with politics.”

“Yea, Anderson speaks highly of you over there. Told me you’ve been ghostwriting Grimm’s columns since he’s been out on sick leave.”

“Yes, Hans approved the first few pieces.”

“Well written, quick paced and free of any liberal. Good pieces, but I’ve been reading them for three weeks and I didn’t realize they weren’t Grimm’s.”

Lacey nodded warily, keeping her eyes locked straight ahead. Her pulse was starting to pick up speed and her hands were locked in fists in her lap. Reese was hard to read in most situations, in a private meeting like this, it was impossible to tell where it was going. “Yes, well that was the idea…” she replied tersely, readjusting her legs and leaning forward slightly.

Reese waved his hand, seemingly oblivious to her now slightly gaping chemise, “Yes, well, I asked around. You’ve been writing for other reporters in a few other departments, and I didn’t notice those either. You’re a very talented chameleon, French, but I don’t know if copying someone’s
writing style qualifies you for an actual writing desk.”

She swallowed the angry words that rose to her tongue before nodding. Reese continued on regardless.

“I’ve got a story that just came in and I need someone who isn’t a fixture here. Someone I can send on assignment and trust not to lose their head, resent the assignment or lose perspective and if you want it as bad as everyone seems to think you do I figured you’d be a good choice.”

“An assignment?” Lacey exclaimed. “You’re sending me on an actual assignment? Of course, I’ll go! When do I start? Is it for the opinions desk or-“

Reese interrupted her. “French, you have a lunch meeting with Greg Mendell at noon today, he’ll fill you in.”

Lacey’s excitement drained away. “Greg Mendell? Isn’t that the conspiracy nut from the TV series *Vanished*?”

“The very one,” Reese agreed, leaning back in his chair. “Mendell’s been pushing a lead on a story, and it rang some bells in our research department. There’s some town up in Maine. It seems a few missing people over the years, couple unexplained homicides. The Feds have tried to get involved since the sixties but no luck. Small town, tight community, so no outsiders have been able to get more than a few words from even the law enforcers over there.”

Lacey crossed her arms. “So, you want me to…what exactly?”

“Meet with Mendell, see what he has to say, and sniff out if there’s a story.”

After five years, five years of working her ass off, this was the story that got dumped in her lap. "Sir, if you don’t mind me asking, what makes you think that the guy from *Vanished* has a credible story? If he did, wouldn’t he use it for his own syndication or book rights?”

Reese fixed her with his sharp blue eyes. “Because he wants someone to do what he can’t do as a national television celebrity.”

Lacey waited, biting the inside of her cheek. This could be a good opportunity but something told her it was going to be just another fool’s errand. “And what’s that, sir?”

“Go undercover and find out why people keep disappearing from Storybrooke.”

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An hour later, Lacey sat at a table at Dickin's Café waiting on Greg Mendell. She had run home to change into a cream skirt suit and jacket that suited her complexion. She had pulled her hair back into a high ponytail with tendrils framing her face. In all, she looked professional but still feminine enough to be disarming. She toyed with her glass, trying to quell the growing irritation. Her first real assignment happened to be with a guy who was considered a national nutjob; a very famous nutjob, sure, but a nutjob regardless.

There was movement at the door. A man walked in, periodically checking behind him as if he was being followed. Satisfied he was alone, he took off his sunglasses to speak with the hostess. With a closely shaved head and watery blue eyes, Lacey recognized him as Greg Mendell, host of *Vanished*. He was pointed towards Lacey, who stood to greet him.

“You must be Ms. French?” he greeted, gripping her hand in his. His eyes flashed down to her
chest and Lacey inwardly rolled her eyes. She gestured for him to have a seat. “Picked a spot in the back with high booth partitions and away from the windows,” he noticed before ordering an unsweet tea from the waitress. “Smart.”

After some small talk about their respective backgrounds, they ordered lunch before settling down to discuss the story. “So, you’ve seen the show?” he asked, picking up a piece of bread and smearing it with butter. She nodded, picking up her pen. “Have you seen the pilot episode?”

“Actually, no,” she responded. “That’s probably because it was aired on a local channel in Maine and the original recording was lost in a fire they had a few months later. You know, if it wasn’t for your third episode finding the supposedly lost housewife from New Jersey living happily as a nun in Vermont, you probably would never have been picked up for syndication by the cable network at all.”

His smirk was sly but it now held a hint of respect. “Okay, so you did your homework.”

“What does the pilot episode have to do with your story, Mr. Mendell?” she asked.

“Well, it’s actually the story of my father’s disappearance,” he shared.

Lacey nodded, unsurprised. Most people with interest in the unknown had a trauma or mystery in their past. “Can you share that story with me?”

For you?” he asked with a wink. “I’d be happy to. Let’s see, simple as I can make it. I was about six. Dad took me camping in the woods. It was an early Christmas present. My mother had passed away and Dad didn’t know how to hold a proper Christmas for a kid. So, he took me camping. We ended up a few miles out of a town called Storybrooke. We had missed the campsite somehow and Dad just decided to set up out in the woods instead of driving another couple hours back to the interstate.”

Lacey nodded, writing the salient details in shorthand.

“Well, middle of the night, I woke up to find my Dad talking to some woman outside of our tent. I assumed it must be a park ranger so I just went back to sleep. When I woke up in the morning, Dad was gone. Naturally, being six, I didn’t realize I should be scared or worried. I just ate all the chocolate we had left over from our s’mores. When I started to get bored, I decided to go looking for him.”

Lacey looked up from her notepad. “In the woods? Or along the road?”

“In the woods. I followed a trail I found nearby and went along calling out for my Dad for a few miles,” he grinned ruefully. “I remember being freezing and then getting mad at him for playing around. I didn’t think to be scared until I realized I was lost. I had wandered off the trail somehow and into the middle of the woods.”

Lacey tried to place the self-assured man in front of her with a scared kid lost in the woods. So far the entire thing just seemed like publicity. “Did you ever find a park ranger?” Lacey asked.

“No, those woods are basically empty. The only thing I found was...well it’s odd what you remember but I found this odd, large ruin of a iron wrought gate. I just leaned up against the column, cold and hungry, lost and scared, calling for my dad.”

It was the first interesting thing about his story to Lacey; a specific detail in an otherwise straightforward story. “That’s odd, isn’t it?” Lacey asked.”Was the gate connected to a house?”
Greg shook his head, looking slightly annoyed at her interruption. This was apparently not what he wanted her to focus on. “Just two big brick columns with an iron wrought gate between them. I just remember it because it was the first place that looked like civilization.”

“So…there's just a locked gate out in the middle of some huge forest?” She shook her head. "Didn't you think that was weird?"

He shrugged. “That was the least of my worries. Anyway, I got hungry, so I decided to go back to the campground, but I couldn’t find it again. Then, I tried to head back towards the gate but I couldn’t find it either. I just managed to luck out and find the interstate, followed it for a while and some folks coming back to Storybrooke from the city found me, middle of the night, some poor kid with blue fingers and red streaks running down my face from crying.”

Lacey dropped the gate; while it interested her, Mendell didn’t seem to think about it much more than a random memory marker. "You share that with your viewers?"

“No,” he confessed with a laugh. "But you’re cute and I was hoping it would make you feel sorry for me."

Lacey smiled invitingly in return, re-crossing her legs under the table, letting one brush against his pant leg. Always easier to catch flies with honey. "So, then what?" she continued.

He grinned. "You tell me," he challenged as he sat back.

Lacey tapped her chin with the pen. Most people with closure rarely kept up with obsessions and conspiracy theories, so it was simple to guess. "Hmm, let's see. Your father stayed missing which drove you to start a TV show about vanishing people?"

He nodded in approval. “You’re sharp, Lacey French,” he replied. “I told Reese I needed someone fresh, wanting to prove themselves but I must say I'm impressed…”

Their food came out before Lacey could reply. While Greg poured steak sauce on his plate, Lacey toyed with her fork as she waited for him to continue.

“So, where was I?"

"Found on the side of the road," Lacey supplied helpfully.

"Right. Well, I got lucky. I was placed with a family out west, nice folks, older. They didn’t really approve of my fascination with disappearances, but I read all the books on aliens, mobs, anything to do with unknown conspiracy theories. I devoured it.”

Lacey nodded along as he reminisced about his formative years: college stories about his fraternity, dropping out to work odd jobs in his early twenties, “So, then when my adoptive parents passed, I was left with a decent nest egg. I put it all into starting my show, and the rest’s history.”

Greg had already aggressively devoured his steak and fries. He was now leaning back, picking his teeth with a toothpick, comfortable and relaxed.

“So, all this in the quest to find your father?"

“My father is dead,” he replied without hesitation. “I knew that when I got old enough to understand people’s behaviors. Most of the people we find were unhappy, unfulfilled or with nothing to live for. They leave to start over or to protect someone. My father was a young, single father with a good job who had promised his dying wife to take care of their son. He didn’t leave
me willingly, not out there in the wilderness in the middle of the night.”

“Didn’t you say he was talking to someone?” Lacey asked, going back to her earlier notes.

“I was six but yea, I remember. There was definitely a woman’s voice but I didn’t see anyone outside the tent but my father’s shadow. Whoever she was, she wasn’t standing close enough to the fire for me to see her. Plus, why would a woman be out in the woods alone at the end of December?”

“Maybe she was a park ranger?”

“Maybe. But I doubt it. Besides, there have been too many disappearances over the years to be a coincidence.”

“Have there been any since your father’s disappearance thirty years ago?”

“Not any that have been officially reported but I’m sure if I had gone missing with my father, no one would have linked our disappearance to that area. We weren’t even supposed to be around there. There is one interesting thing I noticed in my few talks with Storybrooke’s sheriff.”

“Which is?” Lacey encouraged him, waving away the waitress who had just brought her a refill.

“That every single disappearance has been around the same time in December, around the Winter Solstice.”

“Which is what you must have told Reese to get him to agree to investigate it,” Lacey pieced together.

Greg nodded, looking smug. “Something is happening up in those woods, Lacey.” The famous intensity of his gaze was much stronger in person than on TV. “Do you want to help find out what it is?”

Lacey took a long drink, flicking her eyes to her notepad full of question marks and arrows. A story like this could either make a career or ruin it, following a journalist around their whole life as the crackpot story that was the biggest joke in publishing or the biggest cold case solved in recent history.

Yet, something in her was reacting to the story, just like Reese had. It was entirely possible this man’s story of his lost father was just the tip of a much bigger iceberg.

She looked back up at him, slipping the check off the table. “Well, Greg, how should we begin?”

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By the time she had made it back to her office, Lacey had already made four phone calls to Greg’s agent, Tamara. Lacey had requested all of Vanished’s files and records for Storybrooke as well as any important information or possible leads they had been following to be delivered to her before the end of the day. Tamara had agreed, ironed out logistics before calling and confirming everything had been delivered.

It was just past seven when Lacey returned to The Looking Glass. The adrenaline rush had ebbed away, leaving her a tired, knotted mess. When the elevator doors slide open with a chirp, Lacey took a deep breath and squared her shoulders before exiting. She turned the usual corners to her space; stopping short when she saw her desk was completely empty. Her laptop was missing; there were personal mementos stuffed in a cardboard box on her chair, and her notes and Tamara’s
files nowhere to be found. Her fellow coworker’s desks where exactly as they had left them before they left for the night, only hers looked like it had been cleaned out. She was in the process of trying to think who she should call when she heard footsteps.

Reese turned the corner, carrying his briefcase, nose buried in the tablet he typically used to check The Looking Glass’s online articles before they were published. “Mr. Reese,” Lacey called out in relief, hurrying towards him. “My desk-“

“French?” he remarked, staring at her in disbelief. “How did you even get up here?” he asked, grabbing her elbow and hauling her towards the elevator. “You shouldn’t be here!”

“But my desk-!”

“I’ve had someone store your personal effects for the time. Didn’t Jacobs contact you?”

“Melody Jacobs? From Human Resources?” Lacey stumbled into the elevator after him. He jabbed at the down button furiously. “I don’t understand...“

“You are on an assignment, starting the second you agreed to meet with Mendell. Hasn’t anyone been in contact to explain protocol to you?”

She shook her head, angrily toying with her satchel strap where her notes from that afternoon and her few cold calls to potential contacts were packed. “Did you mean Melody Jacobs?” she repeated, moving to stand in front of him. The downward motion of the elevator was making her lightheaded with her nerves. “She’s the one who’s trying to get Jack Gaston to ask her out, right?”

“French, if you think I know what kind of depraved social experiments go on outside my office, you are mistaken.“

“No, I mean, I think she may dislike me...due to his attention towards myself,” Lacey managed, trying to be politically correct. “It may have...” Lacey fumbled with a polite way to phrase this to the owner of the paper. “…slipped her mind to call me.”

Reese nodded, glancing past her at their reflection in the metal of the doors before they slid open. He held his arm out for her to stay, exited the elevator, checked both ways and then motioned her out. “Mendell called to say he approved of you covering the story but also mentioned a few photographers had followed him to the meeting. We were finalizing your backstory when his assistant called to finalize delivery of files for you. We had them sent to your apartment listed in your file before clearing you from our employee records.”

“You sent them where?” she started but the older man was already in front of her and swerving his head as they exited the lobby towards the parking garage stairwell.

“Mendell was very clear. We took the steps to be able to plausibly deny your employment here. No one should connect Lacey French, research and journalist from The Looking Glass as the same girl as Belle Ives, librarian and newest transplant in Storybrooke, Maine.”

“I already have a backstory?” Lacey had been hoping to have a hand in it herself, give her the necessary tools she would need to delve into the dark past of unsolved cases like Greg’s father.

“All at your apartment, which I believe is still under your father’s name?”

“Yes...” she answered slowly, starting to wonder if she had not been picked due to her skill and ingenuity as much she had been picked due to convenience.
“Now, I’ve texted my usual driver, he’s sending a man over to pick you up and take you back to your apartment. You will find your files, a new laptop, and a bus ticket to Storybrooke, and a folder full of your new identity, including driver’s license, birth certificate, credit cards, and a checking account that you will find has enough to get you through two months of hotel and board. A new cell phone registered to Belle Ives is also there, programmed to certain numbers including mine. Mendell is off the board, for now. If you need to reach him, his assistant can help you.”

“Sir,” Lacey interrupted, taking a deep breath. “This is...I don’t... what I’m trying to say is, I don’t think you had any intention of allowing me to turn down this assignment.”

Reese looked at her over his glasses, texting quickly with his left hand before snapping his phone closed and throwing it in his coat pocket. “French, as I am sure is not news to you, the paper isn’t doing well. Greg Mendell is offering a lot of money to bankroll us in advertising and his network is standing behind him with other programming advertising including print and online ads. The paper wasn’t in a position to turn him down.”

Lacey nodded; everyone was all too aware the paper was having financial problems. She wrapped her arms around herself a little tighter, the cold air of end of October bracing even in her jacket. Reese seemed unfazed, but his ears were turning red.

“He wanted one of my best to go up to Storybrooke, do a few poking and prodding. The problem was my best have all been nationally recognized as investigative reporters. He came in the office to meet Gaston-“

“You were going to send Gaston?” Lacey did not bother to hide her incredulity.

Reese shrugged. “He’s our senior journalist without any major awards. No one would place him as a writer for a paper, but Mendell came in and saw you arguing with someone in the kitchen and asked for you specifically. Liked your spirit, said he wanted someone with something to prove and while I was hesitant to send you, your work does speak for itself.”

Lacey reflected on the uncomfortable feeling she had about Mendall earlier. His pleasure at her being assigned had been less authentic than she had realized. Oh, she hated when she was outplayed but the TV show host had managed to play her rather well. She was slightly relieved she wouldn’t be dealing with him for the majority of the story.

“But this story- it’s- you know it’s probably just going to be tilting after windmills,” Lacey raised her arms in frustration. “There’s no guarantee I’ll find out what happened to all these people, and I’ll have just been wiped off the face of this Earth until what? Mendell gets bored? I disappear? The Looking Glass closes?”

Headlights came swerving in from the upper deck as a green sedan pulled up towards them. It hummed to a stop a few feet away.

She was breathing hard, heart beating rashly and her skin felt too tight. She didn’t like the idea of going home now. Now that she was no longer Lacey but some girl named Belle. Some girl no one knew because two days ago, she didn’t exist. And a librarian? How was she going to get any information from anyone as some meek librarian?

“Lacey,” Reese said calmly, and she focused despite herself. “You have my word if you have found nothing substantial and you feel this is a fool’s task, Christmas Eve I will bring you home, review a possible permanent move to a writer’s desk, and make sure we tell this Mendell fellow where to stick his money.”
She nodded, forcing a weak noise of agreement that she didn’t feel. He nodded back, opening the door for her.

“Wonderful, will you please get Fren- I’m sorry, Ms. Ives to her destination? She may also need to schedule a pickup to take her to the bus station tomorrow. Best of luck, Ives,” he said quietly, shaking her hand firmly before heading down the dingy parking lot towards his usual spot.

Lacey watched him for a moment, trying to swallow the dry ball in her throat before the driver cleared his throat. “Miss? Are you ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” she replied, sliding into the car and shutting the door firmly behind her.

Chapter End Notes

First, I am sure some of you have a running tally of grammatical and spelling errors- please feel free to message me any. I am working without a beta and while I tried to catch them all- I am afraid I may have missed a few when I got caught up in tweaking the story instead of the structure.

Second, this story has not yet been completed. I posted a few chapters on FF but I am reworking these a bit as I publish over here.

Third, thank you for reading. If you enjoy, please drop feel free to drop me a note!
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

As we enter Storybrooke, there are some original characters in this chapter. There is a reason for this. I repeat- there is a reason why Granny's is not run by Granny. There was not a curse and thus our favorite fairy tale characters never came to Storybrooke. But that doesn't mean they don't have a connection to it..and why a certain Sheriff and his Deputy are the only familiar faces.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In less than two days time, Lacey arrived in Storybrooke.

Old wooden buildings were nestled in with newer bricks buildings, pastel whites and creams, greens and yellows covered the storefronts with various mom and pop shops mixed with what appeared to be a post office and the occasional other government building. Hand painted signs, curtained windows and old blue mailboxes completed the picture.

It was simple, a few stores with their doors propped open to invite stragglers inside, the occasional car driving slowly down the street. The autumn leaves had already begun to fall off the trees, but all were carefully swept in piles off the sidewalk.

It was quaint, endearing and wholly unbearable.

The ancient bus creaked and groaned as it pulled away, back down the road, heading towards civilization and abandoning Lacey in Small Town, USA. A brief urge to run after it tempted her for a heartbeat. Instead, she squared her shoulders, tore her eyes from the departing bus, and bit the inside of her cheek hard enough to draw blood.

Lacey counted to five, reminding herself this was only for two months when a large ringing reverberated down the street.

A large building, just visible over the top of the bus station gazebo where she was standing, was the source of the noise. A clock tower was nestled in its heights, its face glowing in the morning sun. It announced noon, the chimes slowly fading out of the air as it finished its solemn duty.

As if to echo the clock, Lacey's stomach rumbled, reminding her she hadn’t eaten yet. As it happened, across the street, a small local diner seemed to be already bustling for lunch. Lacey headed towards the light gray old building, going up the low porch steps before swinging open the glass door to enter.

Cute as the diner was, it didn’t take long for Lacey to discover the little town wasn’t nearly as welcoming as she had at first anticipated it might be.

Upon her arrival, the closest server pointed her hesitatingly over to a booth in the corner, a few diners turning around in their seats to watch her as she walked past. She avoided eye contact, keeping her eyes fixed on the menu, fighting off the itch to look up and glare at the gapers. She was used men's ogling and women's whispered derisions, but this felt different.
When her waitress finally came over, she stared openly at the suitcase. “Welcome to Granny’s. My name is Paige and I’ll be serving you today. What can I get ya?”

“Some coffee, if you have it,” Lacey said, rubbing her temple. “Just got in town and I’m half asleep.”

“How about Canada?” Paige asked, flicking her eyes back to the suitcase. “We get a lot of people who like to take the scenic route.”

“I’m new to town,” Lacey corrected, watching as Paige’s eyes slide back to hers in curiosity before she averted them. “You wouldn’t happen to know where I might find a leasing office or rental service, would you?”

“Small town like this,” her waitress responded, cracking her gum as she aggressively started to tap her pen against her pad. “Don’t have a lot of need for that sort. Word of mouth usually serves us fine. Now, did you want to order something for lunch or?” Lacey glanced down at the menu and Paige huffed. “I’ll get your coffee, be right back.”

Before Lacey could stop her, Paige hustled off towards the bar area. A few customers glanced back at Lacey before they began to talk in low voices. The waitress Paige was deep in conversation with some patrons up at the counter, the promise of coffee forgotten in the face of this undivided attention. Lacey used the time to watch out the window beside her. People were walking about, a few running errands with bags at their sides but others just strolled, waving to each other from across the street, stopping and talking to each other. It seemed everyone more or less knew each other.

It was a very friendly town, Lacey noted, knowing her usual city slicker persona would stick out like a sore thumb here. A few people were leaving, waving goodbye to the rest of the lunch crowd. Lacey toyed with the silverware, worrying at her lip while deep in thought.

By the time, Paige came back, her stomach was loudly protesting. Smiling up at Paige the best she could through her foggy exhaustion, Lacey sweetened her tone before proceeding. “Sorry about earlier, I didn’t mean to offend. I just, well I guess…” Pausing, Lacey glanced down at her hands, before continuing in a low voice. “Could I just get the lunch special please?”

“Sure thing, hon,” Paige replied, thawing slightly. She hurried away, but this time she went straight to the counter to put the order in, dropping off a few packets of creamer for the coffee moments later.

Lacey sat sipping her coffee and watching as the diner picked up swiftly. A few families came in and a few blue collar guys took over the lunch counter, all shouting their hellos and fighting about what to put on the lone TV perched in the corner. Paige dropped off the turkey club sandwich special before hurrying off to her other table. Lacey sat forgotten, watching and occasionally toying with her phone, looking up the weather back home and desperately wishing she could check her now inactive work e-mail.

When Paige dropped off a small brochure on the table, it took Lacey by surprise. “You should try the Inn,” she suggested, scooping up Lacey's empty plate as she dropped the bill off. “Eddie over there,” she gestured towards a man who was sitting at the counter. “He works up there, probably could give you a ride so you don’t have to hoof it.”

The brochure was thin, a single one sided slip of paper that had a picture of two dark russet doors, cracked open to reveal a large chestnut staircase, sweeping upwards and out of the focus of the photo. The words “Storybrooke Inn” were stamped on the bottom of the paper in elegant
calligraphy with a telephone number below it in block letters. Lacey flipped it over, there was no address.

Luckily, Eddie, a middle aged balding man with a baseball cap pulled low over his protruding ears, had been heading back up to the Inn after lunch. He agreed to give her a lift. He was incredibly shy, looking fixedly at his shoes the whole time, the tips of his ears turning red as they stuck out from under his cap.

Eddie was parked right out front, an old red ford pickup with Storybrooke Inn painted in fading green letters along the side. Eddie took her duffel, tossing it in the back before swinging the passenger door open for her.

Fed and slightly warmed, Lacey felt much more herself as they headed up towards the coast where the Storybrooke Inn stood high on a cliff overlooking the otherwise flat city of Storybrooke. The town itself was laid out in a curved semi-circle. Main Street curved in an open parenthesis shape. The town surrounded the coast bay with woods flanking it on other sides, a nest of tranquility in between two forces of nature.

During the drive, Eddie pointed out a few landmarks but kept his eyes on the road the whole trip, stammering awkwardly whenever his eyes accidentally met hers. Lacey took note of the bustling dock and the small stores that lined the streets. There weren't any chains. They headed slightly uphill for the a few blocks, up out of the valley.

They drove through a gated entrance, an old antique iron wrought detailing around the opening. Lacey turned in her seat to try and get a better look as they drove through it. The fence itself wrapped as far as she could see around the property. It appeared to switch from iron to solid brick before it disappeared along the hill crest leading towards the woods. The opposing side drifted towards the cliffs of the beach, waves roaring faintly over the wind.

The Inn itself was a mammoth old manor with cobbled stones and dark accents. There were turrets and curved stone walls spreading out on the lawn and overlooking the city like a feudal castle of old. At least five stories tall, blockish with shorter wings on either side of it, it would have looked at home anywhere in England.

“It’s beautiful,” Lacey said, watching as the sunlight winked off the various windows of the top floors. “How old is it?”

“About a hundred years,” Eddie answered, smiling slightly to himself at her interest. “Old harbor town like this had to have a nice place for folks to gather.”

“Do you all still get a lot of tourists?” she asked, turning to look at him. Eddie shook his head fitfully, twitching his nose in embarrassment.

“That’s a shame,” Lacey murmured, craning her head as they pulled up to the front of the Inn. The expansive grounds were well kept, noticing all the ground floor windows were sparkling clean. A few were even open to let in the fall sea breeze. It was obvious this was the pride of the town, despite the vacancies.

Getting out of the truck, Lacey thanked Eddie again. He nodded shyly, ducking his head down in his collared shirt before he pointed her up the main stairs, handing her the suitcase from the bed of the truck.

As he got back in the driver’s seat to move the truck, the front doors opened. An older woman appeared at the top of the stairs, eying Lacey with interest. A high winds kicked up,
blowing Lacey's hair directly into her face. She winced, brushing it out of her eyes the best she could. The woman barely blinked as her skirts whipped around her ankles. “Checking in?”

Lacey bit back the sarcastic reply that rose to mind. Instead, she smiled as best she could as she headed up the stairs. “Yea,” she said, “uh, they said there might be some vacancies?”

“Oh, dear,” the woman pulled the door open further to usher her inside. “You aren’t from around here, are you?”

“Just off the bus,” Lacey said, “Eddie was kind enough to give me a lift from Granny’s.”

“Well, best come on in,” the woman advised. “What did you say your name was?”

Lacey turned from taking in the large entry way, double stairs curling upwards to the second floor landing, hunter green striped wallpaper faded from the years but still pressed neatly on the wall, an old heater humming merrily in the bowels of the building. “It’s Belle. Belle Ives.”

“Lovely name,” her host said. "I'm Alice Aiken." They continued past the staircase to a small room off the main hall. “How many nights will you be staying with us, Ms. Ives?”

“Not sure, actually,” Lacey answered honestly, putting down her suitcase. “I’m new to town.“

Alice looked up at that, a look of hesitation fluttering across the previously unreadable face. “So, you're planning on settling down here in Storybrooke?”

“Needed a fresh start,” Lacey said. "I picked a direction and just rode the bus until I felt like stopping.”

Alice silently digested the information as she finished checking her into a room. Lacey busied herself looking around the old study. There was wood paneling along the windows worn with time and sun but were carefully dusted and polished. A few more modern pieces were scattered around the room including a Wi-Fi modem and router on a nearby desk. “It's nice here,” she continued through Alice’s silence. “I just really needed a place to stop and catch my breath for a bit.”

“Well then, you might head down to the Sheriff’s office,” Alice finally said. “People usually post the odd housing notice or job opening down on the town bulletin board there. Sheriff Humbert or Deputy Swann should be able to help. Eddie can take you down there on his way home this afternoon and one of the sheriffs can drop you back up here on their rounds.”

“I don’t want to be any trouble,” Lacey started but Alice cut her off with a shake of her head.

“It won’t be a problem,” she said. “Now, as you happen to be our only current guest, you have your pick of a view. Ocean or woods?”

Despite the barren trees, Lacey choose a view of the woods. If Alice thought it strange, she didn't say anything.

“Is this the down season?” Lacey asked, trailing her fingers along the balustrade.

Alice shook her head. “Our only real busy time is the town's annual gala in December.”

“A gala?” Lacey paused to glance at an old gilded mirror which reflected her wind tossed hair and chapped lips back at her. The pale girl before her looked pathetic with red rimmed eyes from exhaustion and tense shoulders slumped forward. Lacey ignored her injured vanity, knowing her ragged appearance had probably helped more than hurt her today.
As Alice showed her to her room, she explained that every year the town got together at the Inn, an old tradition from the town’s first days as a trade outpost. “Everyone comes from the newborns to the elderly to celebrate fall’s end with a huge dinner and a night of dancing. Then, everyone goes upstairs to their room to sleep it off. It started as the harvest feast but over time, it just slowly transformed to a Christmas celebration. It’s the town’s way of bringing the community together out of the darkness.”

Lacey tried to picture the population of a whole town under one roof and failed. “Sounds wonderful.”

“We have the usual meetings and club gatherings in our ball rooms downstairs through the year. We really only keep the second floor open for guests year long. All the other floors are usually closed off.”

“Is the Inn on any historical marker list?”

“It’s mostly just a local treasure and we honestly prefer it that way. Now, your room is just down this hall,” Alice replied, effectively ending the conversation.

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Later that afternoon, Eddie drove Lacey back down to town. He dropped her off at a small building, tucked slightly off Main Street across the way from what appeared to be a coffee shop, Chip’s Cup. After a few moments of internally prepping herself, mostly just finalizing her backstory: new to town, bad break up, looking for a fresh start, Lacey gathered the character of Belle Ives around her like armor before striding forward and pushing the door open.

She stepped into the office, bell jangling merrily overhead and directly into unmitigated chaos. A tall, slender man who appeared to be the sheriff and a blonde woman who appeared to be his deputy both stood at their respective desks. There was phones ringing, one on top of the other with loose paper scattered over every surface imaginable including the floor. A bullet ridden file cabinet was propping a jail cell door open, a cell’s blankets were draped like a tent from the hanging water pipe overhead and a dalmatian sat panting happily in the corner, his red collar askew.

Lacey’s eyes wandered over the confused mess as she stood awkwardly in the doorway. The two harried sheriffs remained unaware of their new arrival, both too busy wearily explaining in monotonous tones: “The reason the main traffic light hadn’t been fixed yet” and “No- the city isn’t responsible for damages in the interim...”

Lacey, momentarily taken aback, glanced between the two young officers. They were both oblivious to her entrance and continued to answer their respective phones in weary resignation. Lacey considered leaving, overwhelmed with the sheer ludicrousness of the scene before her.

She finally managed to catch the Sheriff’s attention by toying noisily with the zipper of her jacket. He rubbed the beard on his face absently as he tried to place her before nodding in polite but tentative greeting. He motioned to a chair nearby just as another phone at the empty desk jingled to life.

That’s when Lacey did something that surprised them all.

Stepping to the loudly ringing telephone, she picked it up. “Storybrooke Sheriff’s Department, this is Belle, how can I help you?”

She jotted down the caller’s name, number and complaint, promised to have someone call them
back by the end of business day and hang up without issue.

She was unofficially hired within an hour. By the second week, Sheriff Graham Humbert agreed to a full time job with benefits. Her new position at the station allowed her unrestricted access to old police files and potential leads. She couldn’t have done better if she had actually tried.

However, working closely with law enforcement professionals while undercover proved to be more challenging than she anticipated.

Graham was a simple nut to crack: hardworking youth with a lot to prove and a deep dedication to his hometown and community. He was welcoming and warm but deeply private about his own personal life. His only noticeable lack in professionalism was his obvious interest in his deputy.

The deputy in question, Emma Swann, was an entirely different puzzle. A loner by nature, Emma was polite but curt with most people. She had an unusual manner that made Lacey feel uncomfortable without really knowing why. For the first few days, Lacey had avoided her as much as possible.

Unfortunately, the deputy seemed unusually bothered by Lacey as well. Emma often asked pointed questions about her past and her family while avoiding any personal questions Lacey asked in return. This constant attention hindered Lacey’s initial attempts to glance through any old files. For a while, it looked like her luck at getting a job at the Sheriff’s office was going to prove worthless.

As luck would have it, some kids over at the school pulled their annual senior’s prank which involved fireworks, helium filled blow up dolls and a very angry goat in the air vents. Before Graham returned from his early morning fishing trip, Lacey managed to help Emma safely put out the fires, wrangle all the floating sex toys from the gymnasium rafters, as well as return the goat to his home before he was missed.

Somewhere during the goat’s near successful attempt to break down the patrol car’s back seat partition with his rear hooves, she and Emma became friends.

Over the weeks working with Emma and Graham, Lacey's constant searching through outdates and misfiled old cases kept her busy, writing notes on scraps of papers and snapping photos with cell phone camera. The real challenge was keeping the sweet natured Belle in character instead of reverting back to her usual skeptical and sharp tongued persona.

Which some days was harder than others.

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All in all, life in Storybrooke stayed calm, easy going and pleasant…if one liked small towns.

Her first few weeks had mostly been getting to know owners of shops, talking to people who came to the station, building herself up as someone they could talk to, confide in. Small town people had a different view of outsiders, while they seemed to like Belle, they still tended to keep to themselves about their own business.

Graham, who had been born and raised here, had told her one night not to worry so much about it. “People will warm up to you over time,” he said, turning down the secondary main road as he took her home after a late shift. “Just give them some time to get to really know you. Hell, most of them still don’t care for Emma and she’s been here almost a year now.”

This early December morning, Lacey trudged towards the sheriff’s office for the day shift. A large
gust of wind from the East surprised her, nearly knocking her sideways. She instinctively grabbed at a nearby street lamp as her feet started to slip out from under her on the ice all the while cursing madly.

“My, what language, Belle!” Emma, holding two cups of coffee, joined her. “You kiss your mother with that mouth?”

“I panicked,” Lacey said guiltily as she tentatively released the lamp pole.

“Relax. It’s just... I don’t think I ever heard you swear before,” Emma said. “Must be hanging around me too much. What’s with all the padding?”

“What are you, crazy? It’s freezing out here!” Lacey shivered. Emma only wore one layer, her signature red leather jacket. “You don’t even have any gloves on!”

“I was going ten feet across the street, you wimp,” Emma pointed out and handed her one of the cups. Lacey curled her gloved fingers around it, raising it to her face as the steam wafted through the lid. She paused before she took a sip of it, looking over at Emma with a grin.

“Now, was this for me or Sheriff Skinypants?” Lacey teased.

Emma reddened slightly. “No,” she grumbled. “Graham’s off today. I was just trying to perk up your morning, but if this is the thanks I get...” Emma pulled the door to the office open. Lacey rushed ahead of her to get out of the cold. “I’ll take it back over there and tell them I work with an ingrate.”

“No, no!” Lacey laughed. She set her cup down on her desk and shimmied out of her parka. “It was really very sweet of you to think of me. Thank you, Emma.”

“You are very welcome,” Emma answered. She waved her hand in a sarcastic sweep before bending her knee in a faux curtsey dip.

Lacey sat down and flipped her hair out from underneath her scarf. “You know, you are way too good at that.”

“Had practice,” Emma muttered. She plopped down at her desk and kicked her feet up.

“Beauty pageants?” Lacey asked distractedly. She was already combing through the service calls from the night shift. She recognized most of the usual suspects, locals with too much time on their hands, neighbors with decade old vendettas, the town drunk and some fish pond.

Emma pulled out her cell phone and started punching at it in her usual direct way. “I hate this thing. I don’t understand why I have to have a work cell phone on me at all times when this desk phone works just fine.”

“Graham still hasn’t texted you back?” Lacey asked.

Emma’s mouth tightened in a thin line. “Seriously, Belle, I’m considering replacing you with a robot. Stop it with the whole Graham thing.”

“Well, then you two stop being so awkward around each other. The kid we were holding in here last week for skipping school was practically begging me to call his mom by the time I got back from my lunch break, told me he couldn’t take Days of Our Lives anymore.”

Emma looked over with a raised eyebrow. “Days of what now?”
Emma had grown up with her grandparents who didn’t believe in cable or VCRs. She often completely missed pop culture references others, shooting others a bewildered, confrontational glare when she didn’t understand a joke. “It’s a soap opera,” Lacey told her. She reached for last night’s call log, printed out from their voicemail system. “Hey, looks like Mrs. Silverton called again just a minute ago.”

“That the lady from Tennessee looking for her son?” Emma asked, sipping her coffee and continuing to toy with her phone.

“Yea,” Lacey mumbled, rereading the details. “She’s been calling pretty regularly lately, hasn’t she?”

Emma kept her eyes on her phone screen. “Graham mentioned families often pick up calling around the anniversary. It’s on their minds more.”

Lacey started to memorize the Silverton information, careful to note the number and name so she could double check it against her files when she got back to her apartment. "Were you here when it happened?"

Emma shook her head. “He was supposed to be in Canada at the time, how could he possibly have been outside Storybrooke?”

“I don’t know,” Lacey murmured distractedly. She tried to remember the last missing person case information she had unearthed while “helping file” the other day. Greg’s father’s case was over twenty years old and had been buried in the back under wildlife accident. There had been a few others in the interim years who had disappeared or had been reported missing in the winter months, fitting with the winter solstice timeline. Still, even with the few records she had found, nothing seemed to really fit together.

Lacey pulled the Silverton file up on her old computer. No one had heard from Joshua Silverton since his last text to his girlfriend before he stopped for gas on the main highway north. The filed report noted the office had informed Mrs. Joanne Silverton her son had never been to Storybrooke, had no record of him driving through and no explanation on why his cell phone tracker showed his last location as being within twenty miles of the small town.

Emma grumbled some more before stretching slightly, hands reached out towards Lacey. “Just give it to me and I’ll file it.”

Lacey nodded, careful not to show any outward sign of interest as she wordlessly handed it over. Emma was sharp and had keen observation skills. She often liked to unnerve people by telling them she could always tell if they were lying.

In Lacey’s opinion, it took a liar to spot one.

Casually elbowing her notepad, Lacey knocked it to the floor, leaning down nonchalantly to pick it up. She let her hair fall into her face as she bent down. She watched through her curtain of curls as Emma quickly folded the paper and stuck it in her jacket pocket, continuing to flick through her cell phone. Her suspicions confirmed, Lacey straightened, tucking her hair behind her ear, turning back to her work with a frown. She doubted that call would ever be logged.

Despite their friendship, working together often could be tense at times. Both women felt deep down that the other one wasn’t being completely honest. A few probing conversations had finally led Lacey to drop that Belle may not be her real name, but a possible cover from an old abusive flame. Emma had seemed satisfied, and dropped the subject completely. On the other hand,
Emma’s story about being raised by her grandparents out in the boonies of northern New York never felt quite true either and she tended to avoid the topic whenever it came up.

Lacey didn’t want to think Emma had anything to do with the disappearances but...

Emma was relatively new to town. Most of the town didn’t trust her yet. She also had a tendency to be a bit of a lone wolf. Often doing what she felt best instead of following the rules and procedures the Sheriff’s office had in place to deal with small town problems. Lacey had toyed with the idea that Emma was here for the same reason she was but Emma never seemed curious about the things that seemed odd to Lacey.

Phone calls from a worried mother were handled perfunctory while Lacey kept hoping for a chance to talk to the woman, find out what her son was doing around here and why he may have ended so far off course. Other missing cases that Lacey dragged out or discovered misfiled were often ignored, both Graham and Emma shrugging them off before they changed the subject to a more recent issue at hand.

Recently, Lacey had hit a low point in her research and while the disappearance of the young man last year was a credible lead, she still wasn’t sure what she was going to tell Reese when he called in four days. She was eager to get home, back to an actual career and an apartment with a dishwasher. Back to a life where she was Lacey French, investigative reporter for The Looking Glass instead of Belle Ives, Storybrooke Sheriff’s Secretary.

It ended up being a slow day. A few calls came in but the winter weather seemed to be keeping most people inside and out of trouble. Graham called around five to tell them to go ahead and close the office for the night, an early Christmas present.

“God, I can’t believe it’s almost Christmas,” Lacey said. She followed Emma out the door, flicking off the lights as they left. “I swear it was just summer yesterday.”

“I like it,” Emma replied, blinking up at the night sky. Lacey stopped besides her, gazing up as well.

The stars were out, clear and bright this evening rivaling for attention with the Christmas lights strung along every roof and store front as far as the eye could see. The two women stared up for a bit, both adrift in their own thoughts when a loud rumbling startled them out of their reverie.

Down the road, an old pickup was driving by, the truck bed filled with logs.

“Are they chopping down trees for firewood?” Emma started forward, her authority face firmly set before Lacey held her arm out to stop her. “I didn’t see a permit request come through.”

“Relax, Emma! It’s just the Allens. Some trees fell down on their farm last week during the storm,” Lacey said. ”They’re giving the excess wood away. They stopped by the station earlier this week to see if we needed any.”

Emma nodded, twisting her hands in her jacket, staring off at the disappearing truck. Lacey bit her cheek, knowing what was really bothering her. “I’m sure they stopped at your place, Em,” Lacey assured her. “You probably were just out working late when they did.”

“Yea, sure,” Emma said but it lacked conviction. “You know, you’ve only been here a month and everyone’s already half in love with you. ‘That nice Belle girl is such a doll- can’t understand why she’s not settled down yet’. Most people cross the street to avoid talking to me…”

“Yes, Emma, because you know I just I love it when people I barely know discuss me and my life
choices,” Lacey deadpanned. Emma cracked a grin. “Besides Graham likes you just fine. And so do I. The others will get there; you just… take some adjusting to, is all.”

Emma looked far away for a moment, glancing back up at the sky before back at her shoes. “Yea, I get that a lot.”

Lacey nudged her with her elbow, trying to break her out of her bad mood. The temperature was dropping fast. “Let me buy you a hamburger,” Lacey decided. She headed towards the diner without waiting for a response.

“Oh, twist my arm a little harder,” Emma laughed, hurrying to catch up.

“What are friends for?”

The two walked side by side down the path, a few flurries dusting the lawn outside the diner. The promise of more snowfall that evening made them hurry inside, shaking their boots off at the door. Lacey noticed another local ad promoting a Christmas Gala, even Graham had brought it up the other day, showing excitement about something other than guns and hunting for a change.

“Hey, what did you say you were doing Saturday night?” Lacey asked.

“It’s an annual town tradition,” Graham had said, eyeing Emma across the room. “Everyone goes.”

“This Saturday?” Emma asked looking over the menu, even though she always ordered the hamburger every single time.

“Yea,” Lacey confirmed, finding her usual sandwich on the menu. “Just thinking about sharing a room for the Gala. Unless you already made room reservations with someone else?”

“Oh, I think I already have plans,” Emma mumbled, keeping her gaze fixed on the menu. “I’ll have to see. Maybe we could do something Friday instead?”

Lacey unlocked her phone, going to check the weekend’s dates. She noticed the diner had a calendar perched on the windowsill, a merry and bright countdown to Christmas. She leaned forward to check the dates and froze.

That upcoming Saturday was the 21st.

Marked clearly as this year’s Winter Solstice.

Lacey sat back down heavily, mouth slightly ajar and brow furrowed.

Emma glanced up from her menu at the sudden silence. “Belle, what is it? You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.” Emma grew concerned, peering out the window looking for whatever had upset her.

“Oh no, I’m fine,” Lacey promised. She reached for her glass and waved her hand to dispel Emma’s panic. “Just warmed up too fast, got woozy for a second.”

Emma cocked her head in concern. She looked like she was considering pressing the issue but Lacey offered a shaky smile, forcing herself to relax. Emma finally nodded in begrudging acceptance. “What were you saying before?”

“I was wondering what you were doing Saturday night,” Lacey repeated. She tried to act nonchalant as she picked up her menu again. Her heart was beating oddly, thumping loudly
enough she was sure Emma could hear it across the table.

“Just something.” Emma said, pushing at the salt shaker absently. “It’s my one year anniversary here. Thought I’d stay in with a glass of wine and toast my small accomplishments, watch some movie I’ve never seen before, get drunk out of self-pity and stay out of everyone’s way. Can’t we just do something Friday instead? I won’t be any fun Saturday and besides I hate getting all dressed up.”

Lacey nodded along in forced agreement, trying not to look at Emma.

She knew the other woman was lying. Emma wasn’t really the type to host a pity party for one, much less admit to it. The deputy hated anything resembling weakness especially when it came to herself.

Now, avoiding a social event that everyone in town would be attending? That did sound like Emma.

Not that Emma was antisocial, it was just... the whole town knew Emma but only four or so of them actually went out of their way to speak to her. Most townspeople including the serving staff at the diner and coffee shop kept a careful almost cautious distance from her. This was strange in Lacey’s opinion. Graham’s excuses aside, they had all warmed to Belle after the first few weeks. Lacey had marked that up to her small skills at being able to read people but now, sitting at a booth across from her colleague... she wasn’t so sure.

Even now, Lacey noticed a family sitting nearby looking over nervously. The young mother caught Lacey’s eye and looked guiltily away.

Most people didn’t like authority figures, Lacey considered, especially a small town community where a practical stranger to the town was second in command to the Sheriff himself. A young woman at that.

She looked up catching Emma’s eye. Both sat for a moment, the awkward feeling of uncertainty hanging between them.

“So, are you getting the chicken?” Lacey managed to joke.

Emma rolled her eyes with a groan as she kicked at Lacey’s shins under the table causing them both to start chuckling dispelling the tension. Lacey decided put it the whole mess of her head for the night, noting she could always see if she could get any more information about Emma from Graham if it still bothered her in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

If you are interested in what the Inn looks like, and it will be featured more in the next chapter- I based the initial look and feel on the Norumbega Inn. My version is much larger since I had to fit a whole town in there but I loved the look of the old place so when I stumbled upon while researching I couldn’t help but be influenced by it.

Again, please DM me with any notices on spelling/grammar errors- working without a beta is a dangerous business.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The scent of snow heavy was in the air as the town of Storybrooke woke on the morning of the Winter Solstice.

In her small rented rooms, Lacey reached out blindly to silence the screeching noise currently emitting from her alarm clock. She managed to silence the mechanical noise, eyeing the small device with a frown before glancing out the window beyond it. Outside it was starting to flurry, chunks of soft snow drifting along in the wind.

With a jaw cracking yawn, she willed herself to sit up. Completing that small victory, she checked the weather on her phone. It was supposed to stop snowing by night fall with temperatures staying well below freezing for the longest night of the year. She leaned over on her elbows to better see the swirling snow for a moment before giving in to nature’s increasingly insistent call. She padded across the cold wooden floor, grateful she had managed to keep her socks on while asleep.

Usually she liked to sleep in on Saturdays but today was the big gala up at the Inn. Graham had explained most people got dressed, packed up the car and headed up there to get ready as a town. Some were already helping set up the ball room or helping out in the kitchen while others spent the whole days upstairs socializing and primping for the big night. Since Emma was continuing to be sullen and refusing to attend, Lacey planned on getting ready mostly at home.

This year’s gala was a masquerade theme. Most people had spent the past few weeks discussing their costumes and masks in great detail, which completely defeated the purpose as Emma sarcastically, albeit correctly, pointed out.

Emma had been no fun all week, ignoring any attempt to drag her into conversation about the gala. As nice as everyone in Storybrooke was, Lacey preferred the deadpan sense of humor that Emma wielded like a weapon over the usual pleasantries and small town charm of the other young women their age. Lacey was still privately hoping Graham would be able to convince her to go to the ball. Lacey had even reserved a room with two beds just in case.

Brushing her teeth, Lacey caught her reflection, noticing the bags under her eyes. Souvenirs from her late nights researching after completing a full day working at the office. Before she could lament over them, she saw her rental dress which hung on the back of her closet door. It was a gorgeous coral princess cut ball gown with scalloped neck and shoulder straps that looped the upper arm, showcasing the collar bone and shoulders of the lady. It dipped down in boning with golden highlights and as the dress fell in heavy folds of the voluminous skirt, the dress became more and more sunset gold.

She had even ordered a pair of golden heels from an online boutique and purchased some matching costume jewelry and a golden mask to perch in her hair during the dancing. It was the perfect goodbye dress for the sweet Belle Ives.

Lacey lightly touched the dress, stripping off her pajamas as she turned the hot water on in the shower. As far as her journalism career, Lacey had officially packed it up. Her notes were scanned on to her laptop. All hard copies and scribbles burned in the kitchen trashcan, window open just in case the smoke got too bad.
Now, she was just waiting for Reese to call her, so she could tell him if there was a story here, no one knew about it. Her last potential lead had fizzled out when the oldest town resident Ms. Stonage had kept her for five hours going on about the history of the town and the minor scandals it had faced putting in a sewer system back in the day.

'Founded by S. Teller, blah blah blah, settled by his descendants and keeping a small town community in the face of today’s metro lifestyle, blah blah blah.'

Lacey had very nearly fallen asleep over tea and biscuits. Her attempt to delve into the mysteries of the town ("But have you heard of all those odd disappearances in the woods? Do you think it was bears? Or you know, maybe even something worse?") had been met with a serene smile and the question of whether she would like more milk in her tea.

All her time in the record room at the Sheriff’s office had unearthed nothing interesting. A few wolf related deaths in the early years of the station, a couple bears had eaten a few campers in the early seventies but no town person had disappeared since the early fifties. All cases were out of towers, people who seemed to be drawn to the wooded areas on the winter solstice and who found themselves in very unfortunate spots with the local wildlife.

She had just about convinced herself that Greg’s father had been eaten by a bear when she had first noticed the missing Silverton case. Graham had brushed it aside, saying there was no evidence of the kid having ever stepped foot in the town. Unconnected.

Lacey towed off her hair, slicking on some gel so she could curl it when a small thought suddenly crystalized in her mind. She let the towel fall to the floor, stepping over it towards the bedroom.

Pulling out her original notebook, buried under her underwear and half-forgotten since she had typed in most of those notes to her computer, she settled down cross legged in her bathrobe on her bed. She flipped to her original interview with Greg, pulling out a map of the local trails she had picked up from the town’s only outpost. She carefully followed the interstate with her finger to the area Greg had mentioned he had been picked up.

The first thing she noticed on the map was that the Storybrooke Inn was on the opposite side of town, the furthest point away inside the city limits. The edge of the woods backed up against some farming land, then some houses and then the main alternate street, followed by the same layout on the other side of town of houses and farms and then the inn, stuck on the edge of town, high overhead like an afterthought fortress.

The only time people ever stayed at the inn was the yearly gala. It was a beautiful place, but not any kind of viable money making operation. Alice and Eddie were the only full time staff. Alice mostly cleaned and cooked for the occasional guest and Eddie did most of the repair work. A few other local families came in to help clean, cook, and work when a large group rented out a hall but for the most part the Inn stood empty.

Yet, when the annual gala was held on the solstice, an entire town gathered together in the remotest place in town.

Lacey stared at her rough sketches for a few minutes. She grabbed a pen and circled the area Greg had been found (Mile Marker 90 according to the local police report) and then the inn which was roughly parallel to Mile Marker 145, the two laying between the two circles.

Something was missing but Lacey couldn’t quite grasp it. Hadn’t Greg said something about locals picking him up the next morning? How could he have gotten so close to the interstate by
wandering deeper into the woods? He would have had to have been turned around…and there was no mentions of any old properties in the wooded area on the map. The gate he had mentioned could be anywhere in the miles and miles of woods that surrounded Storybrooke but no one she had talked to had mentioned any kind old ruins or property past the city limits.

Lacey began to plot different routes, periodically checking notes on other disappearances. She noticed the stretch of highway that led through Storybrooke was littered with odd bends and twists in an otherwise straight highway up the coast...

She nearly knocked her laptop off its precarious perch in surprise when her phone suddenly lit up with a loud beep.

**EMMA NOT @ HOME. SHE WITH YOU??**

She typed a negative to Graham who responded back right away.

**CAN YOU TRY AND CALL HER?**

The call went straight to Emma’s blunt voicemail. “I don’t understand why making them leave a message is going to make me call back any sooner-“

Lacey left a message asking Emma to call her or Graham when she noticed the time.

It was already nearly two p.m.

With a muffled curse, Lacey leapt up off the bed, heading towards her closet to get dressed. She had spent over three hours bent over maps and notes and now she late to check in. She texted Graham to let him know she was heading up to the inn and would call him if she heard from Emma. She was careful to store her notes back away as she began to gather her things.

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Everyone was supposed to check in the inn before four to get an accurate dinner count. Over an hour late, Lacey arrived just as they lit the front walk. Lanterns and fairy lights twinkled in the dusk’s faint light as night fell rapidly across the northern sky. Lacey lugged her bag out of her car, handing her keys to the teen valet dressed up as a coachman. She recognized him as one of the senior pranksters.

The inn was a madhouse already. Stopping to say hello to a few other people, Lacey headed to the check in counter. After a brief chat with Alice, who assured her she wasn’t the last one to check in, Lacey headed up to her room, dodging kids half dressed as fairies and dragons while tugging her overnight bag behind her in the narrow corridor.

She let herself into her room, and slumped against the door with a heavy sigh. The infectious energy of the night was catching and she quickly began to get ready. She arranged her usual soft curls into a low bun and tilted her mask to sit like a tiara. She was just putting her shoes on when there was a knock on the door. Hoping it was Emma, she flung open the door only to find Sheriff Graham looking forlorn on the other side, a bow and arrow slung over his shoulder.

“William Tell?” she guessed gamely, but he shook his head. "Zorro?"

“A huntsman,” he mumbled dejectedly. She stepped back to let him in and he slouched past her, fingers plucking absently at his bow’s string.

She took a minute to admire him. He was wearing very attractive tight buff breeches and a black
shirt with a leather vest over it. His hair wasn’t pushed back as usual, following in curls around his ears and the nape of his neck. Lacey refrained from commenting on his eyeliner. It worked for him but she wondered how he knew that. A black Zorro mask dangled limply around his neck, the forgotten icing on the cake.

The rooms had been remodeled in the eighties and hadn’t been updated much since. Graham’s tall, lean frame dwarfed the room making Lacey feel slightly claustrophobic. “You heard from Emma?” he asked, leaning against the old dresser.

“No,” she replied, checking her phone one more time before slipping it into her hand bag. Music was beginning to swell up from the main hall, curling up into the air. People’s doors were closing and opening, footsteps hurrying down the hallway towards the food and drink awaiting them downstairs. “I thought she was just being dramatic but looks like she really meant it. She’s not coming.”

“Damn it,” Graham growled. Lacey lifted an eyebrow at him and he reddened a bit. “Sorry, it’s just... this is a town tradition. She should be here, show she wants to be a part of this community.”

“Everyone in town is here,” Lacey said. She slipped on her shoes, careful not to wrinkle her dress. “I even saw old man Richards and I didn’t think he ever left his house.”

“It’s an unwritten law,” Graham said, scratching the back of his neck. “If you are a part of this town, if you want to be counted, you attend the gala. Emma not being here is a flat refusal to be accepted. If she’s really set on turning her back-”

“Turning her back?” Lacey paused in putting on her left heel. “That’s a little dramatic, isn’t it?”

“Uh- well figuratively speaking,” Graham corrected, looking flustered. He straightened and strode to the window, looking out into the darkness. Lacey peered around him, noting that the entire town below them was black. No lights and no one at home. The Storybrooke Inn stood up on the hill like a glowing beacon.

“Whoa, did they close the gates?” Lacey asked, leaning around him. “They must be serious about no drunk drivers, huh?”

“Yea, just so people don’t try to do something stupid,” Graham answered but he avoided her eye. He scratched the back of his neck before finally looking over at her. “Sorry, Belle,” he mumbled abashedly. “I didn’t even tell you how beautiful you look.”

“I’ll forgive you,” Lacey grinned up at him, “but only if you escort me into the gala so I’m not some new girl out all on my own.”

“My lady,” he replied, bowing. “It would be my honor.”

The night passed in a blur of champagne and excessive eating. Lacey put a hand to her corseted stomach with a grimace as she ignored her own limitations for just one more bite of the strawberry cheesecake or the roasted chestnuts. Graham patrolled the hallways, checking to make sure no one was being sick in the stairwells or causing a ruckus on their floor. He got a free room for this service and Alice offered Lacey the same deal if she watched the ballroom while he patrolled.

During the height of the party, Alice sided up to her, dressed in a stunning gray gown that flared out at the waist but showed off her small torso and stately shoulders. “Enjoying the festivities?” she asked. She handed Lacey another flute from the passing waiter, another local teen who was
busier watching the girl in front of him than where he was walking.

“This is wonderful,” Lacey enthused, gratefully accepting the glass. “I had no idea Jack was such a dancer.”

“Careful,” Alice laughed, watching the man in question spinning a woman around in his arms. “If you dance with him more than twice, he won’t leave you alone for the rest of the night.”

Lacey joined in on the laughter. The children had all been taken up to bed but the young and young at heart still keeping the party alive in the late hours of the night. “Graham just popped out to the lobby. He mentioned some of the valets from earlier were having a bit too much fun.”

Alice nodded, “Happens every year, they volunteer to work mostly for free beers they can sneak out of the kitchen. I was young once, I remember how it was to have that first beer on the solstice.”

Lacey looked over at the woman, noticing the fine lines and deep laugh marks around her face. Alice caught her looking. “I’m not that old I don’t remember my first real gala, young lady.”

Lacey felt the champagne loosening her tongue. “Why is this such a big deal to the town? I mean I think it’s wonderful but-“

“You don’t understand,” Alice finished for her. She raised her own glass to her mouth and took a drink. “Course you don’t, dear. You’re still an outsider.” Graham reentered the party, head swiveling as he searched for a face that they both knew wasn’t in the crowd. “But perhaps not for much longer,” Alice concluded, mistaking Graham’s search for Emma as something else entirely.

“Graham,” Lacey started, but Alice shook her head. A young man and his date were heading towards the back door.

“Josh,” Alice called out. “Close that door this instance, I doubt Ginnifer wants to catch pneumonia before she goes back to school after the holidays. You know the rules.”

The young man and his date grimaced, closing the door guiltily and heading back towards the far corner of the dance floor where a few of their friends sat watching. “Every year,” Alice sighed, shaking her head as she watched the two retreat. “Honestly, it’s not like they don’t know better.”

“What’s wrong with letting the kids out for a bit of air?” Lacey asked. A good breeze would be wonderful right now. Alice watched as Graham made his way over.

“It’s not about letting them out,” Alice said quietly. “It’s about letting things in.”

Lacey opened her mouth in question but Graham had reached them. “Come on, Belle,” he said, grasping Lacey’s hand for the lively jive that had just come on the speakers. “I hear you haven’t danced nearly enough tonight.”

He pulled her away from Alice. Graham ignored her protests, pulling her to him in a swinging motion. She laughed despite herself as she almost collided into another dancer as he spun her away again. The dance seemed to pass quickly but as another song started, familiar face after familiar face asked for the next dance. Lacey lost time of the night as she talked and laughed, danced and spun. Slowly as the night wore on, Belle Ives became a member of Storybrooke and Lacey French forgot to care.

- -

Hours later, Lacey sat by a large ornate gilded window resting her feet. Graham had gone on his
last patrols, locking up the front door and checking all fire exits to make sure they were fastened securely. It was just past two a.m. and the ballroom was empty except for a few youngsters slow dancing and a few older chaperons falling asleep in their chairs. A couple sneaked towards the stairwell, only to find a sleeping chaperon wearily stand and march them towards the elevator, bent on making sure they got to their respective rooms safely.

Just as the last couple was being whisked off the dance floor by what appeared to be their parents, Graham re-entered. He was talking with Alice who gestured towards the lights. He nodded and Alice waved goodnight. Lacey waved feebly back across the large hall.

Graham approached her, covering his yawn with the back of his hand. “Well, that’s it. Night’s done. What do you say to-“

He stopped short, leaning over her to peer out the window.

“Graham?” Lacey turned to look and stopped short herself.

A figure on horseback stood just outside the lights of the ballroom beyond the main gate. The horse pawed the earth fitfully while the rider stayed perfectly motionless, their face turned towards the light.

“Who is that?” Lacey asked. She stood and forced Graham over slightly. “It’s not Emma, is it?”

“What would Emma be doing out there at two in the morning?” Graham breathed, backing up slightly to head towards the closest exit. The rider noticed. With a sudden movement, the horse was off, rushing along the low gate area on the south lawn towards the woods and away from town.

“What are you doing?” Lacey cried, rushing after Graham as he whipped open the back door. Cold air blew in, refreshing for a moment after the heated room of the hall before goose bumps started to rise along her arms.

“Go back inside,” Graham ordered. The inn kept a few horses for the families in town and Graham headed straight for the stables.

Lacey followed after him, thankful she had chosen thicker heels which didn’t sink into the lawn. It allowed her to keep up with Graham’s longer strides.

“Get back inside now!” Graham ordered, flinging open the stable door and startling the horses. One bay towards the front neighed in excitement, pawing at the ground when he recognized Graham.

“Wait, is that your horse?”

Graham was already jumping up, bareback and urging the horse out of the stall. The horse neighed eagerly again, pulling forward on its stirrups. “Get inside and lock the door behind me, Belle,” Graham said. “I’m going to get Emma. Absolute crazy, she knows the dangers of tonight!”

“I don’t understand! Lacey protested but Graham was already off. The horse cleared the low brick fence easily, running faster, gaining ground.

“What the hell is going on around here?”

The town was pitch black beneath them, the echoes of horse hooves fading as Graham disappeared towards the town.
He was going towards the town? The other rider had turned into the woods at the main turn.

"Where the hell is he going?"

She swung the stable doors shut as best she could, before heading towards the main gate. She could barely see anything in the darkness and the cold was starting to turn her blue. After a moment of freezing, the silence of the night was broken by the echo of a gunshot. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” she groaned, adrenaline flooding her body. Something was going on and she was not going to waste her own chance at figuring out what this town was hiding with its crazy traditions and obviously lovesick sheriff riding off into the wrong direction.

The wind was picking up, tossing her mumbled complaints back into her throat. She jogged along awkwardly, holding up her skirt with her hands. The cold froze her ankles and she couldn’t quite catch her breath. Her lungs were on fire from the cold wind and her feet were killing her with every step. She stopped, wheezing at the forest’s edge, ready to admit defeat when she saw it.

A horse with no rider stood just ahead on the edge of the forest. It was pawing the ground, tossing its head fitfully.

“Oh well, this is just great.” She headed towards the rider-less horse. “I’ll be the only,” she gasped, “…the only journalist to ever break a story while wearing a ball gown in the middle of the woods.”

Her feet kept snagging roots and stones, but she finally managed to teeter up to the horse that now stood motionless in the darkness. The saddle and reins were still in place. Lacey eyed them uncertainty before tentatively grasping it. Just as her fingers closed around the leather another gunshot rang out across the silent night. The horse strained towards it.

Lacey held him back, almost getting herself kicked for her trouble. “Where are you going?” she asked it harshly. The horse swung his head, turning and fixing her with its stare. An odd relaxation spread through her cold limbs and suddenly the only thing that mattered in the world was to get up on the horse.

A nearby stump solved her problem. Part of her knew she was going to get herself killed but she somehow could not muster the energy not to be too concerned. As she grabbed the reins and tried to remember what they said about riding a horse, it galloped straight into the woods, ignoring her startled protest and her feeble slaps and kicks.

Heedless, the horse plunged into the woods with his reluctant rider.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, sorry for any mistakes, I do not have a beta. I got a beta fish but he unfortunately was no help proofing this chapter and I think I may have misunderstood the purpose of said animal…

Next chapter, a few new faces and a few more steps out of Lacey’s comfort zone.
Racing through the night, Lacey hung on for dear life, terror locking her fingers tight on the reins of the runaway horse. It carried her through the night, her prayers and shouts falling on deaf ears.

The only sounds in the night were the rapid breathing of the galloping horse, the regular ta-dum, ta-dum of the fall and rise of his hooves, the wind whistling madly around them as Jack Frost followed them on their course. Lacey's own heartbeat fell into the racing rhythm of the steed below her.

Her face was buried in the neck of the horse, her gasping whimpers muffled in its coarse mane. The uneven terrain bounced and rocked in her seat, developing saddle sores while her muscles screamed at her in unholy protest.

She had long given up any hope of finding the mysterious rider. Her earlier clumsy attempts to control their course had ended up with the obstinate horse nearly throwing her. At this point, her only goal was focusing on keeping her seat. Stories of people breaking their necks or cracking their head open from horse related falls was forefront in her mind. She couldn't even remember her determination to mount the horse, to find her mysterious rider, all in some desperate last mind effort to find a clue on the story which had taken over her life with its oddities and dead end leads. Now, her mind was clouded by an overwhelmingly strong survival instinct, the urge to stay alive blocking out all other thought.

The horse moved effortlessly through the wood, dodging branches, fallen trees and rocks. Lacey was less graceful in her efforts to stay alive. Her dress was hiked up uncomfortably around her knees, the cold air and unrelenting wind stinging her legs like needles in a hurricane. Hell, she could barely feel her toes anymore since she had lost her heels on their first downhill rush. She fought to move them but the sharp pain that resulted in this just brought more tears to her wind burned eyes. Her hair was blown out of its elaborate pinnings, curls drunkenly bobbing down her back and her mask long ripped off by some low hanging branch.

The horse leapt again, clearing an old log, determined on his invisible course. She made one last effort to stop it, but as when she tugged at the reins, it screamed fiercely and accelerated. She had been hoping for him to tire out or to find a safe spot to attempt a fall but the fear of falling and breaking her neck kept her clinging on for dear life.

Lacey's mascara slid down her face and she rubbed her bare arm against her cheek as best she could in her bent over position, whimpering at the goose bumps and blue tone of her arms rasped across her raw face.

Her legs were on fire. Her thighs had been rubbed raw on the saddle and she was hiccuping in pain when she finally felt her grip start to loosen. She clutched at the horse tighter, mumbling prayers to whatever god was listening, thinking desperately about her old apartment, the way the light shone through in the late mornings on to the white comforter, the smell of printer ink, everything waiting back home...back where she was Lacey French.

With a small shudder, she went limp. Slipping backwards off the saddle, she squeezed her eyes shut even more tightly around the tears, preparing for impact, knowing it would be a miracle if she survived a fall at this speed when to her utter shock, the horse seemed to sense her fall and began to
slow.

Lacey grasped at the reins in alarm, feeling her legs spasm underneath her and her left foot slip out from the stirrup but just as she toppled sideways, the horse sidestepped, righting her slightly, trying to keep her on his back. However, she didn't have time to realize that. As her muscles came back to life, she just stretched out, clutching for the mane. As her fingers found the coarse hair, the horse screamed, tossing his head back in affronted shock. He halted, rearing slightly and Lacey slid off his haunches, topping head over heels to the frozen forest ground.

The dress broke her fall, the volumes of the skirt cushioning her back, coming up around her face and smothering her but just managing to protect her head from the impact. All the air burst from her lungs and she coughed violently, pulling her arms around herself and trying to bite back the sobs. The horse stomped around her for a moment, eyes rolling and froth bubbling from his lips. She rolled out from under his feet as he reared up again, trying to pin her underneath his giant hooves. Snarling down at her, the horse's bared teeth became pointed fangs, the reins hanging uselessly around his neck. There was not a bit in sight. Lacey rolled to the right again, under a clump of bushes. The horse snorted and pawed at where she had disappeared, but she burrowed deeper into the leaves, heart thudding in her chest. With a final unearthly scream, the horse turned and raced off, picking up speed without his rider, heading on the same course as before.

Lacey tucked her frozen legs underneath her, rubbing desperately at her bare feet to restart circulation. There were tears burning treks down her wind burnt face. "The hell," she cried, hiccuping violently. She put her head back down on the ground, still trying to get feeling back in her feet. "The hell kind of horse- Oh Jesus, what the hell were you thinking, you stupid idiotic-"

In the distance, the devil horse gave another shrill neigh and to her surprise, a voice shouted back in response.

Lacey crawled out from under the bush, gulping in deep breaths, which was excruciating since her throat was on fire. The closest gap of trees had a sort of path leading up the closest hill. She made it to her feet, wincing at the frozen ground bit into her bare feet. She was shaking uncontrollably, arms trembling as she wrapped them around her torso. She limped towards the nearest gap in the trees, biting her lip and trying to hold back exclamations whenever she stepped on a stone or a twig. Staggering onto the trail, she kept her eyes down, trying to see in the darkness but with no moon she failed miserably.

She thought of a six year old boy alone in the woods, wandering for hours in the winter sunlight, alone and scared. She felt a ruthless urge to laugh when she suddenly stopped feeling bad for the lost child but jealous of his good luck. At least he had shoes and a coat, sun overhead and no demonic horses trying to kill him.

"Just forget about the stupid horse," she berated herself, stumbling on her numb toes. "No one is going to have any sympathy for you getting on some rabid horse with no idea what you were doing."

Just as she felt her feet start to scream back to life in protest at her determined movement, she stepped heavily on a sharp, hard object. It cut deep into the pad beneath her toes. Curse words bubbled to her lips but she bit down hard on her lip, bouncing up and down on the cold ground in agony. She managed to stumble over to a log nearby and sat gingerly, thighs tight and stretching uncomfortably as she lowered herself.

She took in a deep breath, pain radiating all over her but none as painful as the sharp agony pulsing upwards from the sole of her foot. Pulling up her dress, which was tattered, stained and well beyond any dry cleaner's help, Lacey peered down at her foot the best she could in the dark. Blood
was running freely, a dark gray stone sticking out from the ball of her foot. After a moment of contemplation, she looked up and around her in the darkness before reaching down, holding her breath and pulling.

Curse words peppered the air as Lacey inventively used every major four letter word she could think of with adjectives, nouns and a few choice adverbs thrown in for variety. As the sudden burst of stars in her vision started to fade away, she inhaled a shaky breath, flipping down her dress again over her torn limbs. Her toes were like ice, though the blood warmed them for a moment before cooling rapidly in the freezing air. Her legs were scratched from her ride and her thighs were protesting all movement.

Taking in deep breaths amid her muted gasps of pain, Lacey wanted nothing more than to curl up in the path and wait for someone to rescue her. Surely Graham would notice her missing on his return from his fool's mission to town?

It didn't matter. Even if he did, she was barefoot, had no coat and was in all likelihood freezing to death. Hypothermia was supposed to feel like falling asleep and amidst all the pain and fear, at the moment that might be the best thing.

Still... dying in a ball gown in the middle of a forest just doesn't make sense.

"Really," she said low to herself, trying to ignore the pain. "Are you just going to give up like this? On your first assignment? You want to be that footnote in *The Looking Glass*? Young Woman Dressed as Princess Dies of Exposure in the Woods? You going to go out like that?"

Lacey blinked her eyes open, shivering miserably, and sniffing. Her nose was running like a faucet in the cold and her shakes were becoming uncontrollable. She looked down at her foot again, noticing her night vision was improving because she could see it more clearly. No, the sky was lightening, it must be close to dawn. She rolled to her knees, breathing heavily, feeling her ribs ache with the cold air in her lungs when she heard the same voice again. The words were blurred and barely understandable but the tone however was all too familiar

"Emma?" Lacey croaked but the wind whipped it back into her throat and she coughed roughly, shivering. She raised herself up on her knees a little higher, gathering her last bits of strength and choking back a sob. She tried to yell out the name again but her voice broke on the last syllable. She collapsed back on her side, crying out in frustration as the tears returned. In fury, she picked up the closer rock and chucked it as hard as she could, relishing the cracking noise it made as it hit a target in the shadows.

What was she even thinking? Why would Emma be out here in the woods-

"Who's there?" The wind seemed to reply, the soft syllables teasing the shell of her ear before disappearing entirely. Lacey struggled to sit upright, clutching her arms.

"Emma?"

Lacey stumbled to her feet, wincing roughly as her cut and battered feet made contact with the ground again. Hope was giving her the unrealized strength to endure it as she pitched forward,

"Belle?" The voice came back, incredulous. "Is that you?"

"Emma!" Lacey laughed fitfully, pushing forward up the hill, her feet slicing on the rocks and twigs but she cleared the hill, collapsing onto her knees in a clear field, the trail disappearing ahead of her towards the center.
All Lacey could see was the tall blonde standing just ahead of her, staring at her in disbelief.

"You're here!" Lacey laughed manically, tears streaming down her face. "My God, you're actually really here!"

"Belle!" Emma came running towards her, skidding down on to her knees in front of her and wrapping her in her arms. "What are you doing out here?"

"Looking for - Graham went -"

"I told him to stay out of it, "Emma cursed, turning back to face the field. She rubbed Lacey's arms in a circular motion, trying to get circulation back. "Why aren't you at the Inn with everyone else?"

"Worried about you," Lacey lied, burying her head in her friend's chest. Dizzy at the unheard of luck of finding someone, clutching at her for warmth. "Saw you on the horse and -"

"I wasn't on a horse." Emma went to stand, focusing on something Lacey couldn't see but Lacey clutched at her friend, refusing to let her go. Emma shook herself out of the large black jacket she was wearing, wrapping it tightly around her friend.

"We saw you!" Lacey insisted, shaking her head, crying pitifully. The warmth of the coat was pleasantly painful after the hours of cold so she burrowed into it. "Graham went after you but then I heard -"

"Belle, Belle honey," Emma soothed, taking her face in her hands and looking at her, forcing her to concentrate. "It wasn't me. I promise. I'm fine."

"Why are you...," Lacey hiccuped, actually really looking at her friend. "Why are you dressed like a pirate?"

Emma shook her head in exasperated incredulity, looking back over her shoulder. "Only you would ask something so pointless."

Lacey ignored Emma's commentary as she took in her outfit. Emma had forsaken her usual leather red leather jacket and tight jeans for form fitting black leather pants, rough black riding boots going past her knees and a beige cotton blouse, billowing out in the sleeves but fitted in the cuffs, covered with a black vest ties open and dipping down. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a low ponytail and her face was shiny red with the cold, lips chapped unpleasantly and currently pursed in a frown.

"Are you even listening to me?" Emma questioned, arms folded in front of her.

"How long have you been out here?" Lacey answered the question with her another, her journalism background kicking in as queries and concerns starting to build over her fear. "What- what are you even doing out here, Emma?"

"Nosy little thing, isn't she?" chimed in an unfamiliar voice, surprising Lacey back into silence at the intrusion.

Emma tensed before turning and standing abruptly. Lacey blinked over to where the voice came from, casting her eyes about in the darkness for the newcomer.

It was only then she noticed the large two columns in the center of the clearing, a large circular wrought iron gate yawning open to the woods beyond. Lacey barely noted the intricate styling of the open gate.
"I walked around the columns for a bit...never realized I should be scared..."

Emma stood in front of her, between her and the pillars. It was starting to lighten, the wee hours of the night bleeding into the early hours of the morning, stars vanishing from overhead.

"Regina, you know the laws," Emma said, her hand lowering to –

"Is that a sword?" Lacey asked folding over to sit side legged on the ground, leaning on her good foot to try and stand.

"Quiet, Belle," Emma whispered, motioning for her to stay down.

"Yes, do be quiet. You've been making enough racket in these woods all night," the voice replied, tone cruel and biting as the wind. "Help this and help that! Completely distracting for those of us who are trying to get any work done."

"Leave her out of this, Regina," Emma growled. "Now, you know as well as I do that you have less than a few minutes to get back to the other side before you face the consequences."

"From you?" laughed the voice, and Emma turned sharply just as the form of a woman seemed to materialize to their left. Lacey blinked in confusion. Her vision must be spotty from the tears. She rubbed at her face furiously trying to clear her vision.

"Staying in this land beyond the Solstice is forbidden," Emma replied. Lacey barely heard her, too focused on the newcomer.

Greg had said his father had been talking to a woman, but this woman barely looked older than her early thirties. Her hair was raven black, pulled back in a high ponytail, braids wrapped around the base. Her skin was milk white, cheeks red in the cold and her lips painted a dark plum purple. She was wearing an all-black outfit just like-

"Graham," Lacey whispered, struggling to her feet.

Emma reached back to hold her behind her but Lacey shook her off, standing beside her friend. "What did you do with Graham?" she yelled, gulping in air, trying to get her breath back to normal. Her voice came out in a petulant feminine whine but she held herself upright, anger starting to warm her. The woman raised a lone eyebrow in reply. Lacey felt a chill creep down her spine. The woman was looking through her, almost into her.

Lacey shook it off. "Graham was wearing that exact outfit tonight, down to the lame mask she's wearing as a headband," Lacey told Emma, pointing accusingly at the woman before them. Emma reached over slowly and lowered Lacey's arm, never removing her gaze from the stranger.

"Is the little fake princess accusing me of something?"

"Regina," Emma addressed her, stepping more squarely in front of Lacey. "You have no rights here past the sunrise, you should be going."

"Of course, I'm going," Regina replied, smiling like the cat who gotten into the cream. Her teeth were straight, gleaming white but her canines were sharp in her smile and it didn't reach her eyes. "Just not until I finish up my business here."

"Graham," Lacey said under her breath, Emma nodded tersely to signify she understood.

"Where is the Sheriff, Regina?" Emma asked, her hand firmly on the hilt that was protruding from
her belt. The woman's smile deepened, and with a lazy hand she waved to her left, towards the gate. A figure lay face down in the grass.

"Graham!" Lacey cried. How had she had missed him there? She raced around Emma, ignoring her friend's cry to wait and slid to her knees, feeling the dress protest and stretch under her as she fell to her colleague's side. He was cold, dressed in his usual Sheriff uniform, his face devoid of any color but he was still breathing in small shallow puffs of air. "He's alive," she shouted over her shoulder. He groaned in response, rolling his eyes feebly beneath his eyelids. Emma slowly joined them, keeping a careful eye on the stranger who was advancing towards the gate at the same rate as Emma.

"What did you do, Regina?" Emma demanded as Lacey checked Graham's breathing. It was slow but normal. She went to check his heartbeat, putting her head over his chest to make sure he didn't go into some kind of arrest but she paused, confused.

"His breathing's fine," she related to Emma. "But his heart beat is really slow. I can barely hear it."

"Oh, you mean this?" Regina asked coyly. In her hand, she held a glowing red-

"Is that a heart?" Lacey managed to choke out, eyes locked on the beating apparatus in Regina's clawed grip. The other woman was no longer just smiling but smirking, her entire face unperturbed.

"Belle," Emma muttered through clenched teeth. "Do. not. move."

"Now, what is that pesky little law about the Guardian of the Gate?" Regina was asking aloud. The question was obviously rhetorical as Emma made no move to answer. Lacey was focusing on Graham, trying to ignore the beating heart in her peripheral vision. She felt sick, the cold no longer cutting her now that fear and disgust were rolling in her stomach.

"Graham," she whispered. "Get up Graham, please get up."

"Oh, you want him to get up?" Regina asked. "Why didn't you say so?"

With a jerking motion, Graham's eyes flew open as he wrenched himself off the ground, nearly toppling Lacey over in his sudden momentum. Emma whirled to her left, her back to the gate now, grasping Lacey's arm and wrenching her behind her again. She pulled her sword free, the scabbard ringing as the metals scraped against it. Lacey's eyes slid down the gleaming metal blade, down to the ornate bejeweled handle where Emma's small fist was wrapped tightly around the hilt, her other hand balanced to her side. In the twilight, the broad sword seemed to gleam sickly in the heart's unnatural light. "Emma," Lacey said slowly, eyes fixed on the sword's sharp blade. "I'm going to ask again. Why do you have a sword exactly?"

Graham was breathing heavily and clutching at his chest. "Graham," Emma whispered, tears in her eyes. Her voice shook, but the sword stayed pointed between Regina and Graham, perfectly still in her grip. "Graham, I'm so sorry."

Graham looked pained, eyes fixed on Emma. "I thought it was you," he managed, trying to assure Emma of something. Lacey watched, a silent witness, unable to look away from his pained face. "I thought she was you."

"Regina, please," Emma pleaded, eyes flicking to Regina. "What are you trying to prove here?"

"I'm not trying to prove anything," Regina teased. Stepping closer to the gate, she looked down at the beating heart in her hand. "A guardian must stand to protect the Realm of the Believers against
the Fae. Isn't that how it goes, Emma dear?"

Emma didn't reply, her lips drawn tight in a bloodless line. Lacey felt her shaking pick up again, wrapping Emma's black jacket more firmly around her. "Graham, what's-?" Lacey started but Emma silenced her, raising her free hand to stop her. Lacey tried again but Emma cut her off.

"Belle, will you just shut up for a second!" Emma yelled, causing Regina to laugh in delight.

"This is what you protect!" she chortled, looking past Emma to Lacey.

The uncomfortable feeling of power and darkness climbed up her spine again. "Weaklings and cowards. This one almost got carried off by one of the Kelpies that run loose in these woods, but managed to fall off just in time to avoid being drowned in the river bed." Lacey's knuckles tightened into white knots in her pockets, bile rising in her throat. The flash of fangs and foam rising to her eyes, the sick knowledge that it wasn't really a horse clouded by her fear. "Still, you people," Regina continued. "You insist on protecting the ignorant natives of this land. So, fine. If I can't have it the way I want it, I'll just make sure it works to my advantage."

"Regina, no!" Emma screamed, lurching forward. Her sword at the ready, she raised it for a clear strike but Regina was already crumbling the beating heart in her grip. Lacey tore her gaze away from the stomach-turning sight at the noise of Graham choking. He collapsed to the ground with writhing limbs. Lacey called his name hoarsely, crying and sniffing, trying to shake him awake but his eyes were wide open, staring lifelessly in the sky. Emma was screaming "Coward! COWARD!" but Regina was gone, and dawn was approaching.

Lacey turned, looking to call her friend to Graham's side, words sticking in her throat when her eyes fell on Regina standing nonchalantly, right past the gates, grinning madly and laughing. It was the laughing, Lacey thought later. It was the laughing at killing Graham that made her stumble to her feet, leave him behind and run full speed through the gates. It was all to stop her from laughing.

She rushed through the columns, felt a sucking, whispering sensation like walking through a spider web. Then, she was close enough to see Regina's eyes, cold and merciless, delighted at this development.

Emma screamed her name, yelling for her to come back but she was so close, so close to silencing the bitch that had just killed her friend. She was close enough to reach out and scratch her eyes out when suddenly Regina was gone.

Lacey's momentum carried her forward, straight through where Regina had just been standing. She tried to stumble to a stop, but fell forward, falling onto her hands and knees. She stayed there for a moment, tears dripping own her chin, before she pounded the ground in anger, only to feel it shift beneath her.

She was kneeling in sand. Shifting it idly between her fingers, it swirled around her palms. Lacey slowly raised her head, looking for where Regina had run off to.

She was no longer in the field.

She was in the mountains, next to a dry lake bed, and she was warm.

She turned her head round, back towards the gate only to see it swinging shut. Emma rushed towards it, tripping and falling just short as it clanged shut.
"Em-Emma?" Lacey stuttered, stumbling to her feet and rushing back towards the gate. She staggered drunkenly in the gravelly sand. The gate was no longer set in two columns, it was now in a standing rock shelf, the columns jutting out from the rocky wall, still brick but covered in flint and rock dust.

"Belle," Emma whispered, sitting on her haunches, fingers interlacing the curls and swirls of the intricately patterned gate.

Now that it was closed, Lacey could clearly see it as she neared it.

It was a landscape, trees twisting from one side to the other side, where other trees were stretching towards their counterparts, wavering more in the breeze. One had a moon curled low with snowflakes falling around its point and the other had a sun rising over the horizon, birds and flowers blooming underneath it. It was beautiful, etched and stylized with a master hand, no rough edges or rusting points. The sharp points of the thorns on the rosebud prickled her fingers as she wrapped her fingers around the iron as well, falling down wearily to match where Emma was kneeling. The two women mirror images, their hands inches from touching. "Emma..." Lacey whimpered, tears welling back in her eyes as panic started to overwhelm her. "What just happened? What- Where am I?"

"Belle." Emma was crying, her usual composed face blotchy and red. She rubbed at her cheeks with her sleeves, caking dirt and leaves into her hair. "Belle, I am so, so sorry."

"Is he-?" Lacey started, choking back the words, trying to see out of the gate. The field was starting to lighten, sun coming up on that side of the gate and she could see the dark form lying motionless behind Emma. When she felt a shift in the air around her, she turned. The sun behind her was beginning to set.

"He's dead," Emma said falteringly, licking her lips and swallowing hard. "She knew- she knew if he was dead, I'd have to stay."

"Emma," Lacey gasped, fighting back the panic, trying to focus on her friend. "Emma, please open the gate. I don't- I don't understand, I'm sorry, I'm trying I just can't..."

"Belle, listen to me," Emma managed, leaning her forehead against the gate. Lacey reached out to take her friend's hands but it felt like a shadow, cool and not quite real. "You have to listen to me."

"Emma, this is-"

"You're in Fae, Belle," Emma said, looking up at the rising sun. "I can't open the gate-"

"Emma, Emma please," Lacey begged, wiping away the tears that were starting to fall again. The sky over her head was darkening, and at the top of the circle's gate, she could no longer see the dawn sky of Storybrooke. Instead dusk was falling and the Gate's background was turning to the rock of the shelf behind it.

"Belle, Belle listen to me," Emma exclaimed. "You have to do exactly what I say."

"Well, for starters, she really should back away from that Gate unless she wants to become a part of it."

Lacey pressed herself closer to the gate, swinging around just as Emma let out a mirthless laugh. "Oh, perfect. You would be here!"

"Always glad to be of service," came the eerily high pitched voice.
Lacey was kneeling under a small framed man. He was hooded in a large cape, his entire being shrouded by the dark material.

"Emma," she whispered, twisting her fingers more firmly around the iron curls of the closest tree. "What am I supposed to do?"

"I already told you *that!*" the stranger crackled, stepping a bit away, cocking his caped head to the side. "And yet you seem to like the idea of becoming a piece of the scenery. Too bad. Princesses are in short supply these days."

Emma whispered softly, right in her ear, "Belle, do you trust me?" Lacey bit her lip, keeping an eye on the stranger who was standing completely still, unseen eyes fixed on them. "If you trust me, you have to go along with I say, okay?" There was a sense of urgency underlining her words. "So, do – you - trust - me?"

"Yes…" Lacey answered slowly, because she did. She had no idea where she was, what had happened to Graham or why any of this was happening but she trusted Emma. Despite everything she didn't know, she trusted the woman who was still with her, even when she was hallucinating wildly.

"You like making deals, Imp," Emma said, standing. Lacey looked up at her, backing up closer to the gate so it pressed into her spine. "Make a deal with me."

"Oh?" the now named Imp asked, giggling. "What would that be?"

"Your word to protect this woman from all harm for the year of the Moon and to return her to the Gate as the year of the Sun begins."

The cloaked figure laughed riotously, swishing his coat about his knees in merriment. Lacey couldn't see anything inside the cloak, not clothes or skin, not even the gleam of a tooth or an eye. The idea of facing Regina again seemed a better prospect than trusting her life to him.

"Emma," she said, pulling herself to her feet. She belatedly realized Emma's borrowed jacket was dirty and torn, the ball gown ripped and frayed, dirty with grass stains and mud, horse hair clinging to it in random patches. "I don't think going anywhere with this man is a good idea."

"*Man!*" the cloaked figure yelped in merriment. "My, my, you friend really doesn't know much about our way of doing things, does she?"

"Imp," Emma commanded, and Lacey almost twisted to look at her friend in surprise. Emma's voice was ringing with unquestionable authority now, tears and any trace of fear gone from it. "Do we have a deal?"

"What do I get in return for this protection?" the Imp asked, sliding closer to the gate. Lacey faltered off to the side. The dusk shadows edged deeper down along the wall. The two were standing still, despite the Gate starting to fade. Emma had also moved back, releasing her grip on the gate.

"You already know what you want or you would have refused the deal," Emma stated imperially, chin thrust out defiantly. "Name your price."

"Well, then," the figure retorted, bouncing on his heels. "I want access to the Realm of the Believers."

"You know I can't-!" Emma started but he cut her off with a snarl.
"Do you want me to leave her defenseless here? She has no idea what this land is- she'll be dead before dawn. Now, ask yourself Princess," he whispered leaning in towards the gate. "Do you want to lose another friend this day?"

Emma stared down at him, her jaw tight and eyes sparkling. Her forehead disappeared as the sun started to rise higher, and she ducked down, looking over at Lacey as she spoke. "As Guardian of the Gate, you have my word. Access to the Realm of the Believers for one year's time but after that-!"

"A year's all I need, dearie," he giggled. "And if I don't return her safe and sound, our deal will be void. So, I suppose we will see you in a year, Princess. Do try not to get too much more attached to the natives. Why this is positively embarrassing for you. What would your parents say?"

Just then, clouds parted overhead behind Emma and she disappeared entirely. Her furious face the last thing Lacey saw before her new guardian turned to her, cloak swirling around his ankles. "Well, then dearie," he murmured. "We should be going." He reached one hand out, scaled and glowing in the twilight, green and gold, clawed fingernails like alligator's claws. Lacey had the sudden urge to scramble backwards, to run as far as she could from the beast standing before her, but she was frozen, immobile in her terror. "You don't talk much, do you?" he sniggered, tossing his hood back.

His eyes were large globes of yellow molten pupils like reptiles. His long curly gray hair fell in waves about his shoulders, framing his green scaled face, teeth rotten and sharp like the komodo dragons she had seen at the zoo with their poisonous bite. He was waiting for her to scream. His golden yellow eyes gleamed sickly in the dusk's fade, challenging her to break. She bit down hard on the impulse, drawing herself straight against the rock shelf, keeping her eyes locked on his face. Unblinking, she entered into the staring contest with the creature before her.

"Lovely," he snapped, irritated at her failure to react. "A fake princess with spirit. Just what I was missing."

Then he snapped his fingers and her world disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

So, after sticking with Lacey for three chapters- on the fourth one I give you Regina, Fae, and the Imp- be honest was it too much too fast? Everyone still holding on to their socks?

But I did take away Graham- I hope too many of you didn't curse me for that but as much as I hated his death, I think it was one of the best oh shit moments Ouat gave us. I wanted to honor that with a good death.

Once again- no beta. See an error, earn a shout out/ my internal gratitude by PMing me and letting me know.

Big thanks to everyone who is reading and following the story!
Chapter 5

Coughing fitfully amidst all the chalky fumes that had surrounded her, Lacey batted ineffectively trying to distill the tendrils of smoke. When it cleared, she slowly lowered her hand, clearing her throat with a guilty cough.

The Imp was standing exactly where he had been seconds ago, but –

Lacey tilted her head back in surprise, taking a step forward in uncertainty before stopping.

The lake bed and mountains were gone. Inexplicably, they now stood in a large hall of some sort. Large gray stones hewn together in jointed jagged lines, rough stones hung with tapestries and weaponry and decorated with what appeared to be heads of other … creatures. Looking away from the gaping mouth of what looked to be the distant cousin of a buffalo, she raised her eyes to the ceiling. High above her the rafters were lost in shadows. A few chandeliers hung from the depths but they were unlit, iron rusted and dripping with chains. The only light was coming in from the curtained windows that lined the hall. She turned slowly, taking in the large wooden door, drawbridge style that seemed twice her height and four times her width but it seemed stuck, immobile as if hadn't been used in years…

Her gaze fell back down, tracing the bare stone walls, rough and uneven but jointed together in a pattern that traced the length of the whole hall. She avoided the other decorations, eyes skipping around her host in a denial of his presence. Her mouth was open, she was horrified to find, snapping it shut quickly as she noted the place had the same odd musky air that she associated with museums. She finally let her eyes fall where they were being drawn. To him- it- whatever.

The thing in question or Imp as Emma had referred to him was leaning against the wall. He had opened his cloak in the warmth of the hall, which now displayed more of his odd ensemble. He wore all scaled leathers, dyed dark rich colors but his eyes were locked on her, that self-satisfied grin back on his face.

"Is this- place some kind of- castle?" she asked, incredulous.

"How astute of you," he replied. He pushed off from the wall and bowed low before her, hair falling in a curtain around his snake like face. "Welcome to my humble home."

She took a shaky step back away from him, feeling a faintness overcoming her accompanied with a weak feeling as if her knees were about to buckle from underneath her. She drew in a short, shaky breath, the noise of it echoing along the stone floors and walls, disappearing into the inky shadows at the end of the hall. "How did-?" she started but closed her eyes and shook her head fitfully. "No, I don't want to know."

"Is this the part where you ask if you're dreaming?" he asked, picking himself up from his bow. He leaned his head towards her, cocking it to the side to emphasize his point. "Because, you're going to have a bit of a wake-up call sooner or later," he sang out, carefully pronouncing each word and throwing it at her like a knife.

The corset must have cut off the oxygen to her brain; she raised her hand to her stomach. She kept her face neutral as best she could, raising her eyes to look over him, around him, anywhere but at
him. The hall wasn't as deep as it had previously appeared to be. A large staircase went up, spiraling to a second level which loomed just out of her sight. A smaller staircase to the right of her seemed to go straight down in the depths of the hall.

"You actually live here?" Lacey questioned, purposefully letting her disdain color her words. The damp and the rot of it was starting to invade her bones. Her entire body was sore and aching and her head felt like it had been caught in a vise. The smoke had made her eyes water and now they itched fiercely. Plus, the damn dress was in tatters around her and goddamn it, she was scared. She was terribly scared and all she wanted to do was cry but Lacey resisted the urge. Instead, she wrapped her sarcasm around her like a blanket. "How… quaint."

He narrowed his eyes at her, sweeping himself upright. He made sharp, quick movements, almost reptilian but… deliberate, almost stylized. "How kind of you to notice," he mocked, twisting his hand in a circular motion before offering it out to her like a courtier. "Shall I give you the grand tour?"

"How about you go to-"

Lacey never got to finish that sentence. With a snap of his clawed fingers, the purple smoke encircled her once again. She swatted at it ineffectively. Instead of dissipating, it grew thicker around her, pressing her down. It seemed to have a will of its own. She threw her arm over her head as it surged towards her face, angry and darkening. She felt the now familiar sickening dizziness. She fell down to her knees, eyes clenched shut against the wall of magic. Her legs clenched up in spasms at the sudden movement and she opened her mouth to cry out but smoke filled her lungs before she could close her lips against it.

Just as suddenly as it had struck, it cleared.

She was breathing heavily, shoulders shaking from the chill of the air and the fear that was beating wildly, madly, frantically in her chest. Blinking, she lowered her arm slowly, chest heaving despite the corset's best efforts to keep it still. "Oh for fuck's sake-!" She slowly rose to her shredded feet, looking around in disbelief. "Enough with the smoke trick!"

She was now in a smaller chamber. It had the same walls but the floor was rougher on her bleeding soles. It was cold to the touch, a slight relief from the throbbing warmth that was radiating from her soles upwards. It was chillier down here so she wrapped her jacket around her more tightly, seeing small puffs of air emerge from her raw lips into the stillness.

She slowly backed up, eyes taking in the small chamber. It was merely a step or two before her knees hit a rough edge and she found herself falling down into a seat, hard. She was sitting on a stone slab with a ratty burlap fabric folded along the bottom. Two candles were burning next to a large solid wood door with a small oval at the top where bars crisscrossed to form a small grid work. The room was about the size of her first dorm room, low ceiling and heavy walls with no window. She slowly moved her head over the whole room again. A slight burst of manic laughter escaped her before she quenched it down.

She was in a dungeon.

Chains were lying lovingly by the door, open and menacing, with patches of rust in certain key areas. She wrenched her gaze from them to the nearest item, a silver platter bowl looking item which she puzzled over for a minute before she recognized it from her old days covering the health section. She confirmed her fear when she did another look around the room, confirming a toilet was indeed missing from her quarters. She stared back at the thing for a moment. "Nope," she muttered wildly, shaking her head. "No, this is not happening-"
"Liking your new quarters, are we?"

"You-!" she seethed, popping up and rushing towards the door where his face had appeared. He watched her approach, eyes following on her odd limping. A rush of fury erupted in her chest at his the odd frown that crossed his face. She wanted to show nothing akin to weakness to this creature. "You let me out this minute!"

"I promised to keep you safe!" he replied. His eyes flashed yellow in the candlelight. "I can promise you, you'll be perfectly safe here."

He disappeared with another of his sharp, pinched laughs. Her fingers clutched at the iron bars where he had been moments ago. "Wait!" she called, frantically trying to peer out into the hallway. "You can't just leave me like this!"

It seemed he could. After a few moments of standing in agony on her toes, she gave up. Exhaustion pulled her back to the slab of stone which she assumed was her bed, curling up with Emma's jacket wrapped tight around her. It had the familiar smell of the forest and Emma's perfume. She twisted her nose away from it angrily, irritation and fear mingling with the memories. She managed to contort the burlap blanket into a pillow of sorts, pummeling it ineffectively before giving up and lying back down. She stared out across the room, curling into a fetal position and trying not to focus the throbbing pain in her left foot where the stone had punctured through the skin or the scratches all over her legs and arms. She twitched her left leg to get comfortable and the pain that shot through her made her whimper miserably into the coat's label.

Cold, afraid and losing herself in the persistent pain, Lacey slipped off into an uneasy sleep. She could only hope that when she woke up she would be back in her bed in the city, back to being Lacey French.

--

"Wake up sleepy head!"

Lacey's eyes shot open, pushing herself backwards from the intrusion and instantly cracking her head on a solid stone wall behind her. "Christ," she yelped, reaching up to touch the back of her head. She peeped one eye open angrily to find the smug little leprechaun who was holding her hostage sat primly in a wooden chair by her bed. "Do you have a death wish?" she growled, closing her eyes and drawing her feet up to her chest.

"Possibly," he answered with a shoulder wiggle. He was smiling his horrid toothy grin again. She looked away from him towards her freezing toes, only to realize-

"My feet..."

He splayed his hands out before him, palms up in a mockery of supplication. "Healed, yes. I noticed blood on my floors." He wagged a finger at her in disapproval. "I'm sure you didn't mean to bleed all over the place. That's rude, you know."

She fought back the urge to grab her feet and rub warmth into them, almost dizzy with relief to be free of the pain. Her brain whirled as Lacey tried to use common sense to apply to this situation. When it failed her, she was left staring back at a scaled mythical magical beast wearing a torn ball gown and holding in a full bladder. He was watching her. Despite his air of unconcern, he was waiting for her to react.

Lacey had never been very good at giving people what they wanted. Why start now?
"How thoughtless of me" she said robotically. She knew if she checked her arms and legs they too would be healed and the saddle soreness had receded as well. The only lingering discomfort was a slight burning in her throat. She readjusted slightly on the hard surface of the bed. His eyes narrowing slightly at her movement. She met his gaze with a sarcastic grin. "Being too injured and scared to be grateful when you're being such an attentive jailer."

He didn't say anything in return, just gave another small giggle before standing abruptly. "As lovely as this has been," he snipped, striding back towards the open door. "I have things to do, people to kill, monsters to unleash."

He slammed the door shut just as she scooted towards the edge of the bench, placing her feet on the cold ground.

"Hold on!" she cried, almost tripping over her skirts to get to the door. but he was already gone. "Damnit."

She noticed the candles were still burning at the same height as the night before. She watched them wavering in the air for a moment before making her way back to the bed. She plopped down on it, letting her face fall into her hands. She had no earthly idea what to do. She was in some kind of story tale nightmare, trapped in a monster's dungeon. Tears blurred her vision again but she rubbed her eyes roughly, pushing them back.

She leaned back, lying back down on the hard stone cot, staring up into the ceiling. For a moment, she traced patterns in the stonework, trying to calm her ragged breathing. When she felt her heart rate start to level out, she began to think more clearly. She was under the protection of a ... well he laughed at being called a man. So, she was under the protection of a beast with magical abilities and an alarming penchant for giggling.

The call of nature intensified. The slight fuzziness in her mouth accentuated the fact she had been drinking champagne the night before her current situation. She assumed the adrenaline in her system had prevented a hangover; either that or the magical healing of her "host" had taken care of it. She was begrudgingly grateful as she doubted they had coffee in this world. She stared balefully at the chamber pot.

She turned her back on it, curling back up on her side. Not going to happen.

Not even an hour later, Lacey had the unique experience of trying to pee in a ball gown into a chamber pot. There was a lot of cursing, some unintentional spillage and a really embarrassing moment where she thought she heard the Imp behind her.

Turning her nose up at what the knowledge of what the room was going to smell like here in a minute, she returned to the bed. She nearly sat down on a plate of food that had appeared there in the interim she had been up. A silver goblet sat next to the breakfast offering, clear water gleaming at her in the reflection of the candles. For a moment, she wavered between the sudden hunger in her gut and the odd fear of the Imp. For all she knew, she could eat the food and sleep for the whole year...

Seating herself back on her bed and now table, she ate quickly. The bread was soft and warm, delicious with a sweet berry jam to dip it in. A hardboiled egg finished the meal but she was forced to use her fingers as there had been no utensils. Finishing the last bite of the bread, she swirled her finger in the jam and bread crumbs, licking her finger before putting down the plate. As she took another sip of the cold water from the goblet, she absently wiped her fingers on the edge of Emma's coat, offering a quick apology in her head even though it was obvious the coat was long past ruined at this point.
Shifting to find a more comfortable position on the stone, she winced as her corset bit into her stomach. She feebly reached behind her to try and undo the lacing of the gown but her muscles protested the stretch and she gave up with a grumble. Now properly fed and awake, Lacey could only whimsically think on pajama pants and sweatshirts as she lay down, trying to get comfortable. Just as she flipped on to her other side, carefully lowering the goblet to the floor beneath her, she felt a hard circular object press sharply into her lower thigh. She winced as she sat back up, fishing in the many pockets of Emma's odd coat to find the offending item before drawing out a –

A tiara.

Golden and delicate, it held a few shining rubies in its branched tendrils but overall, it was very simple. She turned it over a few times in her hands, the weight of the gold and stones as well as the feel and shine all adding up to the obvious conclusion of it being a very real and very expensive piece of jewelry to be carrying in one's pocket. Frowning at it, Lacey sat upright a little more and held it up to the candles burning in the wall socket over the stone slab. It glinted at her in a wink of light, the dark rubies swallowing up the light in one facet before shining merrily in the next. She turned it over a few times in her hands, puzzling over why Emma had been carrying an actual tiara in her coat pocket when she had been dressed like a pirate.

Wait... her memory nagged at her. Something about the Imp calling Emma... princess? She had assumed he was being ironic but what if he hadn't been?

"Hey!" Lacey shouted out into the silence of her quarters. "Hey!"

The shouting brought on a sudden fit of coughing. Lacey stopped for a moment to catch her breath, covering her mouth with her hand as she tried to get control of her breathing back. Unsurprisingly yet infuriatingly, there was not a response. This left Lacey shifting back into a sitting position, bare feet touching the floor. Moments passed as she strained to hear any kind of shuffle or footstep, just in case but silence echoed down on her ears and she was left sitting and staring at the door.

Gathering in another deep breath, she shouted, "Hello?! Anyone home?"

Silence was her only response. She rubbed her hands together, squaring her spine and licking her lips. If he planned to ignore her, he was in for a rude surprise.

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Lacey spent the next couple of days in constant noise. Screaming, talking out loud, even banging the (thankfully self-emptying) chamber pot against the iron on the door for a solid bit until her arms got too tired. Still, nothing.

Everyday, her food was delivered three times a day. The plate disappeared when she turned her back on it but the goblet stayed full of water, no matter how much she drank.

(It was a rough afternoon the day she kept drinking it, trying to find the bottom. She and the chamber pot had gotten rather chummy that day.)

It wasn't until almost a week after her arrival at Casa de Crazy when she was hoarsely croaking the theme song from Titanic when a loud snarl interrupted her.

"What is it that you think you are doing!" the Imp raged, throwing open the door and striding in. She stopped, sitting up quickly to face him, fingers tightening around the tiara in her pocket, ignoring the painful, raw scratching at the back of her throat. "Five days of this incessant NOISE."
"Six days, but who's counting?" she shot back, standing. She hitched the falling sleeve of her gown back onto her arm, the lacing having come undone a few days ago and now only held by her grip. He, on the other hand, was in a more casual outfit than his previous visit. He had on a simple white shirt, neck strings untied and showing his golden skin stretched tight over his collar bones with dark black breeches which showed him to be a more slender build than she had previously realized. She grinned at this discovery, catching his eye in her sudden amusement. His face was pointed in anger. At her grin, it twisted into a snarling grimace, teeth black and pointed as he bared them at her. She found herself taunting him, "You can't just leave me down here for a year!"

"I can do what I like, dearie," he ground out. "Haven't you figured that out yet?"

"I'm going insane stuck down here!" she whined like a petulant toddler throwing a temper tantrum. She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth before she screamed in frustration, chewing on it fitfully. She released a slow breath before meeting his eye again. "I'm bored. Can't I-?"

Her jailor barked a laugh at her, but it was deep and growling not like his usual infantile giggles. "How you can be bored with the amount of noise you are making is beyond my understanding," he snapped. "Now be quiet or I'll make you."

"You wouldn't," she said but he grinned wickedly, flicking his hand outwards toward her. She mouthed the rest of that sentence, only silence falling from her lips. She frowned, and tried again, reaching up to her throat to massage the muscles there.

He was grinning gleefully now, eyes crinkling in nasty delight. "Oh, wouldn't I?"

Outrage, Lacey balled her hands into fists, before picking up the goblet beside her and throwing it at him. He disappeared in a cloud of that noxious purple smoke. His laughter ringing behind him as the goblet sailed through the air and broke in half against the far wall, water trickling out of it like a leaky hose. She stood there, shaking with rage for another moment before she broke into tears. Silent angry sobs wracked her body as she curled up on her side, pulling Emma's borrowed coat even more tightly around her. It no longer smelled of Storybrooke and winter or Emma's shampoo. Now, it smelled of the various foods she had spilled on it, stale body odor and sweat.

Another five days passed in forced silence.

A new goblet arrived with the next meal, a heavier tankard this time with stylized coat of arms on the front which she traced with her fingers. She tried to talk to herself for the first few days but after a while gave up. She told herself stories in her head, wrote articles in her mind, tried mediation and slept as much as she could to push back the growing fear that she was dead or worse insane. Trapped in her own mind while her body lay out in the elements of the Maine wilderness.

Anything but this.

For exercise, she roamed the four corners of her small room, occasionally banging things when she got frustrated at her muteness but she stopped this behavior when she couldn't find her chamber pot one morning. It appeared back later that day but she too nervous to try bang it against anything again for fear of it being taken away for good. If she moved too much she would stat coughing again, the silent ones were even worse than the noisy ones from before and she stopped getting up from the slab, tracing patterns in the ceiling and eating when it appeared.

Old Stockholm syndrome stories and symptoms popped up in her mind's ramblings occasionally. She promised herself if the Imp ever returned her voice, she wouldn't thank him for it.
Her cough worsened.

Her ribs ached with it, a deep racking cough that twisted her insides and made her throat burn. Still, it was silent. On the sixth morning of her muteness, she found herself startled awake, coughing and retching loudly. She sucked in large gasps of air, laughing hoarsely when she realized she could hear it.

Her voice was back.

"You absolute-!" she began to shout hoarsely, but another coughing fit interrupted her. She was too busy trying to avoid coughing up her lungs to finish the sentence.

"One would think you may have learned your lesson," came the familiar voice from just outside the room. "That would be hoping too much, I see."

"Never was a quick learner," Lacey muttered savagely. The door swung open and she opened a blearily eye at him. "Don't wait for an invitation," she grumbled, starting to sit up.

He positioned his chair to face her bed, peering at her from under his brow. "You're ill," he muttered distastefully.

"Apparently," she mumbled, wiping the dampness from her forehead. " Might have been the hours in the freezing cold the other night or maybe from the dampness down here. Can't pick my favorite option."

"Looks to be Dragon's Fire," he theorized, peering at her.

She clutched at her throat, swallowing nervously. "Dragon's...fire?" she croaked. It sounded rather serious, and god knew it felt serious.

"A simple illness most catch in their cradle," he told her nonchalantly. "However, it has been theorized that it originated as a more deadly disease with fever, chills, and inflammation."

He wordlessly waved a hand with a quick flick of his wrist, and a bottle appeared, green liquid glowing in it, bubbles popping in the depths. "Drink this," he said, handing it out to her. She stared for a moment, jaw tight, but another coughing fit bent her in two. When she came up for air, he was still there, waiting. "Goodness," he complained. "If I had known how hard it would be to keep one of you alive I would have just told her royal high and mighty to forget it."

"How do I know that's not poison?" Lacey demanded, though at the moment, poison sounded like the better option than this fever.

He scoffed. "If I had wanted to kill you, you'd be dead by now. Stop glaring at me and drink it."

After a moment of silent mediation, she wordlessly swiped it from his grasp. She paused to glare at him once last time for good measure before she downed it. Her throat instantly felt better. Her stomach unclenched from its spasms and her airways cleared. She sighed in relief, feeling a small bit of drowsy comfort overtaking her. She capped the bottle and handed it back to him, refusing to look him in the eye.

He pocketed the vial but did not move. He sat there, still as a statue. Yet, he radiated a kind of energy that made her uncomfortable. He was in his usual leather outfit today, a darker green than usual with shoulder pads with spikes on the arms and shoulders. It should have looked ridiculous but instead it was formidable, threatening. She slowly raised her hand over her mouth, aware of her rank breath and disgusting teeth in the face of his own. "Why do you call her that?"
He squinted at her, obvious confusion on his features.

"Emma, I mean," she clarified, holding her hand carefully in place as she scooted back from him to lean against the wall. She drew her feet underneath her tattered skirt, the chill of the room deepening with his presence.

"What are you doing?" he inquired, eyes on her hand.

She swallowed, rasping her tongue over her coated teeth. "I asked you first," she pointed out, but it lacked a certain authority with her hand hovering waveringly over her lips. She frowned at him, lowering it slightly to wait for his response. He merely raised an eyebrow and she moved it back up. "I haven't brushed my teeth in over a month," she admitted. "My mouth tastes like garbage and my breath could stun an elephant."

"What in the world is an elephant?" the Imp asked, face twisted in annoyance.

"It's an animal," Lacey replied. "You don't have elephants here?"

"We must certainly do not. Now, stop it, you look ridiculous," he grumbled, eyes flickering away from her back to the door.

She didn't lower her hand, just plucked uncomfortably at the folds of her dress. Sure it was foolish, but all the same she smelled horrible. Her hair was an oil slick on her scalp and there were pimples on her chin from not being able to wash her face with anything other than goblet water the past few weeks. To sum it up, she was miserable but she was not going to give him any further ammunition. So, she sat stubbornly with her mouth wedged tightly shut and her hand propped against her chin in defiance.

"Have it your way. If you insist on worrying about your vanity," he snarled, standing and striding out of the room. He clicked his fingers behind him before disappearing in purple smoke. She lowered her hand, wiping it roughly on her shredded ball gown when she saw it. A table had appeared just to the left of the bed. A pitcher of water now stood by the goblet along with a few twig like apparatuses which smelled strongly like mint. Lacey picked one up, sniffed at it before gently touching it to her lips.

When nothing happened, she sucked it into her mouth, chewed it a bit and felt the burst of freshness against her tongue. She happily continued to chew on it, glancing at the cloth that was lying neatly beside the pitcher and the large cotton towel that was under it. Not a bath, she understood, but a huge improvement. She eagerly shed her jacket, wrestled unsuccessfully for a bit for the lacing in the back of her dress before with a final wrench of her shoulders, she managed to grab the final knot and pull it down off her hips.

She nearly wept when the dress fell off her. She threw a worried glance at the bars on the door but no one was staring at her through the bars. She picked up the pitcher, pouring the entire thing over her head in one big rush. She let out a shamelessly happy squeak when she realized it like the goblet had an endless water supply spell cast on it. She let the pitcher serve as a type of shower, laughing despite herself as the room temperature water splashed about her feet before disappearing mysteriously from the dry stones.

Afterwards, she was wrapped in her towel, scrubbing at the stains on her dress with the small cloth when dinner appeared. She abandoned her new project to eat the sandwich and fruit that was laid out for her when she realized she wasn't as cold as usual. She frowned, looking around the room. It was definitely warmer than it had been before her faux shower. The fruit felt cool in her hand and she popped the berries into her mouth, grateful that this land had the same kind of fruit as they did.
at least. Perhaps there's hope for coffee after all.

After she finished eating, her hair was still wet but with no alternative than to redress herself in her soiled gown, she kept her towel on. She hummed a few bars from an old show tune and turned back to finish scrubbing her gown, but it was gone.

"Hey!" she yelled, affronted at this new turn towards perversion. "I need something to wear!"

When nothing happened, she gave a heavy sigh before squeezing her eyes shut. She counted to ten to calm down before re-opening them.

Laying across what she now referred to as "his" chair was a cotton sky blue dress. A white blouse was folded over it and nude stockings lay neatly on the seat itself with black flats tucked daintily beneath it. She threw a look at the door, before walking slowly over to hold up the white blouse to the candle light. It was a thick material but with delicate lace patterning along the bodice and shoulders. It had a scallop neck with a collar and soft sheen buttons going down it. She slid it on, lamenting she hadn't worn a bra to the Gala. She hadn't missed one with the tight corset and pinning of her gown but in a loose collared shirt, her nipples pebbled against the fabric.

Her underwear she had wadded up after the second day. It had probably disappeared too and she simply hadn't realized it. No undergarments were laid out, so she pulled the stockings up, fastening them awkwardly while fiddling with the stays and laces on them before she finally slipped on the warm blue dress. It had russet piping on the pockets, tucked neatly at her waist. She reached a hand into the pocket as she slipped her new flats on, marveling at how they were all the right size, trying not to ponder how he had known. Her hand suddenly encountered the smooth silk feeling of a ribbon. She smiled despite herself, pulling her wet hair off her back, curling it into a bun and sighing in contentment as she fastened the matching blue ribbon to hold the curls in place.

She scooted back over to the bed, reaching under the burlap to check and make sure Emma's tiara was still tucked away. She was glad she had the forethought to hide it under the burlap pillow a few days ago, now that the jacket and the dress had vanished to who knows where. She was comforted by it as odd as that seemed to her now, but it was something of Emma's, of Storybrooke, of real life.

She curled her legs up underneath her, drawing the burlap under her head, placing the tiara in her new pocket, humming an old ballad off key to herself.

She was not going to say thank you.

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Over the next few days, a nightgown, a new day dress, a robe and a blanket appeared. Her supply of breath mints never ran low and her new shower system worked much better with a towel for her body and one she could wrap her hair up in afterwards. Her clothes would disappear when she stripped them off but reappeared the next day when she finished showering.

Her food continued to appear on time and she woke one morning to find a pillow tucked under her head like it had been there the whole time. She smiled dizzily into the feather down pillow, nuzzling deeply into it and sighing delightedly before she caught herself. She cleared her face, coughed brusquely and hit it with the palm of her hand a few times before going back to sleep, her aching neck finally relaxing.

She didn't say thank you.
On what she assumed to be the third week of her stay and with boredom driving her up a wall, Lacey couldn't fall asleep no matter what she tried. She whapped her pillow hard in frustration, grumbled darkly and then hit it again for good measure.

"Whatever did that pillow do to you?" sang a voice from the doorway, just as it swung open. She groaned, clutching the pillow to her and sitting upright in a panic. He was wearing the brown cloak again, his crocodile boots caked in mud and his face travel worn.

"You can't just take the pillow away because I hit it," she said in a rush, clutching it tighter to her chest. Her cotton nightgown had a fleece lining but she wasn't wearing a bra and she didn't want him to see that. "I hit things I like, ask anyone." 

"As true as I'm sure that is," he replied, glancing around. "You have barely eaten anything in two days. Explain."

She kept his gaze. "I'm not hungry."

"You're lying," he answered. She clutched her pillow tighter. She had a weird feeling he could see through it.

"I'm not going to take the infernal pillow." He waved his arms in frustration."So stop clutching at it like it's your firstborn!"

"You've been away?" she interjected suddenly, piecing together the clues from his appearance He didn't respond at first but then he gave a short nod. She frowned at him as she bent toward him. "You left me alone? Locked up?" Self-righteous anger rose in her, the pillow falling into her lap. "What if something had happened to you? What would happen to me if-?"

"While your concern for me is touching," he interrupted. "I assure you. nothing can or will happen to me and in the very, very unlikelihood of that ever happening, you would find yourself free."

"Oh," she responded. "Well, that's all right then."

"The question of where you would go in such a case is one I'm sure you haven't bothered to think though."

"Can I-?" she started but she bit her lip, trying to figure out how to word her request without him responding with a hasty dismissal.

"Spit it out," he commanded, the self amused grin back on his features.

That grin was odd in itself, not scary or threatening, but wrong and twisted. Everything in this world was like that. Twisted.

She scooted closer to him and his eyes widened slightly at her approach, scanning her quickly, nose flaring in unease.

Day is night, and night is day, up is down and down is up.

This was the closest she had ever been to him. Their faces were about a foot apart and she swallowed hard, fingers wrapped tightly in her hemline. "Is there something I can do? Around the castle maybe? Anything? Anything at all. God, there has to be something. I'm going stir crazy down here!"
He blinked as if he hadn't thought that was what she was going to ask. He had probably been preparing her for to beg for her life or freedom. Lacey bit the inside of her cheek to resist smiling, delighted at the idea of surprising him.

"Emma asked me to trust her and I did. She seemed to think you protecting me was the only viable option, so I'm going to trust her. Not you, but Emma. Plus, I know I'm not going to get any answers from you on why Emma knows you or where I am exactly but-"

"Why," he interrupted, a flash of a smile spreading across his mouth. "If you wanted to know where you were, all you had to do was ask, dearie. You're in Fae, more specifically The Dark Castle in the Ninth Kingdom. How's that?"

"I'm... where?"

Silence was thick between them for a moment before he leaned closer, his voice high pitched and eerie once more. "You're in the land of faeries and dragons, kings and queens, goblins and witches..."

He was enjoying this.

"Your dear friend, Emma? Why, she's a Princess of the Fourth Kingdom, or didn't you realize that when you found her tiara in your pocket?"

He started to giggle again, clapping his hands excitedly as Lacey sat uncomprehending, trying in vain to find her balance in a world that seemed permanently upside down.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

Hope you enjoyed this chapter! Thanks for reading! Again, see an error- let me know- working without a beta!

-B
Chapter 6

Pulsing.

Lacey ran towards it. The grass spread out before her, expanding.

Flaming in the dark.

She felt the speed but not the cold. She could feel the heat of the flames and taste the fear but there wasn't a throbbing in her foot anymore.

Black Figure.

Laughing, laughing at her as she squeezed and Lacey still ran. She had to stop her this time or -

And he was falling. His eyes empty. Just the glow of the heart reflecting back where Graham used to be.

All Lacey did now was dream.

--

A month.

If Lacey had counted right, she had been here for a lousy month now. It'd be January by now which meant she had missed Christmas entirely. Not that she cared...she had spent the last few Christmases on her own anyhow.

Most days she just laid around or slept despite the nightmares that plagued her. She had finally grown so bored, she began to write articles in her head. She was mentally editing her fourth or fifth imaginary article on her slip into insanity when she heard the dungeon door swing open for the first time in days. She continued to lie utterly still, tensing only slightly at the unanticipated visit. She tried to focus on her Bell Jar mental footnote, trying to find a better word for 'delusion' when she really wanted to say hopeless.

His footsteps didn't startle her. They were deliberate but light, barely noticeable unless one had been locked up with just themselves for a month. It sounded like he was...tiptoeing?

She continued on to the next paragraph, wondering how to explain how the magical jailer figure represented her father or some other Freudian stereotype when a heavy weight fell on her stomach.

"Wakie, wakie, dearie," sang her jailer, fully aware she hadn't been sleeping.

Whatever it had been knocked the air out of her lungs. Irritated, she shoved it off her stomach and onto the slab beside her. "The hell-?"

He gave a delighted squeal, delighted he had been able to get a response from her. She glanced peevishly down at the weight, ready to snap at him, only to see he had brought her a book.
"This...this is for me?" she asked in disbelief, snatching it from where it had fallen. The Imp snapped his clawed digits and his usual chair appeared below him. He flipped out his leather coattails, sitting primly before her.

She curled her legs up underneath her and clutched the book to her chest. She was dying to open it and flip through the thick bound page. The smell of old paper wafted up to her nostrils. She bit her lip, hard, ignoring the chapped skin's protest. "What is this?"

"It's a book," he deadpanned, inspecting his cuff links. It was a thick tome, similar to old cookbooks she had seen in kitchens. The cover was dark red, leather bound but the pages were not flush with the binding. She absently stroked the spine and then forced herself to stop.

He had noticed. He stared at her hands, his knowing smirk lurking around the corners of his tight mouth. She slowly released the book to rest in her lap, knowing if he chose, he could magic it away from her and she wouldn't be able to stop him.

"You asked to do something?" he reminded her, waving a hand in impatience. "I assume this will be satisfactory?"

Lacey willed herself not to clutch it, relaxing her grip from the prize. It had been weeks of slow mental decline, slipping dangerously into her mind, trying to avoid clawing at the walls or screaming in frustration. Not to mention the nightmares. God, the nightmares…

A book was more than she had hoped for, more than she thought this monster would have been willing to give. "Perfectly," she said evenly. Her eyes strayed to her pillow, the last thing he had given her. She struggled not to name it a gift in her mind. It hadn't been a gift. It had been an afterthought. She raised her head, chin tilted out defiant. He raised one brow at her, waiting for her thank you. "But I don't want it," she finally managed, sliding it back to him.

She felt prickles behind her eyes. Everything in her screamed to grab it back, flip open the front cover and start to read. She didn't care if it was a mechanics book or in a different language. Anything, anything to alleviate the emptiness of this cage.

He leaned back from her, teeth bared in a hideous smile. She kept her gaze on his hooded eyes, trying to face the snake as best she could. The book laid between them on the slab of stone, a gauntlet thrown down in challenge. "Picky, are we?" he said, employing a mockingly polite tone as a spear. She waited for him to magic it away, girding her backbone for the strike. "Why, then perhaps my other gifts were unwelcome as well?"

The magic built up around him. It reminded her of a summer evening before a thunderstorm, heavy, looming, promising to break over her or suffocate her with the waiting. She kept her gaze steady; she knew if she looked away the dam would break. The magic continued to build, curling over his features, his long thin hair, swaying slighting in the static. It crept towards the source of his ire. It was searching for her, reaching out for her in the small cramped room.

"Gifts?" she said in a low dangerous whisper even as she tried to keep her voice level. The magic was at her throat now, pushing her hair back slightly as it curled around her neck. She jerked away from it, breaking eye contact with him. "You promised me protection and then locked me in a dungeon. You threaten me every visit and you award me things as if I was supposed to be eternally grateful for your cruelty."

The beast cocked his head, eyes darting to the basin and pitcher on the table. Her new nightgown lay carefully beside the goblet. His eyes flicked back to her, searching her face for any sign of emotion. She kept still, her face blank, breathing slowly and reaching for the calm she never had
found in the city yoga studio. The magic pushed down her spine, wrapping around her like a second skin.

"I did not ask for these "gifts"," she continued, using her words as a shield. "I asked for something to do, a task so I could earn my keep and you denied me. You have kept me locked up even when I have no intention of running away. God, where would I even go? I'm in a castle in some story tale alternative universe or I'm insane and heavily medicated somewhere in a padded room. I honestly don't know which one of those realities I would prefer."

He said nothing, just stared at her with that odd intensity. The magic still present but not as pressing as earlier. It felt more contained, less hostile.

"You are my guardian for this year, but you chose the role of warden. So, no. I will not say thank you for these 'gifts',' she indicated the things around her, plucking at the blue dress as she spoke. "I will not grovel to a thing that looks for fear in those he has promised to protect."

For a moment, they stared at each other, both unsure of what the other was thinking.

"I see," he finally said, unmoving. She nodded, knuckles white in her dress's folds. Without meaning to, she glanced down at the book, breaking the stalemate. She swallowed back the other diatribes, trying to find the next thing to say. When she looked back up, he was gone.

Releasing the shaky breath she had been holding, Lacey pressed the palm of her hands to her eyes and rubbed fiercely trying to push back the threatening tears of hysteria. When she finally calmed her heart rate down, she blinked open her eyes to find the book was still sitting on the edge of the bed.

She reached for it with shaky hands. When she grasped the cover, solid and real, she clutched it back to her chest with lightning speed. She laughed for a moment at her foolishness, licking her lips, eyes darting to the closed door like a guilty child before cracking the spine open.

It was only after a few pages in that she realized his disappearance hadn't been accompanied with purple smoke.

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A few days later, Lacey was flipping the page of her new treasure, rereading how to properly sew a button when the door swung open. She finished her paragraph, before she finally lowered the book to her lap. "Well?" she said in greeting, keeping the book open in her lap. "Are you here to stare or was there something you wanted?"

"You haven't been eating," he muttered, arms crossed sullenly in front of him. "Is it a hunger strike now?"

There were three or four plates untouched on the table beside her. "Oh," she said in surprise before she turned her sight back to her book, shrugging absenty. "I must have been reading."

"You look terrible," he grumbled, but it lacked his usual glee. Lacey went to answer, already angrily reaching up to touch her hair when she noticed he had yet to enter the room. He was leaning against the doorjamb, silent and cross.

Lacey sat in his usual chair, feet propped up on her stone mattress. She had been getting a backache from reading lying on her side so she had moved to the chair without thinking. She frowned at him, closing her book in mediation. If she had realized all it would take to keep him out was to sit in his stupid chair, she would have never gotten up from the damn thing. She slowly lowered her hand,
returning her eyes to the book, "If you came to insult me, you can do it when I'm asleep."

"Do you still want to be of service to this household?"

She nearly dropped the book, she stood up so fast. "Yes!" she blurted, before catching herself. "I mean, yes of course. You probably have servants or something but I'd be happy to do something."

He snorted. "The Dark Castle has neither servants nor tenants. You and I are the only living things here."

Lacey rubbed her hands anxiously on her dress. "I suppose you use magic to cook and clean then?"

He nodded, still not entering the room. He seemed uncomfortable in the doorway, smaller somehow.

"So...do you need someone to sew?" she asked puzzled, lifting the book towards him. He looked briefly taken aback, glancing at the book like she meant to throw it at him.

"Of course not," he snapped, readjusting the fit of his jacket. The leather scaled armor moved over his slight frame, his fingernails making a nasty scraping noise against the material. "Don't be ridiculous."

"No need to be rude," she grumbled, reaching over to snag an apple off the breakfast plate. "You're the one who gave me a book about household chores."

He sighed in annoyance as he shifted his weight back and forth from the heels to the balls of his toes. His usual tension was broken with indecision and it humanized him slightly. Lacey bit into the apple but when he glanced back at her, she quickly looked away busying herself with wiping off the juice running down her chin.

"The castle is open to you," he finally ground out, raising one finger when she opened her mouth in delight. "But any door that does not open upon your approach is off limits. And do not try and enter the West Wing."

Lacey found herself smiling at that. "Is that where the Oval Office is?"

He shook his head, baffled, looking at her as if she had lost her mind. She struggled not to smile, forming a fist and pressing it to her lips to keep the laughter at bay. Wouldn't do agonizing him at the moment. "Sorry, I just... we have a thing back home."

"It is off limits," he repeated, steel lacing his tone. She nodded in agreement, her chest still quaking with barely suppressed laughter. A moment pause and then he was gone, purple smoke swirling about the door frame before disappearing, leaving its awful smell behind.

Lacey finally quelled her laughter, placing her book down neatly on her bed before rushing gleefully towards the door. She stopped just short of the threshold, taking a deep breath, trying not to appear overeager before she stepped neatly over the door frame.

She winced, waiting for something to happen, a gleeful shriek at her naivety or even magic to pick her up and throw her back in her cell, but nothing happened. A smile spread across her face as she made her way towards the stairs, following the flickering candelabras mounted to the wall, barely able to keep herself from skipping.

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In her first few hours of explorations, Lacey found the kitchen area, dark and seemingly unused. The pantry and larder were fully stocked with fruits, vegetables, grains and meats and she helped herself to a few berries before she exited, carefully marking how to make her way back from her chambers. She discovered a great hall, all the windows boarded up, their great heights twice the size as the Storybrooke Inn's great hall, massive curtains hanging in dust, but no cobwebs to be seen. She tugged at one board for a moment, wondering if it was day or night but magic was being used against her in her quest to open the window.

She trailed along until she discovered the entrance hall, walking carefully towards the large spiral staircase that swung open into the dark depths of the second floor when a familiar cackle interrupted her. "West wing, dearie."

She nodded, backing away from the grand staircase towards the master of the castle who was now behind her. He was grinning that black toothed smile of his but it didn't reach his eyes. "Got turned around," she explained, glancing over her shoulder at him. "I'm a bit unsure of where I am."

"Well, now you do," he chirped, eyes dangerous slits in his face. "Run along."

Lacey headed back towards the area she had been exploring earlier. He watched her, standing coiled like a cobra, head swaying waiting for the charge. "Would you...," she started, ignoring her misgivings. "Can you tell me what time it is?"

"Night," he responded warily.

She nodded, making a small motion towards the doors. "Are all the windows and doors boarded?"

"Trying to get out?" he hissed, the predator grin sliding back over his features. "Why, it hasn't even been one hour and you're already trying to find an escape."

"I just wanted to see the sky," she confessed, fiddling with the button around her collar. He waved his wrist in disgusted disinterest and she sighed angrily before turning away. "I'll leave the windows alone for now," she allowed, plotting how she might get him to let her outside for some exercise or something.

He grunted, walking away from her towards a hallway, a suit of armor standing at salute nearby. She followed him, careful to keep her distance as she looked up at the oddities around her. There was more beasts hanging, a few paintings of things like battles and plagues, even one odd modern looking piece of art which she found to be dried blood splatter upon closer inspection. He turned, saw her following him and sighed. "Now I have a shadow, how droll."

Lacey ignored him, walking past him, trying not to cringe when her skirt hem brushed against him. "You said I had free roam of the castle," she reminded him. She kept her pace steady, head held high as she took careful measured steps down the long hall and away from him.

She finally emerged in a large room with a high table in the center, pedestals all around the perimeter of the room. There were large windows on the southern side of it covered in heavy brocade curtains but she squeaked in surprise when she saw the Imp sitting cross legged on the table, a smug smile on his lips. She turned behind her to look back down the long hallway before back at him. "Cute," she snapped.

Walking towards the closest pedestal to cover her embarrassment, she reached out a finger to trace the odd golden bracelet lying so invitingly on the velvet pillow when his voice stilled her hand. "Careful, dearie. All these are my personal treasures. Most are magical, not to mention very
dangerous. I wouldn't touch if I were you."

Lacey snatched her hand back from the gleaming bauble, before she turned and gave him a baleful glare before marching back down the hallway. His laughter followed after her.

Lacey made another stop at the kitchen on the way back to her room, loading her own plate full of meats, cheeses and bread before finding a hidden dish of what appeared to be jam pastries which she stuffed in her pockets. She headed back down the stairs, humming slightly, a song on her tongue and the red sting of strawberries plumping her lips when she re-entered her chambers to find it empty.

Completely empty. Her pillow, blankets and book all gone, the nightgown and spare blouse vanished and even her goblet and pitcher had disappeared. Every feeling of hope, happiness, relief vanished from her as she tried to hold the plate steady. She slowly entered the room and sat stiffly on the slab. She kicked her heels out, letting them smack painfully against the stone side of her bed, sniffing slightly and picking listlessly at her food. "The bastard," she grumbled to herself. "Gives me free access to his castle and while I'm away takes away all the things he deems me too ungrateful for."

She let the plate slide out of her hands, hitting the floor with a clang, food falling off the plate, bouncing off the stones. She pulled her knees up to her chin, furious and upset at herself for being so naive. She was cursing the Imp in every way she knew how when she finally curled up on her side to go to sleep, tears slipping angrily down her cheeks.

"What in the world are you doing?" asked the incredulous and wholly unwelcome voice from the doorway.

She ignored him, curling tighter in her ball. "Go away," she snipped, squeezing her eyes shut. It wasn't fair he can just open the door whenever he felt like it.

"You aren't going to sleep down here still, are you?"

She turned over, eyes finding his in the open doorway. He was smiling, but it was genuinely amused this time. Upside down, she blinked up at him, trying to decipher his meaning.

"You mean-?" she started, rolling up and tugging her skirt down.

"You're welcome to it," he giggled. "I had taken the liberty of moving your things upstairs..."

She nodded solemnly, standing stiffly in embarrassment. "You could have said," she muttered, walking towards him with her eyes averted in angry humiliation. He bowed extravagantly; arms wind milling about before he folded in half. She exited past him, careful not to respond to his theatrics. She made her way up the narrow staircase, trying not to jump when he was in front of her again, waiting for her in the main hall. "Well?" she snapped, crossing her arms over her chest in obvious annoyance.

His grin widened and he wordlessly pointed down the hall she had walked down earlier. She didn't look back to confirm, but went up it, following it to a landing where another door creaked open. She walked briskly, expecting the Imp to jump out at her any second with a laughing glee at her lost wanderings when she finally entered an actual room.

It was a solarium. A stone floor was covered by a large woven rug that spanned the center of the
room, warm pinks and gold flecked in its surface. A four poster bed was pushed against the wall, its cherry posters spiraling upwards in curved tendrils, a canopy descending around it and a small footsteps leading up to its high lofts. A window seat was straight ahead, book shelves full of books on either side, the curtains drawn open to the night sky outside, a quarter moon and a half moon sharing the sky, stars like buttons in the black sky. Her feet took her to the window before she realized her destination, and she kneeled up on the ivy green cushions, pressing her cheek to the window. It was warm. Outside, there was nothing but the wind. No insect noises or birds, just the rustling of the woods that seemed to be just outside her window ledge and the occasional creak of the wind.

She was so enamored with the two moons hanging low in the sky she didn't stir when she heard the footsteps outside the doorway. "How does the lady find her new quarters?" her jailor asked.

She tore her eyes away, blinking quickly lest he think the moonlight in her eyes were tears. He stood just outside her door, arm propped on his side and legs jutted out in a cocky stance. She glanced around the room, keeping her chin even with her sweep. There was a small doorway which looked to be a washroom. Closer, a large cream wardrobe was ajar, displaying her nightgown and a few other blouses and dresses.

The Imp stood there, enjoying himself immensely. Lacey stood from her seat and walked towards him. He watched her approach, straightening slightly as she neared him, her hips rolling as she tilted her shoulders back and chest forward. His eyes darted down before progressing back up to hers and her lips curled into a familiar, feminine smile.

So, it was a man, after all.

Lacey reached the doorway with him just outside of her new quarters. His grin faded slightly as hers grew broader. Her fingers curled around the edge of the door as her other arm leaned against the doorframe, perfectly framing her in the entryway. He blinked at her, eyes growing wary.

"Tell me," she murmured."Is this door for show as well?"

He kept her stare, recognizing it for the challenge it was. "It will keep anyone out unless you wish for them to enter," he finally said, and she nodded in understanding.

"Well, then," she smiled, baring her teeth. "I find this to be satisfactory."

With that, she slammed the door closed in his face, grinning wolishly ear to ear as she pranced back to her bed. She fell down upon the feather softness and laughed to herself over her first real victory.

Small as it was.

--

*Stone was creeping over her knees…*

Lacey couldn't fight it as it spread slowly upwards.

*Emma's sad eyes stared at her through the iron curls of the gate.*

Emma whispered her name, hands reaching out to touch hers but they were stone now. Lacey tried to yell, scream for help but the Imp was there now. Laughing, laughing and then there was nothing.
Lacey awoke to a mattress shifting underneath her palms. She looked down in confusion before it clicked into place. She wasn't back home, or in Storybrooke. She was in a castle tower.

She pushed the dream out of her mind and burrowed deeper in the warmth of her bed. Her feet had been like icicles for weeks and were finally thawing in the warmth of the summer heat. She had drawn the canopy closed around the bed when the sun rose. Some stubborn part of her was determined to keep on the same time as her own land, which meant day was night and night was day. Either the Imp himself did not sleep, or he too preferred a vampiric sleep pattern.

Lacey yawned, pressing the back of her hand to her mouth before stretching luxuriously. She groaned in delight as the bed dipped down to embrace her fully. Outside, the moons were hanging like low fruit as she made her way to the wash area. After relieving herself in the annoyingly same chamber pot, she looked about for a mirror but couldn't find one.

She puzzled for a moment before she decided she probably didn't want to see herself. She didn't want to see what a month of no face cream, shampoo or lotion had done to her looks. Determined to have some control of her appearance, she picked a new dress out of the wardrobe, a yellow cream with pink laces and tiny pink buttons all down the back. As she put it on, she started to button it up the back as best she could, wondering how she would get the ones in the middle when she felt a slight pressure at the small of her back. Startled, she jerked her hand away as she felt the buttons start to do themselves all the way up.

She whirled around; facing the wardrobe but no one was there. After a moment's pause, her fingers tracing the buttons at her neck. Magical assistance had solved her problem but she was wary as what it may have expected in return. A small gesture of thanks couldn't hurt so she nodded to the empty air before moving towards the window seat and the bookshelves. Perhaps there was something more interesting to read than a how to sew guide.

Later that night, Lacey went out to explore some more. She found a cozy study with wing backed chairs, an excellent reading nook on the same floor of her room. The only oddity was a spinning wheel artfully placed in the other corner, a bundle of straw lying next to it. She traced the wooden wheel with her fingers upon before making herself comfortable in the largest wingback chair in front of the fire. Some moments later, the wheel creaked to life.

Curious, she leaned over the arm of the chair, wondering what kind of magic she had awoken. The Imp sat at the wheel, feeding straw into the device, his eyes closed as he swayed silently. His fingers moved swiftly about the wheel, in a mesmerizing fashion. Lacey watched him for a moment, leaning forward to better see how he was feeding the straw into the wheel. Her added weight on the chair arm caused the old thing to creak irritably and magic instinctively swelling around the Imp as he stood abruptly. The two faced each other in the room, her seated and half hidden in the depths of the chair and him standing awkwardly over a spinning wheel.

Lacey licked her lips, nodded at him politely before ducking back behind the chair and pretended to continue to read. She stared uselessly at the words on the page while trying to figure out what he was doing.

Without warning, her chair floated straight upwards, spun itself around before neatly depositing itself back on to the carpeted rug by the mantle with a soft thud. Lacey clutched at the chair's arm with one hand, the other clutching her book to her chest.

"Spying, are we?" the Imp chortled, flexing his clawed hands at her before wiggling his finger.
"Rude, you know."

"I was reading," she replied haughtily. "I wasn't disturbing you at whatever it is you were doing."

His fingers tracing the wheel spokes tenderly. She stood woodenly, nodding at him without looking at him. "I'll just go back to my room," she offered, heading back towards the door and not looking back, hurrying away. "Even though I was here first," she shot back to cover her retreat. She was unsure and uncomfortable with the familiarity of his magic now. Trying to avoid it in this place was proving impossible.

--

They continued to bump into each other over the course of the next week.

Lacey was learning the telltale signs of his magical signature, avoiding rooms where it felt like a thunder storm was gathering or stopping short of a room where the odd smoky smell was lingering. He had not come to her room since the first night and she never found him near the kitchen so those became her two main sanctuaries.

She avoided the magical trophy hall and the spinning room, as well as the large tower where the magical presence lingered. She presumed it to be his quarters even though they were not in the forbidden West Wing. Despite curiosity eating her alive, she avoided the grand staircase, convinced the second she stepped foot on it, she would be sent back to the dungeon with her burlap sack and chamber pot.

One night in the kitchen, she stumbled upon some tea bags and sugar. With the promise of caffeine, she fumbled around for a bit in the kitchen, clanging old pots and pans about, searching for a kettle or a pot to boil water in when a shrill shriek made her bang her head against the top of a drawer. Cursing, she leaned back out, rubbing the bruised crown of her head.

Sitting on the stove top was a white kettle, purple lines curled gently around its swells, the spigot steaming nicely in the dark kitchen. She looked about for a tea towel, when a glimpse of white on the table made her stop short. "Thanks," she said, giving her now custom nod of thanks to the magic for its service. She was startled to find a teacup when she turned back to the stove, waiting patiently for its turn to be filled. She paused, and turned back to find another waiting teacup.

Her teacup was now on a tea caddy, sugar bowls, cream and spoons delicately laid out on the golden tray, a packet of wafers next to it. Her mouth watered as she put the tea kettle back on the stove, ignoring the additional teacup to grab a sugary wafer, almost tasting the vanilla goodness.

The tea caddy shot backwards away from her.

She blinked, taking a step towards it, just to find it rolling away from her.

"Really?" she asked. She put her hands on her hips, trying to puzzle what she was supposed to do exactly, when another short shriek from the tea kettle drew her attention back to the stove. The extra teacup had moved closer to her now, forlorn on its own. She stared at it a moment before giving it to the annoying thing, filling it with the water, the tea bag bursting in delight as the heated water released its leaves. Lacey picked it up, careful to avoid the scalding sides and placed it on the caddy with her own cup. She picked up the tea kettle from the stove, adding a tea bag to it as well, nestling it in its preordained spot on the cart.

"Happy?" she asked, hands on her hips. The tea cart rolled forward on its own slightly, squeaking to a halt and waiting for her to follow it. "I am not following you," she told it sternly, sitting down
on the edge of the kitchen table. "You just go on and go where you're going. I'll make another cup."

The teacart squeaked at her indignantly and God help her, she laughed. "Fine," she smiled at it, walking up and taking the handles firmly in her grip. "We'll go have tea in the sitting room."

The cart squeaked again and she wheeled it down the hall, trying not to notice that the nicest conversation she had to date in Fae was with an inanimate object.

The sitting room was already occupied. The Imp looked up from his table, paper spread in a wide circle around him. His jacket was draped over the chair, the laces at his throat undone, exposing his collarbones and outlining his sternum. He looked up at her in confusion before back to his papers, a silent dismissal. Lacey tried to wheel the cart back out but it shot forward.

At the sudden rattling of the tea things, the Imp looked back up darkly. She nodded to him, gesturing down at the tea cart. "Thirsty?"

He frowned at her, before he shook his head and went back to his work.

The cart rolled forward, bumping his chair with a happy squeak and he glanced over at it before sighing and looking back at her. "Put it over there," he waved a hand towards the left of him where an untouched plate of cold chicken sat.

Lacey exhaled noisily at the thought of him ordering her about, before striding forward and wheeling the now curiously no longer squeaking cart over to the corner. It didn't move but the extra teacup slightly twisted so its handle was easy for her to grasp. She exhaled noisily before reaching up, plucking it from its saucer and angrily slamming it down on the edge of the table closest to her. It wavered for a second on the edge beside his elbow before it teetered preciously and righted itself. She eyed it darkly before jolting the table with her hip in a sudden move, watching with some petty enjoyment as the tea cup fell down to the floor.

Tea splashed up and out of the small teacup, coating his arm in the fall. It wasn't hot enough to scald anymore, but she still got a perverse enjoyment from watching it soak into a few nearby papers. "Oh darn," she pouted, crossing her arms over her chest in smugness. "How clumsy of me."

He waved his hand towards the mess, tea disappearing as well as all the papers before turning a golden glinting eye up at her. "Careful, dearie," he warned. "I've killed men for less than that."

A huge chunk was missing from the teacup's lip from her little show of defiance. "Didn't break," she pointed out. "Just chipped. Don't have a cow."

They both knew full well he could mend it with just a flick of a finger. He went back to his work but the familiar presence of his magic built up around her. She briefly played with the idea of taking the cart and leaving but she decided against it. Purely out of stubbornness.

She pulled the chair next to his out, scrapping it across the wooden floor. He watched silently, before reaching out to the caddy and picking up the pot of tea. She leaned over the table top, careful of the sharp edge and poured in the hot liquid in his mug, liquid splashing merrily in the small cup.

"Sugar?" she offered, stirring some into her cup before adding milk. She made her tea a sludgy mess before he wordlessly picked up his cup and sniffed it uncertainty. "Haven't poisoned it," she pointed out helpfully, taking a sip of hers. She sighed blissfully, small steam curling up from her mug to tickle her nose.

"I don't like tea," he finally said, pushing it away from him in disgust.
"Your loss," she replied evenly, taking another sip and leaning back in her chair. "Cookie?"

He continued to stare in bewildered disgust before shaking his head wordlessly. She shrugged and crammed one in her mouth, chewing noisily, savoring the vanilla goodness.

She sat there, flipping through her book and ignoring him. After a short time passed, he abruptly banished his papers. He continued to sit still, watching her enjoy her tea, not touching his own. She finished it, stood, brushed off the crumbs from her dress and with no word, placed both the tea cups on the cart, his still untouched.

She wheeled the cart away and just as she reached the door, it swung one for her. She turned her head to find the Imp's hand flicked out towards the door, wordlessly holding it open for her to leave. She quirked her lips at him in amusement before heading out, humming a few bars of the song she usually saved for karaoke nights, leaving the Imp behind her.

The door snapped close as she made her way down the hallway but Lacey didn't notice. She was too busy trying to figure if she could trick the castle into providing her with coffee to realize she had just taken tea with her worst enemy.

Chapter End Notes

Well, out of the basement and into the castle we go!

I hope everyone noticed the little side jokes of the major players from Beauty and the Beast- Chip, Mrs. Potts, the Wardrobe and Lumiere all made brief appearances and while they aren't enchanted servants waiting for a spell to be broken- they are still a little aware, shall we say?
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Time passed.

Clocks ticked away in their mindless count. Dawn and dusk came and went, and Lacey grew accustomed to life in an enchanted castle.

Well, maybe not accustomed... resigned.

Through her first few weeks of freedom, the Imp stayed mainly out of sight but she could feel him... that is to say, she could feel his magic. It was a dark, pressing, heaviness that came and went like storm clouds. She avoided areas where it seemed like a summer storm was brewing, preferring the oppressing quiet to the company of the creature.

Lacey's days usually passed wandering the halls of the castle, exploring the dark halls and crevices of the seemingly endless corridors to stave off her increasing boredom. Staircases that looped upwards for flights and flights would suddenly dead end into mid air, seemingly regular doors opened onto solid stone walls and every curtain was drawn, the musty fabric magically sealed shut.

There was dirt and dust coating most surfaces. Cobwebs spun in cupboards and corners with rusty hinges and squeaking floorboards aplenty. Upon closer inspection, it appeared the grime and wear and tear was seemingly decorative as if the castle was simply playing its role.

She occasionally wiped a shelf off or swept away a cobweb only to return the next day and find it exactly as it had been. Happily, since her room was always dust free and the kitchen was always immaculate, she simply marked it up to one of the Imp's oddities and ignored it.

--

Occasionally in her wandering, Lacey had the unsettling feeling of being watched.

The first time was in a room stuffed with toys, puppets on strings and porcelain dolls mouths twisted in grimaces or gaping wide as if to scream. She had picked up one of the dolls in an attempt to bat away the increasing discomfort running down her spine. She held it limply before dropping it back down with a scoff, but its eyes seemed to follow her around the room after that. She had quickly left, returning to her room where she locked the door behind her.

She did not return to that room. Not that it was declared off limits per se but the chill in the air... a sense of something not being quite right got under her skin.

--

Later that same week, she explored an interior greenroom of sorts. Standing amongst the rosebushes and orchids, she had the distinct feeling of being in the midst of a crowded room. As if there was an invisible throng surrounding her, staring at her.

Similar to the toy room, it was not the castle's growingly familiar presence but something different... more aware of her. Almost as if someone was watching from the shadows.

Lacey shrugged this suspicion off, figuring her host had better things to do with his time than spy
on his unwanted houseguest but she left the odd greenroom all the same and did not return.

She was right of course. The Imp had much more on his mind than worrying about the girl roaming his halls, but she didn't know that yet.

--

Despite both their best efforts to stay out of each other's way, the castle seemed to have other ideas. Shortly after Lacey discovered the green room, the castle began to increase its efforts to throw the two of them together.

Books would disappear from Lacey's room, reappearing on tables of rooms she had subconsciously labeled as His. He would often appear wherever she was at the moment, glowering and holding a dog-eared copy of her current reading selection.

"What is this meddlesome thing doing mixed in with my potion ingredients? It nearly contaminated my entire collection of toad jelly!"

"Honestly, girl, do you think my desk is your own personal bookshelf?"

"Is there a reason you continue to lose your belongings in my personal vicinity or are you just determined for me to read The How to Guide: Being a Damsel in Distress Without Ruining Your Dress?"

Even her favorite pair of slippers had managed to walk out of her room before tucking themselves neatly under his spinner's wheel stool. She had been forced to stand awkwardly before him in her stocking feet while he had begrudgingly stopped to fetch them from underneath his seat.

"Can't have you looming over me," he had grumbled, before she snatched the slippers out of his grasp. She had fumed at his obvious annoyance when it had been his magic at fault in the first place.

When she shared her suspicions about the castle meddling, the Imp merely looked at her with one eyebrow raised in silent condescension. She finally stormed off, muttering curse words into the air.

She missed her host looking up with narrowed eyes at one of her day dresses that had just appeared in the rafters, dangling directly above him.

Shortly after that confrontation, the magical disappearing act and inconvenient reappearing of her belongings ceased.

She did not thank him for it.

--

Now, in the second month of her stay, Lacey, curious as well as bored, ceased reading the books about the Land of the Believers. She put aside a fairly interesting take on the pyramids and the Egyptians Gods, and began to look for information on Fae. The bookshelf in her room proved unhelpful upon her request so she wandered the halls, trying to locate other books that may shine light on the ways of this world.

The castle proved stubborn on this as well. Once full shelves of books were now completely empty. Parchments that appeared promising were wiped blank when she looked closer.

It all finally came to a head one early evening when she kneeling on the floor in front of a cabinet, shifting through odds and ends to see if any books were hidden in the depths when there was a
mocking twitter behind her. "Looking for something?" the Imp snidely inquired.

Lacey glanced over her shoulder at him, blowing a piece of hair out of her face in exasperation, before peering back into the dark depths of the cabinetry. "I'm trying," she said through gritted teeth as something soft whispered over her bare forearm. "To find some information."

"Dangerous thing to look for when one doesn't know where to look," he commented merrily.

She gave up the search and sat back on her heels in disgust. "I'm just trying to learn more about this... place," she said, frustration coloring her tone as she waved an arm to indicate the space around her. "You don't have to be so difficult, you know."

"I'm hardly being-!"

"I was talking to the castle," Lacey clarified. He twisted his lips for a moment, an almost embarrassed reaction but he quickly covered it with a leer in her direction. She ignored it, turning back to her quest. "It's being deliberately unhelpful. All I want is to find some books on Fae."

"The castle does as I bid it," he said, gesturing sharply to a nearby mantel clock which hands started to spin impressively in its shiny glass casing.

"Is that why the tea cart keeps following you around when you don't eat?" Lacey fired back, getting to her feet.

"Whatever are you so curious about anyway?" he snapped, changing subjects adroitly. "You made it perfectly clear you can't wait to be returned to the bosom of your precious Emma's protection as soon as the year mark is up," he paused, raising a clawed hand to his chin in thought before smiling devilishly. "Perhaps we can put a sleeping curse on you? Wake you up when you're safe and sound back in the woods!"

She crossed her arms in front of her chest peevishly. "I'm just curious to how this all works." She spread her hands out to indicate the castle itself. "Is it using the magical energy of its host, which I presume is you, or is it magical in itself and that's why you were drawn here? Well, that is if you didn't magic this place into existence, which would completely change my theory."

It was only a moment later that she realized he had escaped. The now swinging closed door silently but effectively finished her questioning.

--

The next day, Lacey continued looking for books on magic or Fae in general but the closest she found were more books on the Realm of the Believers, including an odd book with drawings of the Eiffel Tower, Empire State Building and the Washington Monument crudely expressing some parable on the fragility of the Believers males and their egos.

She settled down to read it, curious in spite of herself, in the large room off the main hallway. She chose the love-seat facing the fireplace that took up half of the back wall. The closed and drawn curtains gave the room a dark and gloomy feel, one that fit her current mood spectacularly.

It was an unintentional but added bonus that the Imp seemed to be have planned on finishing some kind of project of his own in the room. He entered shortly after she had made herself comfortable and stopped short. He eyed her uncertainly over the odds and ends of the hall's pedestal collection of knick knacks and artifacts. His pride seemed to dictate he stay despite her being there first. Lacey opted to try and pressure him into leaving by openly watching him, putting her book down in her lap to stare after him as he moved about the room. He ignored her, refusing to even
acknowledge her presence, keeping his focus on the occasional object he would stop to stare at in silent thought.

After a few minutes of watching him do nothing more interesting than walk around the few pedestals gathering dust, Lacey's natural curiosity kicked in. "Do you ever sleep?"

The Imp ignored her, continuing to stare at a small pedestal where a curved horn was resting, brass with heavy red lines drawn from the tip to the flared lip, spreading out like fire. There were spots near the mouthpiece, which appeared flecked with blood. When he declined to respond, Lacey closed her book with a decisive snap and stood. "I assume you sleep when I sleep but I wasn't sure if reptiles need as much sleep. I didn't pay much attention in biology. You see, Jimmy Litwell sat in front of me and well..."

"What are you prattling about?" he huffed, turning an eye away from the horn. "Jimmy Litwells? Are those anything like those ridiculous 'hippo pots' you were trying to convince me exist the other day?"

"Hippopotamuses," Lacey corrected with a huff. "Which yes, do exist. It's not like they're unicorns."

"Of course, unicorns are real," he replied. "I suppose you wouldn't know that, would you? As they only appear to the purest of maidens ..."

Lacey scowled at his grinning face "What exactly are you trying to say-?"

Before Lacey could finish, a heavy ringing boom echoed down the hall to them. More surprised than alarmed, she whipped her head around towards the door; taking a step forward just another loud boom followed the first.

"Are those the front doors?" Lacey asked, moving past him to the open door towards the main hall.

Before she could make the doorway, the Imp was suddenly in front of her, blocking the door and facing away from her with an odd look fixed on his pointed face. "Run along now, dearie," he dismissed, closing the doors with a neat flick of his wrists. "Playtime's over."

Stepping back over to the table, he perched astride it, assuming a position of bored disinterest. Despite his calm demeanor, his fingers were fiddling absently with his cufflinks, the claws scratching the stiff leather jacket with a discordant tempo.

"But the doors-" she started, looking towards the hall in what was dangerously close to a pout.

"Now," he directed, eyes burning holes through her into the large door that led from the entrance hall. She opened her mouth to argue when she heard the unmistakably telltale click of high heels coming down the hall, strutting closer and closer to their location.

"Someone is here!" Lacey gasped, turning towards the noise with delight. He ignored her, his face calm and impassive but the now familiar magic in the air tensed slightly as the heels clicked ever closer. "Who is it? Can I-?"

"Stay in your room until I come for you," he said and clicked his fingers.

She coughed violently as the now dreaded purple smoke surrounded her. By the time she caught her breath, she was back in her rooms.

"Damn it," she snapped, childishly stomping her foot and throwing her hands down in defeated
petulance. "You can't just send me to my room like I'm some sort of child!"

Grasping the handles, she gave a quick tug and almost hit her face against the wood when it refused to budge. Lacey frowned at the brass knob, unused to her own room being difficult. Trying a different tactic, she went towards the window, but the shades snapped shut just as she approached it and refused to open to the night sky no matter how much she tugged at them. "Fine," she conceded ill-naturedly, curling up in her armchair by the small mantle on the opposite wall of her bed. "I'll just sit here then."

Her book from downstairs had not made the journey with her and she grumbled at the unfairness, slight as it was.

--

After an hour or so, her stomach complaining since she had missed her usual midnight meal, she started to wonder why the castle hadn't supplied her dinner yet. Usually if she skipped a meal, a plate would follow her room to room until she sat down to eat.

She was picking her cuticles peevishly when the door to her room suddenly opened, creaking slightly as it swung inwards. "Finally," she exclaimed, jumping up and heading out the door only to nearly collide with the Imp who was standing just outside of it.

He dusted off his jacket daintily. "Careful," he warned in his lilting accent, waggling a lone finger at her in reproof. Fighting the urge to scream, Lacey pointedly raised her eyebrows at him, silently indicating he was in her way. "Oh, of course," he bowed at the waist, still stubbornly in her path and she exhaled with a sharp hiss to indicate her continuing displeasure.

Questions came unbidden to her tongue but her instincts advised her not to press him. He was in a flippant mood; anything she tried to pry out of him would be half-truths or just insults. He straightened, those odd yellow eyes fixing her in place with malicious glee. No, a full fledge assault won't work but if she could distract him...

"Dinner?" she asked abruptly. The Imp blinked rapidly in response, narrowing his eyes to look at her from under his lashes before opening and then closing his mouth in uncertainty. It was the most taken aback she had seen him to date. She continued on before he caught his footing. "Or don't you eat?"

'I eat when hungry," he answered, that odd dry tone he sometimes used replacing the usual feminine trill of his mocking banter. "Usually the skin off the bones of my prisoners."

"Oh, do we have more boarders?" she shot back, an impertinent grin spreading over her face. "How lovely, I thought we were quite alone."

He remained unimpressed, making a small dismissing noise in the back of his throat, "Can't have you thinking you're important now, dearie."

"Wouldn't dream of it," she answered smoothly, curtseying slighting before him. He dipped his head in acknowledgement and she stepped neatly around him, heading towards the kitchen.

She was mentally scoring one for the visiting team when he ruined it. "By the way…"

Lacey slowed unwittingly, keeping her head high and turned away from him. If he has something to say, he could say it to her back.

"I will be leaving the castle to attend some business shortly. I should return before you starve to
death.”

She turned and fixed him with a sugary sweet smile, crossing her arms across her chest. "I will strive not to miss your company too much, lord high and mighty," she answered primly. "I'll suppose I'll have to suffer through the sweet freedom of your absence."

He gazed after her, still standing outside her room, arms behind his back in a courtier's pose. "How nice to hear that," he cooed back at her. His stained and rotted teeth flashing as he spoke. "Here I was thinking of asking you to join me."

Lacey gaped for a moment before placing her smile carefully back in place like armor, trying to craft a response. The creature merely laughed and with a maddening click of his fingers, he was gone, purple smoke rushing towards her. She pushed back at it, coughing roughly. He knew she hated those damn noxious fumes, and now he was sending them swirling towards her whenever he did his little disappearing trick. She stomped down to the kitchen, ignoring the usual oddities of paintings with swords marks through them or dented shields upon the wall.

She was still fuming as she stomped across the large hall. Her footsteps weren't making the same satisfying click as heels tended to and she found herself stamping her foot harder and harder until the balls of her feet protested in the thin canvas shoes.

The kitchen door was ajar, light on when she rounded the corner. She clomped in, almost tripping backwards when she found the Imp sitting demurely at the smaller table, a napkin tied around his neck and a nearly empty bowl of soup in front of him. "Hungry, dearie?" he asked, motioning to the other side of the table where another placemat was set, soup still steaming slightly from the blue bowl. A wedge of bread was tucked on the plate underneath it, the crust end. Her favorite.

Lacey fought to compose herself, taking a deep breath. She straightened her shoulders, sauntered around to the offered seat and settled herself. A goblet appeared beside her and in her distracted state, she took a large drink without glancing at it. Expecting water, she experienced a coughing fit when the thick and spicy beverage unexpectedly burned down her throat. "What the-?" Lacey coughed hoarsely, waving her hand in protest. "What is this?"

The toad was giggling. She tried to narrow her eyes at him in consternation but her eyes were watering too much. The liquid was heavy in her throat still, burning roughly down to her stomach.

"Thought you might enjoy something a little stronger," he twittered, raising his hands to temple over his soup bowl. "Why, don't you like it?"

"Delicious," she griped, taking another sip, this one slow and deep.

It wasn't actually bad. The flavor just had an harsh alcoholic bite she hadn't expected. She took another drink, longer this time. "Nice of you to wait for me." She indicated his empty bowl, crumbs of bread around his plate.

He shrugged, settling back in his chair. "I did say, I eat when I'm hungry. Time waits for no one," he quipped, twittering his hands about as he laughed at his adage.

He was punishing her by making her sit through a meal with him. She tried her best not to fidget nervously under his stare. Most people liked talking about themselves, but she expected him to turn any questions into insults and fling them back at her. Blunt questioning seemed to give him some perverse enjoyment, a better way to get him to talk, open up, perhaps over share.

"Is this delightful mood due to your unexpected guest?" she asked, trying to start some
conversation. His watching her eat unnerved her, those snake eyes barely blinking in his attentiveness. "Who was that anyways?"

"No one of importance," he brushed her question away, flicking his hands out to dismiss it.

She took another spoonful, the hot soup burning her mouth slightly. She swallowed it, pointing the spoon at him in accusation. "Really? So, that's why you sent me to my room and then locked the door?"

He shrugged, jerking his shoulders in an exaggerated show of defeat. "Certain people feel they can just walk into my house whenever these please," he confided, picking imaginary lint of his sleeve. "I didn't want them prying into my affairs when they were luckily too busy focusing on their own. Some people," he wrinkled his nose at her in obvious amusement," are too nosy for their own good."

"Was it a woman?" Lacey pressed again, ignoring the dig directed at her

"Why ever would you ask that?" he sputtered, looking at her as if she had grown another head.

Lacey grinned involuntary. "Oh my God, it was, wasn't it?!"

He crossed his arms in a defensive maneuver, eyeing the fire with a glower. "You continue to reference this God fellow like he's some sort of friend of yours."

"You had a female caller, didn't you?" Lacey laughed, settling back in her chair and grinning at him. He was hunched protectively in his chair, teeth bared slightly in annoyance. "Was it a social call or...?"

"An old apprentice of mine, again no one of importance."

She stopped her bantering, taking another long sip of her mead, feeling it spread through her chest. She was actually enjoying herself. Her host was in an unusual mood and she was merely taking advantage of it. "A student?" she fished, finishing the wedge of bread, soaking it in the remnants of the soup. It had been a light dinner and she was still hungry. She took another sip of her mead, she was too busy needling her companion to care or notice how much she was actually drinking.

"A long time go," he looked over at her, before taking a slow double take, a grin spreading across his face. She ignored it, taking another drink, settling herself more firmly against the high back of her chair.

"What did you teach?"

His response consisted of lazily twisting a finger in the air between them. A long golden sparkle shot from it, rocketing into the depths of the kitchen ceiling, lighting the low hanging iron chandelier there, illuminating the kitchen fully.

Lacey giggled, clapping her hand to her forehead at her stupidity. "Of course, magic."

Her eyes followed the glowing sparks as they continued to float on the air, dripping down like streamers as they faded away. She looked back down from the sparkling display, eyes bright and slightly glassy. There was an odd warmth in her cheeks that usually signified she had had four martinis but she had barely had any of her drink, it was still almost completely full. "Oh," she mumbled distractedly, peering into her goblet with a sinking feeling. "Does this keep refilling just like the water goblets?"
He giggled and she moved to deliver a scalding retort but inexplicably started giggling too. He cocked his left brow at her and she started to laugh harder, sucking her lip in her mouth trying to stop. He waggled his other brow and she lost it, stuffing her hands to her mouth in mortified glee, squeezing her eyes shut, tears leaking out slightly. "Stop it this instant," she ordered, trying to breath around the words. "You got me drunk when I was supposed to be questioning you about your lady friend!"

"No friend of mine," he sang, dusting his hands and standing from the table. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I should be gathering my things before the sun rises."

"Just where is it you're going?" she asked, taking another sip. He eyed the goblet sharply; looking at her with a familiar expression most bartenders gave her when she got the giggles. She picked up the goblet and held it protectively to her chest, eyeing him back. "I'm just asking to be polite, is all," she said defensively, taking another drink.

"Why, dearie," he teased, placing his hands on the table and leaning closer to her. He threw his hands over his heart, blinking appealingly at her."I didn't realize you cared."

She snorted into her cup, taking another drink. "What if your friend comes back? Am I to hide again?"

He grew suddenly serious and her goblet disappeared from her grip. Her stifled protest was cut short as he loomed over her. She twisted her back away from him, almost sliding out of her seat and promptly overbalancing. She flailed a bit as she slid out of her seat but he grabbed her wrist with one clawed hand, catching her.

It was the first time they had touched. They had never been this close before. She felt trapped, the urge to lash out swelling as years of human instinct reacted to her adrenaline rush. His hand was neither cold nor leathery like she had anticipated; it was not a warm human hand either. It seemed to shift; the colors of his skin were pulsating, something underneath the scales ever moving and shifting.

More chameleon than snake.

He had never physically hurt her before but he had violence in him, that same reactionary latent energy lurking in him that she saw in so many other powerful men in her time reporting politics and business circles.

He righted her, his hand releasing her wrist as abruptly as he had grabbed it. Had he noticed her increased heart rate and shallow breathing? She tried to calm it. She even tried to tell herself it had been more surprise than alarm but she couldn't deny he frightened her. His mercurial moods and sharp claws were terrifying despite her bravado.

"If anyone tries to enter or leave the castle in my absence, they will cease to exist," he told her. "If any of my 'friends' were to find you here, you would quickly find how dear the protection your friend Emma purchased for you is to your wellbeing."

The warmth of her buzz slid messily into nausea in the pit of her stomach. Her nightmares, not as frequent but still lurking rose up. The glowing heart beating in the darkness, the sickening crunch it had made when it crumbled into pieces in Regina's hand, the way Graham had fallen like a puppet whose string had been cut...

"Then, perhaps the next time you feel the need to pry into things that do not concern you, you will think about how insignificant a mere Believer is in the realm of the Fae."
His words were curt and clipped, spoken evenly in his horrid voice, eyes fixed on the crown of her head.

She tried to focus on the wood of the table and not the memories burning in her mind's eye. Her nightmares were still full of Graham's blank eyes, Emma's sword and the witch's blood red smile, her captor's giggle playing underneath like a sound track on some horror movie. She woodenly continued to stare at the tabletop." I think I will be heading for bed."

He gave a slight dour laugh, backing up and bending at the waist. "Good evening, my lady," he offered contemptuously and she stood stiffly, walking out the door, trying not to stumble. "I'll be gone when you wake," he added and she nodded, continuing her path to her room, angry and afraid and confused and tired all at the same time.

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Four days passed in the Dark Castle without its master.

One morning, she tried to stay up during the day, curious to as what Fae looked like in the sunlight but she conked out in the heat before the sun was in the middle of the sky. She woke up right as the second moon rose to join its brother. She tried again the next night but when her efforts ended in the same result, she ceased. She wasn't sure if it was magically induced fatigue or if her biological clock was determined to stay on her own world's time but she had no strong desire to continue her lethargic attempts to see the day.

The Castle was stifling, even at night, in a summer heat wave, cloying and heavy. Lacey took to lounging in her underwear in her room, drapes closed in the moonlight since the windows were still magically sealed shut. When out in the corridors and halls, she wore a light blouse and the lightest skirt she could find. She deemed it was probably a petticoat or a slip, the cotton almost faded and see-through in some spots but it was too hot to care.

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According to her body's internal clock, time seemed to pass the same here in Fae. Her menses had occurred once before, her only way of tracking the time passing with any certainty.

Her second cycle stared during the Imp's absence. She spent about an hour grumbling angrily before curling up on her bed with cramps, puffing in air and punching her pillows in frustrated discomfort. If her body was to be trusted, it was February now. Thankfully, the castle provided her cotton rags which disappeared the second she set them aside, a new one taking its place. She hated them. She tried to will a tampon into existence but the Fae world apparently just wasn't there yet.

On the fifth day of his absence and the second day of her courses, she was curled in a ball, biting her lip when she heard footsteps outside her door.

An echoing knock tripped upon the door but she was pleased to find that the door didn't open automatically for the master of the castle. She had been worried he could and would open it after the power display incident during their guest's visit. It appeared, however, that if she didn't want it to open, it wouldn't.

"Dearie," he called irritation in his voice. "Let's not play games, shall we?"

"Go away," she ordered, curling in on herself, trying to massage the knots out of her stomach. She bit her lip as another cramp hit her hard, leaving her wincing. No answer came and she released her breath, relieved he had gotten the message and left.
There was buildup of magic in her room, reaching out and touching her with its clammy invisible fingers and she yelped in outraged shock. "Get your magic out of my room this instant, you bastard!" she managed, her head falling back on to her bed with a whimper of pain. Her time was always rough and she wasn't the most...stable of people during it.

"You're ill?" came the reaction from the other side of the door, a hesitatingly uncertainty around the edges.

"No need for concern," she groused. "Just go back to your spinning thing-wheel, whatever."

"I can't keep you healthy if you don't tell me when you are sick," he replied, his irritation growing. She gave a slight exhaled breath of disbelieved outrage at his unwanted persistence. She picked herself up from the ball on her bed, walked stiffly to the door and threw it open.

His travel cloak was still on, boots sandy and gritty and a scowl across his ugly face. He must have come directly up here...

Her dirty hair was stuck to her cheek and she battered it back, drawing her dressing robe around her tighter. "I'm fine," she seethed at him, dizzy from her sudden standing. The closed curtains behind her and the stuffy air of her room made him raise an eyebrow at her in silent commentary. "Just leave me alone for a few days and if you have any chocolate in this castle, tell the damn pantry fairies to give it to me or I swear to God-!"

Recognition flared in his cold-blooded eyes but he didn't smirk. Lucky for him. If she saw the hint of a smile on his face she was going to tempt whatever dark magic forces he wielded by smacking it off of him.

He raised his hands in ceasefire, backing from her room before walking away down the hall. She slammed the door behind her, curling back up on the bed. "Men," she growled into her pillow. She tried to turn a few different times to get comfortable before she noticed she was cooling down slightly. There was now inexplicably a slight breeze in her room. She picked her head up from the pillow, lifting the canopy curtains up and found her window seat drapes blowing gently in a summer breeze.

"Fine," she allowed, refusing to be grateful for his small favor of unlocking a window four stories up from the ground. As she tucked her canopy open so the breeze could flow in the suffocating room, she noticed a small bottle of blue, caped with a small "Drink Me" on the label. Next to it, were a tea pot and the chipped cup from their one and only tea experience, sugar and creamer in heavy supply and a large amount of actual real life chocolate piled on a plate nearby. "Show off," she groused, but she made herself the tea, inspecting the capped bottle before deciding it was medicine of some kind. She ate half the chocolate and took the medicine before she could talk herself out of it.

An hour later, Lacey was fast asleep, her cramps gone and her headache forgotten. She slept for the rest of the night and day and when she woke up in the evening, her courses had almost ceased. She went to the washroom to clean up, still mourning the loss of tampons.

She didn't say thank you.

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Now nearing the end of her second month, Lacey was roaming the hallways, looking up at what she assumed to be a head of a lizard when the Imp rounded the corner. She nodded to him, offering a small curtsey out of humor and was amused when he offered a short bow in return.
She wordlessly held out the seeds she had been munching on. He shook his head, strolling up to her and looking up at the snakehead. "What is it anyways?" she asked, popping another seed in her mouth. "A relative of yours?"

The Imp chuckled darkly, eyes fixed above them on the glassy empty stare. "A basilisk, actually, the King of Snakes."

"Impressive," she muttered, completely ignorant of what a basilisk was.

"Not really," he said in his nasal tone, the high-pitched tone coming out quickly. "Not too hard to kill when you use mirrors."

She dipped her head in agreement, still not really sure what they were talking about. She moved on to the right, tracing a coat of arms with her fingertips. "You like touching things," he noted, picking her fingertips off the etchings with his fingertips, careful to keep the clawed nails off her skin.

"Despite my frequent warnings that most everything in this castle is cursed, spelled or capable of turning you into a statue."

She shrugged, the unnecessary contact disturbing her. They had become more familiar these past weeks, an uneasy alliance between the two based of mutual dislike and mistrust had formed but was usually tense with both parties understanding the boundaries. Touching was one of those boundaries. She had thought that was clear after their shared meal together in the kitchen.

She was fully aware she probably shouldn't be touching odd things. She wandered away, eager to put some space between them. "While I have you here," he called after her, causing her to slow her steps, turning her head disinterested back at him. "I was wondering if your earlier offer in 'working' for your keep was still on the table? It would also allow you to learn more about Fae in the bargain, that is, if you're still interested...?"

"You want to make a deal?" she asked, fighting back her astonishment. He nodded, eyes staying locked on hers in the deep nod of his head, chin going to his chest. "With me?" she clarified, fully aware she had nothing of real value to offer him.

"No, dearie, the chimera head you're standing under," he commented and she only just avoided glancing up. He raised his head from its deep nod, eyes jumping in barely suppressed glee.

"You like making deals," she figured, crossing her arms in front of her, giving her time to think.

"No secret there," he pointed out, gesturing to himself with his long claws. "All magic comes with a price, dearie!"

"What does that have to do with me?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. "I can't do magic."

"Ah, but you can be affected by it, even encourage it," he replied, eyeing the seeds in her hand.

A flicker of understanding dawned to her and she looked down at the food in her hand. "So, my staying here in the castle-?"

"Has tipped the scales of magic usage more than significantly, it seems some people are beginning to take note of the Dark Castle's stirring."

"So, you need to get me out of here before people come looking for what you are up to?" she hazarded a guess, twisting to look at the dark hall behind her. "So, I would get to leave the castle?"

The Imp bobbed his head back and forth in a pantomime of thinking, his eyes rolled up to the
ceiling. "I suppose," he finally replied, crossing his arm over his chest, his free hand framing his chin. "Only on my business. The deal would be a vow of loyalty to me for the remainder of the year, any trespasses or betrayals would bring about a very sticky end."

"You need me to get access to my world," she pointed out, trying to figure out the benefit in it for him. The monster had never shown interest in anything for anyone other than himself. Lacey knew reporters like him, people who seemed to give leads, but were really fishing for something deeper, playing the other party to get to their end goal. "If I double crossed you, my negligence on our deal would cancel your deal with Emma."

He bared his teeth at her in the facsimile of a smile, hunching his shoulders in an ironic shrug. "I suppose I count on your self-preservation interests to avoid that scenario," he countered.

"If I make this deal," Lacey managed, eyeing him and trying to find the loophole before the conversation ended. "What freedoms would I be allowed?"

"You would have the ability to come and go as you please on our trips, your only duties would be ones you accept from me. Otherwise you would be expected to sit quietly wherever I deem fit for the time being, not asking questions and being satisfied you aren't being eaten alive by ogres."

She blanched at the threat of ogres but the idea of getting out of the castle was too good to pass up. Ogres be damned. "So, if I make this bargain what do you have in mind? Carrying your bags? Sewing buttons on your travel cloak?"

"Actually," he said, smiling broadly with his crocodile grin. "I was hoping for your help with a little mermaid."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Those who leave reviews- I personally want to say thank you to each and every single one of you. I hope you are enjoying this little fairytale!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The cold was back. It curled around her ankles and climbed up her legs towards her chest...

Snow fell thick around her, clumping in her hair as her breath rose in heavy clouds as proof of life in an otherwise dead forest.

No, not dead. Asleep.

Emma was there. Dressed in a full gown of golden brocade, her arms and shoulders bared to the cold. She was as white as the snow, her usually sun-bright hair turning darker in the shadows of the trees.

She wasn't breathing.

Lacey took a step away from her, fighting an overwhelming desire to turn and flee but something blocked the path.

Hitting it, she tumbled backwards, hands reaching up to the snow filled sky as she fell. Further down than felt possible in an agonizing slow motion tumble before she fell finally in the snow bank that had formed behind her.

Emma still lay lifeless as a doll discarded by a child. Lacey's eyes searched for what had tripped her and eyes fell on a snow covered lump, a long pale white hand poking out. The familiar badge of Sheriff Graham sparkled in the dim dawn light having tumbled out of the dead man's grasp.

They were both dead and she was next.

Then a laugh, a low throaty chuckle that seemed to be coming from all around. It continued as she looked around wildly, getting louder and louder when suddenly a murder of crows burst from the trees. The bare branches turned into a storm of birds, all taking flight before circling down towards her.

Their black feathers mingled with the snow as it fell onto her upturned face and then just as the laughter suddenly ceased...

They dived.

--

Lacey's eyes flew open as a crow's talons reached out for her eyes, but nothing was there.

The summer day was fading, the sun having set but the stars were still coming out. Her window was open, curtains still as death in the humidity of the day's heat. Her pillow and sheets were soaked. She wiped off the sweat pooling on the back of her neck, clammy and damp. She threw the thin sheet she had fallen asleep under off her, rolling out of the damp patch she had been tossing in all night. She pulled her shift over her head when a sudden banging at her door startled her into knocking over the pitcher of water that had just magically appeared on her nightstand.

"For fuck's sake," Lacey hissed, picking the pitcher up before it flooded her bedroom. The water
had barely hit the floor when it disappeared. A new pitcher appeared over on the other side of the room on her small round table, as if this new perch was a safer choice. The banging continued. It had an odd rhythm to it, as if someone was amusing themselves with how her door sounded when hit in various spots with different tempos and force.

The nightmare had faded but her heart was still racing. The continuous banging coupled with a fast approaching headache propelled her to the door, pulling the damp shift away from her skin as best she could.

"What, in God's name, could you possibly want?" she yelled, flipping the door open. The Imp stood a few feet back, self amused grin firmly in place. His eyes flicked down to her sweat soaked gown for a moment before they were swallowed back up in the squint of his crocodile smile.

"Time to get up!" he crowed, crooking his fingers in a come hither motion. "Can't sleep the whole night away, you lazy thing!" He didn't even wait for her before turning on his heel and heading down the stairs. Lacey stood puzzled for a moment, alone in the doorway staring after him when he abruptly turned and huffed at her. "Haven't got all night, you know," he remarked, tilting his head at her in challenge.

She glanced behind her towards the water basin but the castle seemed to be on his side this time. The water pitcher had disappeared and a silken robe was hanging on the back of the door now, swaying slightly with the force of its appearance. She grabbed it, pulling it on with two short tugs and flipping her hair over the collar. Her slippers were waiting for her just within her reach despite her leaving them by the bed's edge last night. She toed them on before closing the door behind her.

The Imp had gone on but she knew where he would be. She made her way to the room they had taken tea together once. It was a study of sorts for him. He stood at the table's edge, glancing down at papers with a gleam in his yellow eyes. "It's barely dusk," she complained, entering the room while rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. "What exactly is it that couldn't wait until proper evening?"

"Come see!" was her only answer. She rolled her eyes as she joined him at the table.

It was cooler in the room despite the drawn and curtained windows. He must have noticed her earlier discomfort and adjusted the temperature. She didn't remark on it, just twisted her hair to the side to let the cooler air touch the overheated skin at the back of her neck. Maps sprawled across the table before him, some on yellowed parchment others on crystal white cloth. Others were a rainbow of color, shifting like his skin did when she looked closely. She walked to the other side of the table, pushing her hair out of her face as she leaned down to look closer.

Fae was spread out before her.

She traced the closest map's coastline, rocky and jutting out into a blue swirling mix of color that represented an ocean. She tilted her head to read upside down the white and green text that declared it the Sea of Silence. The land mass was half hidden under other maps. She tipped them away gently, revealing the Seventh Realm.

The land itself was spread out in a crescent shape, Fiona's Bay, cradled it with a dozen peninsulas sticking out the south sides, like fingers reaching out into the far off ocean. She studied it for a few moments, trying to spot their current location when she realized what was bothering her. "Where are the mountains?" she asked, turning the map to face him, pushing it towards him.

He looked up from the map of blue he was studying, giving her an odd look. "There aren't any mountains in the Seventh Realm." Dismissing her succinctly, he went back to his private study, his long fingers tracing a pattern of some sort. Under his touch, the map appeared to undulate like
waves on the paper.

"I saw them," she insisted, peering back down at it. "When I came in from the gate. We were by a lake bed and the-!"

"Dearie," he growled in his deceptively pleasant singsong voice. "I'm trying to focus."

Lacey twisted her lips, chewing her cuticles absently as she peered closer at the map. There was the briefest movement in the left quarter of his map, a ripple effect falling after it. "How are you doing that?" she asked, abandoning her map and moving back over to him. He looked up distractedly as her robe bottom swept over his leg and pushed the map over towards her, squaring it between them.

"Magic, dearie," he giggled, waving his fingers obstinately. She let the condescending remark pass.

She looked at the map before reaching across to grab the other one. "You're tracking something?" Lacey asked, noting the lines he had been following. One purple line was heading towards the bay area. The other was a sickly black color, which periodically vanished and then restarted inches away from where it had stopped.

"Two things." He pointed at the purple line. "This one is your concern. Our little mermaid friend is heading towards shore."

Lacey snorted. The idea of actually seeing a mermaid somehow seemed ridiculous than her current predicament of being stuck with a monster in his castle. He frowned at her, obviously perplexed at her reaction. "Sorry," she shrugged, rubbing her nose. "It's just a little funny, that's all."

"Quite," he drawled, making it clear it wasn't.

She cleared her throat, going back to the map. "So, why is she heading towards the bay? Do mermaids live there?"

He shook his head, "Mermaids live in the deepest part of the ocean, far down in the depths. Why, the last mermaid sighting by a mortal was over three hundred years ago and I only know that because I happened to be the one who helped him find one."

Lacey swung her head up to regard him at this, tracing the lines in his face. She had never thought how old the Imp was. He seemed ageless but now she wondered. She saw a few lines around his eyes and mouth but those looked more of a middle-aged man than that of a centuries old sorcerer. "You look good for your age," she said in a matter of fact tone. He ignored her, tapping his clawed hand back to the map. She wanted to provoke him more but a quick glance at his frowning face warned her otherwise and she returned to the topic at hand. "So, why is it going towards land then?"

"This one just so happens to be in love with a prince."

Lacey raised her eyebrow and the Imp giggled in response. "How does a mermaid know a prince?" Lacey wondered as she stifled a yawn. She made herself comfortable by settling down in the closest chair.

"The Seventh Kingdom's Prince Eric is of marriageable age." A pot of tea appeared by her elbow as she sat, and she poured it out as the Imp spoke, nodding politely to the castle for its thoughtfulness. She offered a cup to the Imp who waved it away without looking at it. "He has just finished his tour of the kingdoms."

"What?" she interrupted, pulling the map of the land closer. "Why travel by sea when he could
He released a peeved sigh. "Well, he can't very well travel to the far realms on foot without it taking years, mmm?"

"There's other realms?" Lacey asked excitedly, grabbing for another map and nearly spilling her tea cup in the process. "Like mine?"

"Yours," he said pointedly, flicking a hand out to still the slightly teetering tea cup in its saucer. "Is not part of the other kingdoms. Yours is a mystical realm which most do not know about and which no one willingly seeks."

"Except you," she pointed out.

"Yes, well I'm a special case," he grinned.

"How many realms are there here in Fae?" she asked.

He scratched his neck distractedly, before checking his claws for sharpness with his fingertips. "Nine in all," he said, sharpening his index one on his hide more roughly. Ignoring him, Lacey looked back to the map, trying to determine the overall size of the Seventh Kingdom if it was part of nine. The Imp began to collect his maps up from underneath her, ignoring her squawked protest. "Back to the issue at hand, if we can, dearie?" Taking her sullen silence for agreement, he rattled on. "Now, Prince Eric has returned from his tour, with no eligible princess in mind. Which was lucky for them considering on his return trip, a...well let's say storm hit the royal banner ship while the rest of the fleet was miraculously spared. His Grace's ship sank with only a few survivors..."

"A storm?" Lacey asked, noticing his emphasis on the word.

"I may have helped," he said, wrinkling his brow in thought. "Can't really say."

There was an odd twist in her gut. Her protector was an twisted thing. There was a real darkness in him despite his seemingly jovial laughter but this random callous confession made her feel unsettled, like she was tainted just by association.

She had agreed to help him. She tried to ignore that truth, burying it under her relief of getting out of the magic infested jail for a few days. It worked rather well. She stood from her seat, walking towards the windows to put some distance between them. "So, what happened next?"

"Well, lucky for Prince Eric, a young mermaid just happened to be nearby. She rescued the handsome prince from the perils of the sea, delivering him to safety to nearby rocks where his crew found him unconscious the next morning. The fleet remaining headed home with the Prince none the wiser of how he managed to survive."

"He doesn't remember being saved by a mermaid?" Lacey asked incredulously.

"He was a wee bit unconscious, dearie," the Imp continued. "Our poor mermaid followed the ship to its destination, and is now heading towards the bay in the hope of seeing him again. Sickening, isn't it?"

Lacey privately agreed but she shrugged, fiddling with the curtains.

"Stop that," he snapped, waving her back towards the table. When he was satisfied her had her full attention again, he continued. "Now, Prince Eric still needs a wife, so the Seventh Kingdom is holding a ball for three nights where every eligible noble woman of birth may attend to vie for his
"So, why exactly are you getting involved in this doomed love story?" Lacey asked. "You just a fan of true love all of a sudden?"

He made a little eh noise, waving his hand in dismissal. "I am in need of a very precious, rare ink that is only found in the darkest trenches of the ocean. I may have an understanding with the Sea Goddess that any attempt by myself to enter her realm may be met by a bit of unpleasantness."

Lacey was staring at him, trying to process this new bit of information. "There's a Sea Goddess? Like a real one?"

"Well, she's more of a sea witch," the Imp grumbled, ill-naturedly. "Even so, she has the allegiance of the sea creatures and most of the Seventh Kingdom so I tend to stay out of her way when I can help it."

"Right," Lacey mustered, shaking her head in clouded disbelief. "So, if you can't get the ink yourself-?"

"I have you convince our little friend to get it for you," he finished, hands spreading before him to make his point.

"How the hell am I going to do that?" Lacey asked, shaking her head. "How am I going to find this mermaid much less convince her to get me a bag of magic squid ink?"

He held up the wooden box, and flipped it open. A gleam from the candles on the table glittered in response and she drew closer, looking down into the depths of the box. "With this," he answered. Lacey recognized the golden bauble she had seen on her first day shining up at her. Perfectly polished, the bracelet had a delicate catch, lying open and waiting on a azure cushion.

"I thought you said that was deadly?" she accused him, eyes flashing up at him in annoyance.

"I said things in here could be deadly," he corrected, fixing her with that unnerving grin.

She huffed in response, pushing a strand of hair back behind her ear. "What exactly does it do?"

His eyes sparkled, reflecting gold in the candlelight. That had been the right question. "This will give the wearer legs to walk upon our shores under the moon's domain. With it, she will be able to attend the ball as an eligible woman of birth. With your assistance, of course."

"I'm attending the ball as well?" she inquired. She pushed away the memories of the last time she had dressed as a princess, the screams of the kelpie ringing faintly in her ears.

"You do have the tiara still, don't you?"

She leveled her gaze at him, annoyed he knew she was keeping it safe. "I'm supposed to pretend to be Emma?"

"Nonsense," he blustered. "Everyone knows Princess Emma of the Fourth Kingdom is beyond the Gate. Scandalous behavior of hers, news of it spread all over the kingdoms. But not to say that you couldn't be the next in line to the throne in her absence. No one really knows about succession lines outside their own kingdoms, boring stuff."

"Fine. Let's say I do manage to convince a royal family believe I'm a princess. How am I going to find the mermaid?" Lacey asked, pointing out the hole in his plan. "If she's a mermaid, there's no
way for her to come to shore and I'm not much of a swimmer."

"Our friend will have found the cove under the palace, impossible to get to by sea due to the reefs and since it's on royal land, only castle residents can visit it. Thus, as a guest of the Prince's, you would be able to gain access to the castle, before taking a beach side stroll to their cove, where I'm sure a very curious young mermaid will answer your call."

"Great. I'm tricking a fish into trusting me to help her trick a man into marrying her," Lacey snorted. "How romantic."

"We should get going," he noted. He waved his hands and the maps disappeared in a small burst of smoke. "Run along and get dressed."

She left, heading towards her room with this new information on her mind. In her time here, Lacey had become overly interested in the realm she had been exiled to. While she disliked it with its quiet loneliness and the magic that seemed to cloud everything, clinging to clothing and catching in your throat, she had the innate curiosity of a journalist. It sat ill with her she knew nothing beyond the way to and from the kitchen. The idea of going out into the world...the very chance of talking to someone other than the Imp...

Her feet moved faster, excitement spurning her on. She pushed open her room's door to find a large trunk by the window, cracked open and empty. Lacey hesitated for a moment before choosing to ignore it, heading to the wardrobe. A single pink gown hung there, cotton fabric with white stripes trailing down the sleeves. It was a different cut than what she had been wearing, the waist more pronounced, drawn in to give her a more flattering figure and the bust line scooped low, cut in a more square shape. She eyed it for a minute, found it lacking and closed the doors before reopening them.

The dress remained but now all her other dresses and shifts were missing.

"Fine," she acceded, reaching in for the dress. "I'm going to need a bra for this one."

Slipping out of her gown and nightdress, Lacey went to slip on the pink dress when she noticed a corset of sorts lying neatly on her bed. It was cream, boned with cream ribbons and eyelets on the back of it. She wrapped it carefully around her torso, clutching it to her breasts and taking a deep breath. "Go ahead," she prompted, and a whoosh of magic curled up her spine making her shiver as it laced up the corset neatly. It left just enough room to breathe normally but it was damn uncomfortable.

Once the magic had finished, she released the breath she had been holding back. Drawing up the petticoat slip she usually wore in the heat of the summer when she didn't feel like getting dressed, she tied it neatly at her waist before she stepped into the pink gown. She slid it over her arms, her stomach protesting as she tried to bend over to arrange the skirts around her slip when she felt the familiar tingle and the buttons on the back flew closed, tickling the nape of her neck.

With a small nod to the magic for its assistance, as uncomfortable as it was, she started to comb out her hair. The fashion of this land called for lady maids, which she obviously lacked. She had occasionally stared at the Imp's leather scaled jackets and breeches, wondering idly how comfortable they could be or how long it took him to get dressed.

"Shoes?" Lacey managed, turning back to the wardrobe. It still sat empty but a pair of cream boots now sat by her chair. She carefully sat, noticing the pink fabric was more durable than her usual dresses. It bunched and gathered but didn't hold wrinkles. She laced up the ankle high boots, the corset digging into her ribs at the bent over position.
She left the suitcase where it lay, gaping empty under the window, and headed back downstairs to the Trophy Room where the tension of magic was swirling, occasionally sticking to her skin. She brushed the tendrils away, side stepping heavy pockets in the hallway where the air felt heavy and thick. She waltzed back into the trophy room, noticing her skirts were more voluminous than her usual dresses and made a satisfactory swish noise when she rolled her hips. She sashayed across the room, enjoying the dip of her skirts around her feet as she neared the Imp.

He was sitting at the table still, eyes narrowed in thought over the wooden box. She stopped short, unsure what the plan was now. The teapot had been removed but the cup she had poured for him was still waiting for him to indulge, the magic keeping the liquid warm in the night air.

"Want me to open a window?" she finally asked, tired of waiting for him to acknowledge her. She walked towards the closest shuttered window. "Get some air flow in here for you?"

"Are you ready?" he asked, snapping the box closed and standing.

"Not sure," she replied, standing under the window and looking up at the two story curtains that covered it. "My wardrobe is being difficult."

"Oh, yes that," he said, bouncing his head in thought. "I've decided to have you be another victim of the storms raging at sea, stumbling into town, lost and alone, no one by your side. The Prince's mother is a romantic at heart. She'll love the idea of harboring a young princess who has lost all her crew."

"No one is going to find it weird a foreign princess is the only one who survived a supposed shipwreck?" Lacey sat carefully on the arm of the large wingback chair by the mantle.

"Where have you been dearie?" he laughed mockingly. "In all the story tales in your world, the beautiful good hearted always prevail over the evil of the world, isn't that right?" Lacey frowned, recognizing his obvious insinuation that would not apply to her in any world. He laughed in delight as his jab hit home. "Well, lucky for us, dearie," he cackled. "You aren't really in any danger. I'll be pulling all the strings. You'll just have to play the part of the virtuous princess, but I have faith in you."

Lacey twisted her head from him, annoyed. So, she was a bit of a handful. She had always used her smarts or her looks when the situation called for it. She hadn't shied away from playing dirty to get where she needed to be. Why should she be ashamed of that? She used what she had and she didn't make apologizes for it. So why, now, in this land of magic and monsters, was she letting some lizard judge her?

Her time in Storybrooke had been odd at first, playing the sweet hearted naïve little girl. It had been cloying mostly and now she was being asked to play that role again. It bothered her but she forced it down. It was just pretend. Nothing here is real.

"Now, the final thing,..." he said, interrupting her thoughts. "You'll need a name."

Unbidden, Mo's voice trailed through her head 'Good luck, Lacey'…

It had been the last time she had heard anyone say her actual name. The name Lacey French seemed as distant now in the odd room as her dream had been this morning. The Imp blinked at her in the candlelight, waiting for her to speak. "Why wouldn't I use my real name?" Lacey asked, meeting his eye steadily.

"Names have power, dearie," he warned. "Hasn't anyone ever told you that?"
It dawned on her that they had never used each other's names. She had thought he was simply The Imp but ….

"I'll use my real name," she said with finality.

"As you wish," he chattered, waving his hand. "You'll find the Princess Belle will be received by all without question in the realm."

She was startled but she covered it with a short nod. Emma had called her Belle in his hearing but this was the first time he had acknowledged it.

All the same…she almost corrected him but then she thought better of it. She pushed Lacey French to the back of her mind, wondering if the fairy tales with their happy ever afters ever really proved that their heroes were good people or just good at faking it.

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"It's not going to bite you," he sighed, watching her eying the small dinghy he had conjured into the entrance hall. "Get in. We don't have all night."

Lacey put a foot tentatively in the wooden boat. It swayed dangerously underfoot and she nearly pitched forward with the rocking momentum. "Is this thing even sea worthy?"

She righted herself, plopping down on the middle bench, drawing her skirts tighter around her. The pink fabric was an odd contrast to the warped boards. She adjusted slightly to the left and the whole thing tilted precociously. He shrugged, palms raised upwards.

She shook her head, looking about the entrance hall. The tiara in her hair was pinching slightly, the unwashed sweaty strands of her hair falling loosely around her face. Nerves and excitement rolling in her gut. The very idea of actually finally talking to someone beside the Imp both frightening and exhilarating.

"So, everyone will just believe I'm a princess, right?" she asked again, giving in into her nervous habit of asking questions in times of stress. "Are they going to ask me about the second kingdom?" Doubts began creeping in and she looked up at him in a panic. "Does everyone speak English? Are they even human? Oh God! What if they're all like you? What am I-?"

"Look," the Imp finally interrupted, leaning down at her. "We can do this two ways. You can pretend to be a princess with no memory from the second kingdom who was miraculously saved at sea by a talking fish or whatever nonsense or...," he paused, tightening his lips as he tried to suppress a wicked snicker. "I can wipe your memory with magic!"

"Then, I'd have no idea what I was doing wandering a fishing kingdom in the middle of the night," she reminded him, crossing her arms over her knees.

"Oh well," he shrugged, dramatically. "Worth a try!"

"Let's just go already," she huffed, getting antsy.

"Oh," he twittered, walking away from the dinghy. "I'm not going with you, dearie."

"Wait, what?" Lacey asked, twisting around. The boat teetered on the stone tiles. She clutched at the sides of the boat, trying to steady it.

"Do me proud!" he called, before snapping his fingers.
The hall dissolved away in purple smoke. She coughed, batting it away with her hands when she felt the boat start to wobble, deeper and further than before. She froze, letting the purple smoke swarm about her, lifting her hair and slipping down her spine. The empty noises of the hall were replaced with the noise of the ocean, wind and waves. A bird call from behind her made her tilt her head up, watching as a bird with white tail feathers flew over her, beating its way towards the shore.

When the magic faded away, the dinghy had been gently deposited in the sea, but the shore was still a few yards out. The night air was cool around her, the breeze from the ocean cooling the summer evening on the shoreline. The night was pitch dark around her and she fumbled along the floorboards of the dinghy, trying to find an oar, anything to paddle to shore but she came up empty. "Great," she mumbled to herself, sitting back up carefully as the boat continued to rock precariously in the waves. Reaching over the edge, she splashed at the water in an effort to try to row her way in but the waves pulled the boat backwards and her entire arm was soaked up to her shoulder.

The shore receded further away before another wave came rolling in, pushing the excuse of a boat high up on a wave before crashing down hard into the water. Salty sea splashed on top of her and filled half the boat with brine. She yelped as the cold water poured down the back of her neck, shivering violently as the wind hit her skin in the aftermath. Another tide pulled her out towards the sea.

It was a swim or sink situation. Lacey gripped the side of the boat as it lurched forward yet again, bracing herself as the water spilled down on top of her before she stood quickly in the moment’s pause of the sea tide. The boat swayed dangerously but before it tipped, she jumped in the water before she could think better of it. The water rushed up her nose and into her ears in the seconds her head went under the wave but she pushed forward best she could in the dress. The larger skirt didn't cling to her legs at first but the corset made it hard for her to hold air in her lungs.

She had jumped in facing shore, so she pushed herself forward with her arms and legs, going down slightly in the darkness to avoid the possibility of the boat striking her in the waves. Lacey felt the tide pull backwards but she used her full strength to pull against it, finding she resisted it enough to do a few strokes forwards when a wave pushed her suddenly forward, raising her to the surface as she sucked in a lungful of air.

She looked for the dinghy, but it had disappeared from the sea. She turned back towards the shore, lights twinkling in the distance and she began to swim best she could in the restrictive gown. After a few strokes, she found it easier to let the wave pick her up and push her toward shore.

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After what felt like an hour of riding the waves and resisting the back tides, Lacey waded in shallow water. She lurched, feet slipping in the sand beneath her toes before she fell forward with the next wave, face crashing just out of reach of the tide.

Lacey curled her hands into the sand and slowly lifting herself a few more feet until she was out of the sea completely. She lay there like a beached whale along the cooling sand, hair matted to her head and her dress clinging to her, wet and sodden. It was hard to breath with the corset and she grudgingly opened an eye to look about.

She was startled half to death to find another eye squinting at her inches away.

Scrambling upwards, she scuttled backwards in surprise. A boy sat in the sand where she had been moments ago, looking at her with a disapproving look on his round face.
Lacey didn't do kids.

Not that she didn't like them, per se, but in her experience, they could sense fear. They responded by crying, kicking and screaming or running away and hiding.

This one was just watching her.

He looked about five or six. It was hard to see in the darkness but he had a small lantern behind him, illuminating his jet-black hair and round blue eyes. He had on a rough white short-sleeved shirt with suspenders falling off his sloped shoulders.

He wrinkled his nose at her in response to her silent staring.

She licked her lips stalling for time, noticing the salt air and spray was already coating her face. She went to scratch her nose but stopped herself, the unfamiliar corset and tiara exerting a reminder that she had a role to play. A sudden mewing noise startled her. A small black kitten peeped out from around the boys back, spots of white flashing in the lantern light.

"Pinocchio!" called a voice from the bluff above them. "Pinocchio, where are you?"

The young boy glanced upwards in alarm before back at her, standing quickly and plucking up the lantern and kitten in a defensive gesture.

"Is that you?" she asked, glancing up to see another lantern coming down the sandy dune towards the two of them. He looked at her sullenly, dipping his head down instead of answering her. "Are you supposed to be down here?"

"Pinocchio!" the voice called again, and the lantern swung towards them, halting before the carrier started to stumble towards them in the sand.

"Over here," Lacey called out, rising to her feet. Sand coated her entire body, so she brushed it off her hands the best she could before raising a hand to try and fix the tiara. She expected some magic had helped keep it on in the waves. She fixed it so it didn't look lopsided in her hair.

The lantern arrived carried by a frail old man, tall and thin with a loping grace as he slid across the sand. His white hair glowed in the lantern light, wispy and insubstantial but his full mustache quivered with surprise when he saw a Princess standing over his lost ward. "Oh my," he breathed, in astonishment. "Your Royal Highness," he said, bending awkwardly, his old body taking a moment to properly fold.

"Evening," Lacey greeted him, feeling decidedly uncomfortable as he bowed before her. The boy-Pinocchio? – continued to stare up at her in growing dislike. "Uh, please rise," she said awkwardly, flapping her hands a bit.

The old man rose slowly, eyes still downcast. Pinocchio tugged at the old man's sleeve. "Is everything well, Your Royal Highness?" The older man said, stepping towards her slowly, raising the lantern to see her more clearly. "Can I be of assistance?"

"My ship..." Lacey found her throat tighten as the lie came forwards but she forced a quiver in her voice and pushed through it. "There was a storm."

"Poor thing," the man tutted in sympathy and a watery smile spread across her face and a warm unfamiliar feeling of gratitude rising up in her chest.

"I...," she started but she had to stop and smile tightly, raising a hand to wipe away tears that were
suddenly falling unexpectedly from her eyes. "I just.."

She was overwhelmed.

The mere fact that she stood on a strange beach in the middle of the night with a old man and a young boy was decidedly odd but it more the concern. The genuine concern that a complete stranger showed... tears burned down her cheeks and she sniffled in embarrassment.

The boy looked disgusted. The old man looked horrified, pushing the boy behind him.

"Is this your son?" Lacey asked, gesturing towards Pinocchio who was pointedly not looking at her.

"Yes, Your Royal Highness," the old man answered. "I apologize if he has disturbed you. He's a good boy he just has a tendency..."

"It's fine," she assured, fighting to gain control of herself. "What was your name, sir?"

"Gepetto, if it pleases Your Royal Highness," he responded, ducking his head back down in a show of reverence.

"Gepetto," she bent her head towards him. "I'm afraid I don't know where I am…"

Swinging his lantern out to the sea, the old man looked upon the ocean. He shook his head in wonder before back to her with concern in his eyes. "Your Royal Highness, you are in the Seventh Realm at the Far Coast. Where did you embark from?"

"The Fourth Kingdom," she said slowly. There were dunes up ahead where lights had been visible earlier. "I was traveling for the ball..."

She took a step towards the dunes, but her knees buckled beneath her and she collapsed to the sand with a cry.

Gepetto rushed forward, but he pulled back moments before he touched her. He hovered just above her, eyes flashing in the lantern, "Is Your Royal Highness hurt?"

"No, just tired," Lacey confessed and suddenly, she was. She fought to keep her eyes open.

"You must be exhausted from your ordeal. Let's find you a place to rest for the night. I will run to the castle and request a carriage be sent."

She placed an hand on his arm. He stilled, looking down in wonder at the pale ungloved hand on his coat. She went to pull it back but he covered her hand with his own and slowly helped her to her feet. "I couldn't ask you to do that, if you would but point me in the way of the castle?"

"She can't stay with us!" Pinocchio suddenly blurted out, a small figure standing stubbornly away from them in the darkness. Gepetto seemed at a loss for words but Lacey patted his arm absently and sighed.

Even in Fae kids didn't like her.

"Pinocchio!" the man scolded, gesturing for his son to come over to him. The boy compiled but he kept his eyes on he. "I apologize, Your Royal Highness. He's young."

"It's fine," she responded, fighting back a yawn. It was not even past midnight, she would usually take her tea now but the ocean seemed to have sucked her energy from her. Couldn't have been too
much to ask for that the Imp could have put her down a few feet from the shore. No, he had to
drown her first. She shook her head in weariness. "I couldn't intrude."

"Your Royal Highness," Gepetto said. "It would be our pleasure to host any who came to our door
but a Princess is not just a guest but a honor."

He went to bow again, lantern shaking in his grip as he tried to sink down gallantly. Lacey raised
her hand to stop him, not sure how many bows the old man could take before he was stuck in
one. "If you'll just follow me, our cottage is just over this bluff. If it doesn't offend Your Royal
Highness, you are welcome to rest for a while. Pinocchio, run along and make a bed for our guest.
Quick and don't get distracted!"

Pinocchio glared at her before running off, bursts of sand flying from his small feet. His lantern
swayed as he ran up the dune, the kitten clutched in his other arm. The old man turned to her, a
fond smile on his face and gestured for her to go ahead of him. Lacey smiled in return, slipping her
arm through his. He jolted a bit, glancing down before putting his wrinkled hand over hers.

The fake princess and the old man made their way slowly across the beach with no words passing
between them.

Chapter End Notes

And we are out of the Dark Castle! Who's excited as Lacey is?

(And don't worry I'm not cutting you all off from Rumple- he will back soon.)

Again, this is a story about how its not always the monsters that need to change. I
think a huge reason we all are so drawn to Rumple is his constant fluidity – he has
been at the bottom and at the top and sometimes he is horrified at himself and
sometimes he is so damn proud of himself – and its such an interesting character mix
that OuaT does so well with its "villains' but doesn't always translate to the "heroes".

Who among us doesn't love themselves one minute and then have a moment of clarity
like "Holy Fuck I am the worst. I am the absolute worst…” But this is on a much
smaller scale than Rumple/Hook/Regina's issues- ours are more every day. But that
doesn't make it any less important.

Which is why I personally loved the idea of Lacey- let's see Belle with all the dark
parts of her- the bold daringness of the book worm influenced by our own gritty world.
The taboo in the Enchanted Forest used to be a lady being an woman of learning, - and
in our world she could have been an adventurer or a traveler or a risk taker adrenaline
junkie on our side- but when we met finally Lacey -she was a woman who liked to get
loose, make out with strangers and push the line to see how far she could go before it
broke.

Because our world is such a different place from the Enchanted Forest- but also
because Regina had a hand in the memories and she chose to try and pull Rumple back
into the darkness by using his usual light as a guide.

I would have just liked to seen Belle come back with some of Lacey still in her- some
of that edge. She had the spunk and the courage and the guts and all the things we love
about Belle. But the woman (was it Belle or Lacey?) was also locked up from 28 years- that couldn't have done wonders for her sanity- even when she did get her memories back.

My Lacey French is a mix of the two sides- a modern day dame who finds herself in a world where everything she thought made her strong- might just be the things preventing her from being who she really is.

Enough character talk! But a quick word on the world of Fae which we will delve into more in the coming chapters.

I grew up on Disney movies, fairy tales and anything that was remotely to do with magic, mystery and the unknown. And when I started to reach the age of cynicism, the 10th Kingdom aired on TV.

I was old enough to understand the darkness and still young enough to love the happily ever after promise. And so when they announced OuAT, I was eager for more of the same mix of our reality and the fairy tales. I especially loved how Rumple became the Beast and the Crocodile and how seamless it was. How Red was the victim and the wolf. How what we had come to expect from our fairy tales had a kernel of darkness in the core.

So to honor that work, I wanted to include a homage to the 10th Kingdom in my work- so it will not follow any of the Kingdoms, storylines or who's who in each land- there are 10 kingdoms/realms that make up Fae. Each Realm has multiple kingdoms inside it- so for instance, Eric isn't the only prince in the Seventh Kingdom- but he's the one we care about because #Eric.

In case you're wondering- the kingdoms mentioned so far:

The Tenth Kingdom- is the Land of the Believers, a "made up, mystical" realm (aka where you and I live)

The Ninth Kingdom is where the Dark Castle lies.

The Fourth Kingdom is where Snow White, Prince Charming reside. (Where Emma's from.)

The Seventh Kingdom is where Prince Eric, Pinocchio and Gepetto live and where we will meet Ariel (next chapter!)

(But some of you may be have noted Lacey's question about where the Gate was -the mountains and lake bed- and the answer is- you'll find out when she does.)

Thanks again for reading!

-B
Chapter 9

Immensely relieved that not all inhabitants of Fae were evil, magical creatures, Lacey, for the first time since the night she had tumbled through worlds, breathed a sigh of relief in a small sea side cottage.

Gepetto's home was not far from the path from the dunes. The windows were lit with candlelight as they had approached from the beach. Bowing low to allow her to enter through the beautifully painted blue door, Gepetto ushered her inside, all the while muttering his apologies for the mess. The house appeared large enough for a single man but certainly not a large family. In the back of the large room, a fireplace was crackling to light.

Although it was mid summer, a cool wind blew in off the sea. It had gone straight through her on their walk up from the beach, her dress and undergarments still soaking wet from her swim. Gepetto hurriedly drew up a chair over by the fire. With a shy but genuine smile, he indicated for her to sit.

His son was not as welcoming. Pinocchio sulked in the corner atop a three-legged stool, his small kitten played distractedly with the strings of his shoes as the adults settled into the quaint lodging. He seemed to be listening to something only he could hear, nodding and making small whispers periodically. She turned her attention away, focusing back on her surroundings. It was not so different from what she had been expecting. The house obviously doubled as Gepetto's workplace but instead of it feeling cramped, it felt homey.

The room itself was crowded with wooden toys along all the walls, shelves and any available surface. Strewn about as if in constant play, the toys were in various stages of construction. Some were completely finished, delicately painted with a shine of gloss while others were still being carved, looking forsaken and half done where they lay. Lacey gently picked one up from the floor, tracing the lines of the small marionette.

Pinocchio was quietly speaking to the kitten at his feet, ignoring her completely. Gepetto was in the process of shaking out a large sheet. He was draping it over a hanging line to create a barrier in the open floor plan dwelling. The wooden beamed ceiling rafters overhead vaguely reminded of her first apartment. It had been about this size but had lacked all the intricacies and character that Gepetto had obviously added over the years.

Pleasantly distracted by the crackling of the fire, Gepetto's soft shuffling and the soft mewing of the kitten, who answered to the name of Figaro, she almost didn't notice the insect.

It was far too large to be a cricket… although Fae might breed larger insects along with all the mythical creatures. This brown and green insect looked at her with its bug eyes glowing amber in the firelight. Its antenna twitched, back legs rubbing together. Lacey instinctively reached out a hand to swat it away when Pinocchio looked up. He bellowed "Jiminy!" and bolted upright to grab at her raised hand.

"Pinocchio!" Gepetto cried out simultaneously in horror. The older man nearly entangled himself within the blanket as he tried to catch the boy before he lay a hand upon a royal. Lacey half-turned away from the bug at Pinocchio's outburst. When she turned to check on Gepetto, the cricket leapt straight at her.

Emitting a undignified yelp of surprise, Lacey leaned backwards. With Pinocchio's weight half in her lap, the chair tilted backwards, threatening to spill them all onto the floor. Pinocchio didn't
seem to notice. He grabbed for the insect as Lacey tried to right herself when a tinny voice in her ear suddenly chirped, "I say! Calm down, Pinoc!"

The chair righted itself, thudding back down to the floor.

Great. Fae had talking bugs.

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Once Gepetto managed to disentangle himself from the blankets and collect Pinocchio, they all sat down at a table. Figaro purred happily in Lacey's lap as the cricket stared up at her from Pinocchio's shoulder.

"Jiminy Cricket," it announced proudly, making a small motion with its forelegs. "I'm Pinocchio's conscience."

At a bit of a loss at to what that exactly entailed, Lacey licked her lips, trying to keep her princess composure in place. "I see," she said, although she didn't really. Not at all. "So, you can talk?"

"Well," the small insect explained slowly as if talking to a child. "Most of us Enchanted can."

Pinocchio sat nearby, avoiding his father's eye. He kicked restlessly in his chair before Jiminy chirped in admonition, rustling his wings together disapprovingly at the boy. "I am very sorry to hear about your ordeal," the cricket said to Lacey. "However, did you manage to survive such a tragedy?"

Anticipating more questions she had not prepared for, Lacey hedged her bets. She could refuse to answer. Gepetto was humiliated enough at the young boy's rash behavior, he would put an end to it if she voiced her discomfort. The bug continued with his spiel, sounding very official and important for something she could squash with a shoe.

Deciding the best course of action was avoidance, Lacey let out a loud yawn, covering it with the back of her hand in faux embarrassment. "I'm sorry!" Lacey exclaimed, letting exhaustion thicken her voice. "I...I just didn't expect to make it to shore and then..... oh, but you've all been so kind....it's just... now there's an enchanted grasshopper-!"

"I'm not a grasshopper!" Jiminy protested, his back legs rubbing in offense.

Lacey placed a trembling hand to her forehead in exaggerated defeat. "I didn't mean to offend," she began, letting a slight waver permeate her tone. "I'm just so tired..."

Gepetto stood, walking around the table to take her hand, pressing it to his chest in earnest. "Enough of this," he said, helping her up from her seat. "It's time to let Her Royal Highness rest. Pinocchio, Jiminy, we have our errands to attend to before the sun rises."

Jiminy demurred with a strident chirp but his eyes flashed a warning at Lacey from his perch. She now understood where Pinocchio's hostility had come from. The small insect didn't seem inclined to trust her. She wondered if she had given herself away somehow.

Perhaps Enchanted creatures were just more talented at sniffing out liars.

Lacey nodded her thanks to Gepetto, letting him lead her through the cloth partition which was to serve as her room. As he lowered the lamp, Lacey sat on the edge of the cot, listening to the low whisperings of the cricket and the boy.
Unable to make words out of the murmuring, Lacey thanked Gepetto again and assured him she was fine as he left her makeshift room. The blanket fell closed behind him. Sand and salt crusted her boots, cracking the leather. She deposited them under the bed before removing Emma's tiara and put it beside the pillow. Gepetto hushed the others before the cottage door opened and closed, giving her some privacy in the small hut.

Lacey sat awkwardly on the edge of the cot, trying to determine what her next move should be. She was distracted by this when Figaro poked his nose through the blanket partition, blinking at her in the dim light of the fire. She picked up the small ball of fluff up, and he purred in contentment.

Lacey scratched behind his ears as the light of the fire gleamed off the golden bracelet, the key to getting the mermaid's help in all this. Lacey traced the gold with her free hand, fingers pausing on the catch, taking in the delicateness of the trinket.

By the time she realized she couldn't undo her dress on her own, Gepetto and Pinocchio's footsteps were long gone, leaving her trapped in her still wet gown.

--

The light of early morning danced over her eyelids and cheeks. Lacey drew the blanket more firmly over her head. "It's not even dark yet," she complained. She had been deeply asleep so she tried to slip back into her dream....it had something to do with donkeys and goldfish. There had been no nightmares, no haunting memories, just...dreams. Lacey was just about to fall back asleep when a shrill clanging tore though the room, startling her upright.

"Pinocchio!" Gepetto hissed in horror.

Lacey covered her ears as the racket continued. It repeated itself a few more times before it stopped. Lacey swung her legs off the bed, and rubbed at her eyes.

"Sorry Papa!" Pinocchio whispered fitfully, voice cracking. "I didn't mean to!"

Unbidden, a loud yawn cracked Lacey's jaw.

The father and son stilled behind the makeshift barrier of the sheet. "Quickly, quickly," Gepetto whispered, his usual soft voice tinged with alarm.

Lacey blinked, reaching up to rub sleep out of her eyes as she slowly stood. The cot creaked as her weight left it.

"Papa!" Pinocchio protested as Lacey rose her arms overhead in an instinctive stretch. "I hate it in there!"

"Pinocchio, be a good boy, please," Gepetto pleaded.

Lacey frowned at the worry coloring their tones. She hurried to grab her tiara when a soft click of a door closing made her pause. Her hand hovered at the blanket's edge, wondering what was going on when a small meow drew her attention. Figaro rubbed happily against her now wrinkled and discolored skirts.

She scooped up the kitten just as Gepetto pulled the blanket aside, a nervous smile on his lined face. Lacey smiled back at him, pushing her hair back out of her face as she stood back up, Figaro purring in her arms. "Good morning, Your Royal Highness," Gepetto bowed his head deeply. "Did you sleep well?"
She assured him she had, her voice raspy with sleep. The sun peeped through the hand sewed curtains. Curious, Lacey crossed past him to the window to get her first look at daylight in this world. She drew the curtain back, her eyes protesting at the sudden brightness. The town outside was already awake and bustling but she barely noticed. She was too busy relishing the sun on her face for the first time in months. Gepetto stayed behind her, quietly taking down the make shift partition as she gazed out the window.

No one seemed to notice the small cottage or the woman in the window. All were too busy pushing carts of fish or carrying boats down to the harbor, calling out to one another and hawking their wares. The very humanity of it made Lacey smile. One man nearly pushed his cart into a wall looking back at a young woman. Far to the left of the docks, a large bridge spanned over the rolling water of a river cascading down into the sea. Turrets glittered in the sun, winks of light flashing off what must be flagpoles and metallic gildings.

Gepetto coughed politely to get her attention and she let the curtain fall closed. He held out a plate with a slice of bread and a piece of fish. "If you would like to break your fast, Your Royal Highness," he offered, setting the plate down next to a tin cup filled with water. Lacey's stomach protested she had slept too much and eaten too little since the Imp had woken her last night. She cut the fish up, eating the parts she recognized, ignoring the bones and polishing off the bread. It was some time before she noticed Gepetto was still standing dutifully behind her.

She turned, trying to hold down an unladylike burp, to see him smiling at her in the dimness of the hut. His pants were patched but well cared for and his shirt was stained around the armpits and neck but cleanly pressed. His hat was old and well worn but the feather in it appeared new and bright.

"Thank you," she said, nodding towards the plate. She brushed the crumbs off her lap, noticing Gepetto's slight puzzled expression at this but too well mannered to say anything. He continued to stand by the bed, hands behind him. Silence fell between them and she scrounged about a bit for what to say when her eyes fell on the wall behind him. "Why don't you open the curtains?" she asked politely, motioning towards the covered windows, which had all been opened last night.

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Gepetto coughed, turning slightly red as he looked over his shoulder. "Oh, to keep out the heat," he explained, looking down at his shoes in distress. Her host was much more at odds this morning, his eyes flickering past her as if checking on something but there is nothing in the room to indicate anything out of the ordinary. Cuckoo clocks of different sizes and colors were haphazardly hung on the wall, some crooked and low and others perfectly neat and lined up and dusted proudly. They were all currently dormant, doors and hatches closed and silently ticking in perfect time to each other. The sudden clanging from earlier suddenly made sense as her eyes fell on one laying by a nearby cupboard, it looked to be slightly off from the others, its little hand twirling faster than the rest of the ones hanging on the wall.

"Do you collect these?" she asked curiously.

He closed his eyes and nodded proudly, a faint blush crossing his withered cheeks. "I make them, Your Royal Highness. I'm a carpenter by trade but I dabble in clocks and other mechanics when I have the time."

Attempting to be polite and show some interest, Lacey stepped closer to the wall. The nearest one was a white house with red and green flowers in the garden beds, windows shuttered with panes and flowers painted on them. It even had a brown, tiled roof with a small chimney jutting out. Underneath the house, a beautifully set clock was ticking.

Well, a sort of clock. It had three hands and twenty numbers on it. She traced the detail of the
gutters and chimney with her finger, careful of the delicate wind vane on the top of the house. "It's lovely," she praised tentatively. She was privately unsure why anyone would want something that loud and kitschy but she was used to people being obscenely proud of their accomplishments. Anything that screamed at someone every hour wasn't something many people would want, doubtless why the old man and young boy lived in a small cottage by the sea despite his obvious talent at carving toys and furniture.

"Then, it is yours, Your Royal Highness," Gepetto offered magnanimously. He took the clock she had been admiring down, holding it out to her in genuine gratitude.

"I couldn't," she edged, eyeing it nervously. "I have nothing to pay you."

"A gift, for honoring my home with your presence," he enthused, pressing it into her hands, cloudy eyes shining with pride. Lacey took it with a queasy smile. She handled it uncertainty, much like the time her coworker had handed Lacey her infant and Lacey had juggled it awkwardly, praying for someone to take it away from her.

No such luck came. So, she fumbled for another conversation piece, desperate to get out of the small hut and away from the kind old man before he gave her any more clocks. Lacey glanced down at the golden bangle hanging from her wrist and she cleared her throat in what she hoped was a regal way. "Thank you for your kindness," she offered a small curtsey, juggling the clock awkwardly. "I should be leaving, I have a long walk ahead-"

"Oh, Your Royal Highness," he said, hurriedly. "Jiminy went out to fetch a carriage from the castle for you first thing this morning."

"Oh," Lacey groaned. She wasn't sure how long it would take a cricket to get to the castle, much less how he planned on getting a carriage... True, she was less than eager to try her luck convincing actual royals she was one of them but still. "That's very kind of you. Really, it is, but I can't accept your gift when you have already done so much for me."

"Please," he said, backing away from her as she tried to hand him back the odd clock. "Something to remember me and my boy by."

She had forgotten about Pinocchio. Lacey turned, checking for signs of him in the house. Her eyes fell on a large cupboard on the opposite side of the room. "Is he playing outside?" she asked, eyes still on the cupboard's doors.

"Yes," Gepetto said nodding deeply, but his eyes gave him away as they too strayed towards the cupboard. "He's out running errands."

"Ah," Lacey said.

Why was he hiding the boy? She frowned as she put her shoes on, tying up the laces while sneaking glances at the cupboard. She was fairly sure Pinocchio was hiding in but why?

A knock on the door made both of them jump. Gepetto opened it to reveal a red headed man, dressed in khaki breeches and a maroon cravat. The newcomer bowed low when he saw Lacey, his ginger hair glistening in the sun. She joined Gepetto at the door to greet the bespectacled, freckled man. "Good morning, Princess," he said smoothly. Lacey's mouth fell open slightly but she quickly closed it. The face was unknown to her but the man had the same voice as Jiminy Cricket. "I trust you slept well?"

"Jiminy?"
He regarded her back in obvious suspicion, eyes narrowed behind his glasses. "Your Royal Highness," he replied, but with a hint of steel behind it. "Are you quite all right?"

"Ah, yes," Lacey said. She threw her shoulders back, waving a hand at him in dismissal. "I was just surprised by your quickness, that's all. It was kind of you to fetch a carriage. Thank you."

"Not at all, Your Royal Highness," he said, slowly. They both stared at each other for a moment more, Lacey trying to figure out what exactly was happening without revealing how ignorant she was of this world's norms. Gepetto didn't seem at all surprised to find the bug was now a tall, gangly scholar.

Thankfully, Jiminy moved to the side to reveal two men in splendid uniform standing at attention just beyond him. They were resplendent in gold and white with large blue feathers in their brims. They practically glowed in the sunlight. Lacey felt ridiculous in her ruined dress, her hair matted from sleep and a cuckoo clock dangling limply in her grasp. She wanted nothing more to stay in the shadows of the hut but her pride prevailed over her vanity. She smiled tightly at the cricket-turned-man, before turning to face the guards.

"We are here to take Your Royal Highness, Princess Belle of the Fourth Kingdom to the Royal Palace of their Majesties King Hans and Queen Christiana of the Seventh Kingdom and their son, His Royal Highness Prince Eric."

A general sense of foreboding trickled down her spine. Thankfully, the tiara's weight on her curls reminded her of her course. She offered her hand to Gepetto. He dipped a small kiss to the back of her hand before releasing it and sinking into a bow. Jiminy stood in the doorway, watching her intently as she exited the house. She ignored him. As the closest guard helped her into the carriage, her eyes wandered back to the cottage.

Gepetto stared up at her with a fond smile behind the cricket turned man. Jiminy's arms were crossed defensively in front of him as he watched the carriage door swing closed behind her. Lacey smirked at him, forcing her head upwards and her shoulders back, the very image of a proud princess as the guard gave the cry to the horses.

As the carriage jerked off along the dirt path, Lacey finally released the breath she had been holding.

The cuckoo clock remained tight in her grasp.

--

"Announcing Her Royal Highness, the Princess Belle of the Fourth Kingdom!"

Lacey's head swiveled to the announcer, mouth slack. She was suddenly, terribly, horribly unsure of what to do next.

"I...," she stuttered, glancing down the long length of the throne room. At the end of the long walk, a dais was raised. Two figures were sitting, awaiting her as the bugle noise faded from the room. All eyes, hundreds of them it seemed, were fixed on her in the shadows of the doorway. Lacey cursed herself seven ways to Sunday but her legs refused to move. She remained stuck in the doorway, frozen in place.

The throne room was nearly as large as the Entrance Hall in the Imp's castle. It was filled with windows, huge towering sheets of glass that lined both sides of the throne room, throwing
everyone into full light, bright colors and jewels winking at her from every angle. The tiles underfoot even had actual seashells inlaid in them. The closest footman coughed politely, making a gentle forward motion with his left hand, urging her on.

Lacey felt well and truly screwed. She could stand here all day and plead insanity, losing her chance at impressing the crown and finding the mermaid, or she could walk down the hall before her and ignore the stares. Focusing on the now familiar comforting weight of Emma's tiara in her rat's nest of curls, Lacey took a step forward.

Then, another.

Continuing down the long hall, she tried to stay as calm as possible and not stare back at all the curious people pressing closer to get a good look at her. Some were making soft comments under their breath as she neared the royal thrones but she couldn't hear them from behind their fans and silks.

One fat woman in bright yellow taffeta actually twittered, pointing at her from behind her fan. Lacey tightened her jaw, forcing herself forward instead of stopping to respond in turn. Her ruined boots echoed oddly throughout the crowded hall, matching the sound of her racing heartbeat. The walk seemed to last forever, but finally she arrived at the end of the aisle. She swept into a deep curtsey, her skirts billowing out as she sank down in front of the dais. An older couple gazed down at her in open interest. "Your Royal Majesties," she said weakly, hoping desperately that was the correct address for a King and Queen.

The Queen rose from her throne and descended the steps to stand before her. "Rise, my dear," she said kindly. Queen Christiana had dark brown hair, streaks of silvers in the temples, pulled back into a chignon. Her kind brown eyes were lined with crow's feet and she had a slight gap in between her two front teeth so she smiled with her eyes rather than her mouth. She took Lacey's hands in hers, the bejeweled rings on her hands warm to the touch. "You poor thing," she mumbled, pushing Lacey's hair behind her ear. Lacey startled at the intimate move, unused to such a casual display of affection from a stranger.

The Queen smiled sadly, squeezing her hands softly before glancing back at her husband. "My love, we must have a room prepared for this poor thing at once. She has traveled so far only for the sea to take its ultimate toll, and yet for some reason, it was generous enough to spare her. It washed her up on our shores, alone and afraid. Surely, it meant for her to come to us?"

The entire court was nodding now, even the bright yellow idiot who had been moments before whispering venom to her neighbors. The King nodded sagely back. He was a larger man, tall and broad in chest with silver hair and a beard covering most of his face. His heavy crown bunched his forehead into a map of wrinkles and valleys. "Of course. Grimsby, see to it that Princess Belle has rooms prepared at once," the king commanded, motioning to a weedy man in the corner. "We shall not ignore such a priceless gift from the sea."

"You are too kind," Lacey said in relief. She worried at her bracelet absently. The man, Grimsby, noticed and flashed a quick look of reproof at her causing her to still. At a loss at what exactly she should do, she sank into another curtsey.

The Queen raised her back up with a soft hand under her chin. "We are hosting a ball these next few nights to celebrate the safe return of our only son, Prince Eric. He too was recently spared by the sea. I trust you will attend as our welcome guest."

"Your Majesty," Lacey said, smiling at the ease of the invitation. "Why, nothing would make me happier."
The Queen smiled warmly back, handing her off to the Grimsby. He was to show her to her rooms and collect her again for supper. Lacey bit the inside of her cheek, noticing the sound of waves through the open windows at the front of the hall. If she went upstairs, it was likely she wouldn't get a chance to get back to the cove without people asking questions.

"Your Majesties," she called out before she could think better of it. Both stared in polite bewilderment as Lacey paused for dramatic effect.

Her eyes lowered to the odd tile work of the hall, lips trembling in fake emotion. "Do you think… do you think it possible that I might go down to the sea for a moment?"

Both royals frowned in thought, turning to one another in confusion. Lacey pressed on, remembering the King's earlier words. "I would give thanks to the sea for my safe arrival on these welcoming shores…and perhaps say goodbye to those who accompanied me only to perish at sea..."

The whole ballroom quieted. A few muffled sobs rang out in the stillness as the Queen regarded her with fondness. "Of course," Queen Christiania said. Her husband appeared uncomfortable with the emotional outburst of his court. "Grimsby will take you down to the cove where you won't be disturbed. We shall see you at dinner tonight."

"You are too kind," Lacey said, curtsying again. This time, it was to hide her smug grin.

--

Grimsby was a nosy, old thing.

Lacey climbed down the steep staircase in the rocks that led to the small cove closely followed by the insufferable man. He kept asking pointed questions about her family, the castle she grew up in, what her father's coat of arms looked like…Lacey managed to artfully fake a few emotional stutters, sniffed in the right places and whispered how painful it was to remember her home so far away until Grimsby finally quieted.

He kept a sharp eye on her all the same.

When they arrived at the beach, he stood doggedly by the stairs. Lacey made her way though the white sand to the crystal sapphire of the ocean. She waded into the surf, letting the waves lap her feet, soaking the dress. There were no ships on the horizon, just ocean as far as she could see. The midday sun gleamed down on the beach as the waves crashed further out to sea, the foamy crests pure white on the deep blue. An unexpected peace settled in her chest at the tranquility of the wind blowing from the deep unknown.

She sniffed, then again a bit louder just to make sure Grimsby heard before she dropped her head. Then, she put her hands to her cheeks, and gave a loud sob.

"Princess Belle?" came the low voice of her guide, nearing slightly before stopping just a bit short of her. "Are you well?"

"I'm fine," she mumbled into her palms, trying to remember the technique to cry on demand. "I'm just-! Oh, I'm sorry, I just-!"

"Should I fetch someone?" he asked, shifting nervously beside her. She inhaled rapidly without exhaling until she felt her chest shake with the exertion. Her shoulders twitched in response as she felt tears start to cloud her eyes at the strain. An old acting trick from intro to theatre, she had never forgotten. It had gotten her out of tickets, bad dates, and the occasional third degree questioning.
She lowered her hands, just as the first teardrop fell down into the salty spray at her feet. Grimsby backed up quickly, eyes wide at the sight of a royal's tears. "I'm so sorry," she cried, sniffing artfully as another tear fell down her cheek to join the ocean below. "I hate to be so caught up in my grief...but I find...could I just have a few moments to myself? I know the way back to the castle," she reassured him, closing her eyes against the pain.

She waited, her shoulders continuing to shake. Grimsby stalled a moment before she opened her eyes again, two big tears slipping down again. It worked wonders. "Uh, well, of course if the Princess wishes..."

"She does," Lacey stated firmly.

Grimsby nodded in relief and made his way back to the stairs. "When you return to the palace, ask for me and I will take you to your rooms," he bowed. "Your Royal Highness."

He disappeared behind the shelf that the staircase hid behind. Lacey waited, counting to a hundred in her head as the footsteps retreated. Finally, she walked slowly over to the stairs as Grimsby entered the castle far above her.

Dropping the grief stricken act, Lacey stared back out over the ocean. The sun overhead made it hard to see and the dark blue waters made it impossible to see anything farther out than ten feet. Searching for a better vantage point, she settled on a jutting rock with a rock shelf over it that pushed out even further. She removed her boots, the warm sand tickling her feet. Hoisting herself on to the waist high rock, Lacey carefully stood, her skirts heavy with seawater.

She edged out to where the rock shelf jutted out over the ocean. Coral reefs, white and yellow and red in the sunlight, separated the shelf's small ocean pond from the main ocean, a trick of the tide. The hot stone under her feet warmed her toes, and she was careful where she put her feet. She made it to the far side of the large rock. The rock shelf was a bit higher than she had originally thought. She eyed it, trying to decide if it was worth the risk of plunging into the unknown depth of the water below when there was a bright flash of something in the corner of her eye. She bent down, trying to see the far side of the reefs more clearly but the waves broke against the reefs, water spraying. When it calmed, nothing else was in sight. Lacey sighed, hoisting her dress up by the skirts, and prepared to climb.

She climbed up off the rock, bare feet protesting with the strain. She wedged her right foot into a nearby shelf and reached her left hand up to the surface of the shelf, finding it slick. "Great," she mumbled, trying to get the best grip possible. She rose up, her right foot grasping at another bit of rock, raising herself up to where her face was level with the rock shelf surface. She grasped for the far side of the shelf, pulling her body up with one arm, when her foot slipped out from beneath her.

Her legs fell out from under her, her chest slamming into the rock shelf. She cursed as her chest smacked into it, knocking the air out of her. She tried to find a grip on the shelf but her hand slipped. She twisted, trying to avoid smacking her head on the rock shelf when her hand spasmed at the sudden pressure. Losing her grip, she fell down onto the rock, hitting a wet spot from the recent spray that caused her to slide further out. Her momentum twisted her around and she slipped off the rock and into the small ocean water trapped in the pond below.

She barely had a moment to grasp what was happening before she was in water over her head. Her dress billowed out in the stale water, her skirts caught in something in the pool, dragging her down. She pushed upwards towards the sun gleaming overhead but the dress refused to rip free. Her corset was tight around her ribs, pressing painfully into her diaphragm. Her earlier fall had knocked all the air from her so she was already dizzy with lack of oxygen.
Lacey kicked and her feet tangled in her underskirts. She kicked again, arms straining overhead. Panic settled in her chest and caused her to open her mouth in frustration, air bubbles escaping and rising without her towards the sun. She twisted again, frantically trying to raise herself from sinking.

Hadn't the Imp promised no harm would come to her?

She held on to that thought until she remembered. The sea witch wouldn't allow him in her domain. Lacey was going to drown unless she saved herself.

She pushed again, hand reaching out towards the light fading overhead. The light from above glinted off the bracelet at her wrist, and it was the last thing she saw as her sight grew dark.

Then, someone had her by the hand, pulling her back up. She struggled upwards with them. When her head broke the water's surface, she gasped for air in dizzy relief.

She blinked salt water out of her eyes as her rescuer towed her towards the coral reefs nearby. Lacey kicked feebly but shock had a firm grasp on her at the moment. When her back hit the warm coral, she turned and pulled herself up. She lay her head down, letting the sun warm her skin and let her heart stop its wild racing. A soft hand touched her ankle, reminding her she wasn't alone.

Lacey pushed the soaking mess of hair out of her eyes. Emma's tiara was still firmly, though inexplicably, on her head. She corrected it slightly, grateful she had pinned it in so well this morning before leaving Gepetto's. She went to thank her rescuer when she saw it was a teenage girl.

The teen peered at Lacey's legs, one hand still on Lacey's ankle, the other moving slowly to keep her afloat. The girl's shoulders were tanner than the skin that occasionally moved over the surface of the water, her nose burnt and her big green eyes shining merrily.

"Thanks," Lacey managed, holding her ribs where the corset pinched. "You saved-!"

"What were you doing?" the girl blurted out, excited and curious. Lacey blinked at her. The girl stared back, smile still in place.

"I was drowning," Lacey said, eyeing her savior with dawning comprehension.

"No, no," the girl laughed. "Before that!" She pointed at the rock shelf a few yards away.

"Climbing?" Lacey guessed as she bent her head to wring out her hair.

"Climbing," the girl repeated, wonder coloring her tone. The teen's red hair was soaked, slicked to her scalp, falling past her shoulders to float around her in wet tendrils.

"I'm Belle," Lacey offered, trying to draw the girl into conversation. The girl smiled shyly, ducking down under the water a bit. Her hand slid down Lacey's ankle to her toes. Lacey squirmed a little at the ticklish sensation but she didn't shake her off. "Are you.. are you inspecting my feet?" she asked.

Caught, the girl ducked down low in the waves, her eyes the only thing staying above water. Lacey slowly drew her soaked gown up to her knees, revealing her pale legs in all their unshaved glory. The girl wouldn't know the difference anyway. The teen bobbed back up, bare chest coming out of the water. Lacey tried to ignore the girl's naked breasts as they appeared occasionally at the surface, trying (and failing) not to be jealous of a teenager.
The girl traced Lacey's calves, sneaking her fingers up to her knees. Lacey sniggered and twitched her leg at the ticklish sensation. The girl shrank back at first but when she realized it was laughter she joined in, tickling at the spot behind Lacey's knees again. "Stop," Lacey giggled, annoyed at her body's traitorous response. "It tickles."

"Tickles?" the girl repeated, marveling at the word. She repeated it and giggled in mimicry of Lacey.

"It's when you... it's an odd feeling you get and you respond by laughing," Lacey explained awkwardly, not sure exactly how to describe it.

The girl nodded, reaching up higher to the hidden curve of Lacey's thighs. Lacey held out a hand to stop her from inching higher. "You do that, you'll have to buy me dinner," she teased. The girl blinked at her in confusion, bending her head down to get a closer look and Lacey flipped her skirts down over her legs. "Seriously, stop," she said, waving a finger before realizing she was mimicking the Imp. She quickly put her hand back down into the folds of her skirt.

The girl blinked up at her, uncertain but respectful. Lacey slid back a bit so her feet were out the water. The girl remained silent, but it was obvious she was desperate to ask more questions. Lacey waited patiently.

Finally, the girl's curiosity won out over her better judgement. "Do you live in the castle?" she asked, swimming closer to the reef.

"I'm visiting," Lacey replied truthfully. "Apparently, there's a ball for the Prince to find a bride."

The teen's eyes lit up. She practically had hearts in her eyes. "Seems all the eligible noblewomen of Fae are coming in the hopes of being chosen as his future Queen."

"Oh," the girl muttered dejectedly.

"I'm not here for that," Lacey clarified.

The girl smiled brightly, relieved. "You're here to climb?" she teased.

"No," Lacey laughed, crossing her legs. The girl's eyes flickered down at the sudden motion. Lacey good-naturedly raised her skirts to show the girl her legs again. The girl didn't touch this time. She nodded solemnly, letting Lacey lower her skirts back in place.

"What are you here for then?" the redhead asked.

Lacey took a breath, trying to figure out the best way to word this without scaring the mermaid away. She had lucked out, saved from drowning by the very mermaid she was looking for. She could practically hear the Imp laughing. She pushed the thought away. She was spending much too time thinking about the insane little leprechaun. She wondered if it was delayed Stockholm syndrome.

"Belle?"

"Actually," Lacey exclaimed, getting back to business. "I was looking for you."

"Me?" the girl squeaked, pushing away a bit but not disappearing underwater.

"Yea," Lacey said, nodding. The bracelet glinted in the sunlight on her wrist. "Well, someone who can help me in my quest really." The girl seemed wary now, slowly backing away into the waves. "Don't be afraid," Lacey urged. "I know you're a mermaid."
The girl ducked lower in the waves, eyes flickering towards the open sea. "I also know you saved Prince Eric," Lacey threw out.

"You know Prince Eric?" the mermaid asked in excitement, completely forgetting her wariness. "Is he kind? Is he as good a prince as he seems? Is he smart? Does he like crabs?"

Lacey laughed. "You ask a lot of questions, mermaid."

"That's what my father always tells me," the mermaid admitted, tucking her hair behind her ear bashfully. "I'm Ariel,"

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Ariel."

The two smiled at each other. The summer sun beamed down on them and the occasional bird called overhead. After a minute or so, Ariel seemed to come to a decision. She pulled herself up on to the coral reef, reddening a bit in exertion. Her arms were paler than her shoulders but her chest and belly were stark white. Lacey helped her up to let her sit beside her.

Lacey tried to avoid looking at her new companion's uncovered chest by staring at the long scaled emerald green tail, forked at the bottom with thin webs. The scales gleamed in the sunlight as the sun bounced off the water below it, backlighting it. Lacey couldn't take her eyes off it, her own fingers itching in curiosity. She promptly buried them in the crooks of her arms, striving to behave like a rational adult instead of an awe struck teenager.

"Is it wonderful at the castle?" Ariel asked breathlessly.

Lacey didn't hear her, too busy staring at gills set along Ariel's rib cage. They fluttered, trying to suck oxygen out of the air.

Ariel gave her a funny look and prodded her with a finger. "Belle?"

Lacey shook her head to clear it. "I just arrived," Lacey confessed. She crossed her legs and Ariel's eyes followed them. "I came from my land far, far away only to end up on these shores. My ship was lost at sea and I only survived thanks to this." She gestured to her bracelet. "And now my quest is to-"

"A quest?" Ariel asked. Her tail slapped against the rocks as she scooted closer.

"A very serious quest to find the famed Giant Squid," Lacey finished dramatically.

"Why?" Ariel asked, leaning closer. "He's just an old squid, barely does anything but float along the tides these days. How funny. You want to go to sea and I want to go to the castle..."

"Oh!" Lacey exclaimed, faking a moment of brilliance. "That's it! I have a wonderful idea!"

Ariel tilted her head, her long red hair falling forward, water droplets coursing down her chest. Lacey grasped Ariel's hands. They were pruned and delicately boned.

"You can go to the castle!" Lacey cried.

"Oh, I'd do anything!"

"This!" Lacey said, pulling her hand free to gesture to the golden wristlet. Its reflections winked back at them from the waves. Ariel clutched at Lacey's wrist in passionate curiosity, hoisting it up to look closely. "It's a protective token for sea travelers," she explained, unclasping it and
removing it from her wrist. "It's how I survived my shipwreck, but for sea creatures, it holds a completely different power."

"What?" Ariel breathed, gills quivering in excitement. "What does it do?"

"It can give you legs," Lacey whispered conspiratorially.

As the young mermaid's face light up in unforeseen hope, Lacey privately congratulated herself on how easy this had been. She was already looking forward to rubbing it in the Imp's face that she had managed to accomplish his little assignment in less than twenty-four hours.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In retrospect, the whole deal had gone off without a hitch.

For a bag of the Giant Squid's ink (which must have some sort of unknown magical quality based off the lengths the Imp was going to acquire it), the mermaid would be allowed the usage of the magical talisman for three days. She would be granted her deepest desire: to walk on land and attend the Royal Ball.

There was a catch.

Ariel would lose her voice for her legs, a way of balancing the magic at work in the young woman. The mermaid had barely hesitated. She promised she would return before the sun set and dive beneath the waves and out of sight.

The horizon was streaked with pink and purple, the sun setting in a beautiful riot of colors and Ariel still had not returned to the secluded cove. Lacey had been waiting all afternoon. At first, she had laid in the sun drying off until she had started to overheat in her now stifling gown. She was now a sticky, sweaty mess and the tight corset pinched her waist. Lacey plucked at it in a frustrated annoyance, eager to burn the hated undergarment as soon as she got it off.

Grimsby had not reappeared, hopefully too busy with the preparations for the ball to remember the emotional Princess he had left in the cove. Lacey was grateful for the oversight. She wasn't exactly sure how she would have explained being completely drenched from her impromptu swim or why she was still sitting on a beach hours later.

Drawing lines in the sand with her toes, Lacey wondered if she had put too much faith in the young girl when a voice called out her name.

Ariel was near the rock shelf Lacey had fallen from earlier. Pushing to her feet, Lacey slipped her way down to it again, wincing as the hot sand burned her bare feet. She scooted carefully out to where Ariel saw, "Did you get it?" Lacey asked.

"Of course," Ariel replied cheerfully. She hoisted up a wet bag from a strap around her chest. The odd bag was made of a rubbery material, the strap some kind of fibrous seaweed wrapped together to form a strong, stretchy wrap. Lacey shook it, hearing a bubbly liquid's gurgling answer within. She grinned down at Ariel, who was smiling nervously back.

"Without being asked, Lacey pulled the golden trinket off her wrist, warm from her skin and the sun. Ariel's eyes followed it like a magpie. "So, to activate it, all I need to do is...," Lacey uncorked the rubbery bag. The dark liquid inside smelled vaguely of gasoline and seafood. She wrinkled her nose, before dropping the bracelet into the inky black liquid. The bracelet sank into the magical ink with a plop. Ariel released a small cry of dismay but Lacey shushed her. "It's fine. It needs to soak the ink up, some kind of catalyst."

Ariel bit the inside of her cheek. "We're lucky that you were able to get some of this," Lacey confided as she peered down into the bag. She missed the guilty look that shadowed Ariel's face. "I had heard it's nearly impossible to find."
"I collect things," Ariel admitted, soft hands tickling Lacey's bare feet. "I have a grotto a few leagues from here. Mostly just things from the world up above."

The bag was slowly collapsing as the ink absorbed into the bracelet per the Imp's transference spell. Lacey hoped he was standing gob smacked as squid ink slowly appeared at the Dark Castle. She found some dark satisfaction in picturing his face, pinched and gaping in astonishment. When all the ink was depleted, Lacey pulled out the bracelet and laid the bag aside. The setting sun traced the delicate pattern of the piece of jewelry. The once unadorned gold shone brightly in the light off the water but now delicate lines of black filigree were etched all over, creating a beautiful dark design.

"Ariel, are you sure you want to do this? Even with the catch?"

Ariel smiled at her, slightly bemused. "All magic comes with a price," Ariel intoned in a matter of fact tone bordering on cheekiness. "The chance to walk upon the sand, to stand before Eric, just for the chance of one dance with him," she sighed, eyes bright with hope. "I'd give up anything for it."

"But your voice?" Lacey asked, shuddering. She remembered all too well her brief horrid stint as a voiceless mute at the Imp's delight. "How are you going to say anything to him?"

"I'll have you, of course" Ariel bubbled. "You will stay and help me for the three nights, won't you?"

Lacey opened her mouth to reply in the negative but then stopped. She was unsure the Imp's plans, she had almost expected him to pop in as soon as the young mermaid had delivered the prize. Lacey was not looking forward to playing translator for a lovesick teenager but she was also not ready to disappear back into the bowels of the Dark Castle. So, she nodded. "Yea, sure. I'll stay. But look, Ariel, there's no guarantee you'll get to actually meet him. Even if you do, it's not like he'll fall in love at first sight," Ariel stared back at her with that odd look Lacey was learning to recognize. Ariel was young, naïve and a little cheerful for her tastes but she had a stubborn streak. Lacey could respect that. "I just don't know if you understand what you lose if he doesn't return your feelings."

"I'll go back to being a mermaid. My voice lost forever," Ariel clarified.

"You're okay with that?" Lacey pressed. Ariel had to be in her teens. Lacey had made some really questionable decisions in her high school years, but the idea of throwing away one's voice at a shot at a guy seemed a little dramatic.

"Belle," Ariel giggled. "This is the only chance I'll have to find if it's true love. I have to take it. You understand, don't you?"

"If you say so," Lacey agreed hesitantly. She handed the charmed bracelet to Ariel who took it reverently. "If this is what you really want..."

Ariel held it carefully in her fingers, flipping it over to fiddle with the clasp lock. "So, I just put it on?"

"Yea, but here, let's get you out of the water before you do. I'm not sure you're going to know how to swim with legs. They work a little different."

They managed to get Ariel on the rock, gills fluttering sporadic in protest as Ariel struggled to breath out of the water. Lacey couldn't help but stare at the gleaming scales, the muscles rippling underneath as Ariel righted herself. The sun was disappearing under the horizon as Ariel continued
to fiddle with the accessory, dark green eyes clouded in thought.

They were both startled when a faint but distinct "Princess Belle!" floated down the staircase.

"Oh shit, he noticed I'm still out here!" Lacey groused. "Quickly!"

Ariel hurriedly clasped the bracelet on, wincing when the latch snapped closed.

Nothing happened.

Lacey's brow furrowed in puzzlement. "Why isn't it working?" she hissed, bending down and seizing Ariel's forearm.

Ariel opened her mouth to answer just as the last rays of the sun disappeared, casting them in shadows from the cliffs overhead. A glittering light pierced the shadows, emitting from the bracelet. The golden aura slowly trailed up Ariel's arm, illuminating her face. Down it spread to her shoulders, sneaking down her chest. The mermaid's gills closed with a loud and unpleasant popping noise. Ariel took in a large gasp, clutching at Lacey as her lungs inflated with air. Ariel's mouth opened in a painful scream but no sound escaped her lips.

"Ariel?" Lacey attempted to soothe her, despite her own growing panic. She pushed the wet hair out of the girl's face. "Ariel, it's fine, it's just the magic-!"

Ariel's hands shot to her throat, panic spreading. The glowing aura spread. The forked tail split upwards as legs formed from the emerald scaled tail. Ariel's body arched upright in spasms as the new muscles took hold. Her mouth wide in a muted scream. Lacey stood rooted to the spot, unsure what to do.

He hadn't warned her it would hurt. He hadn't told her...

With a final shudder from the little mermaid, Ariel collapsed in Lacey's arms. Tears were coursing down her cheeks as she silently sobbed into Lacey's neck.

"Princess Belle!" came a panicked voice from behind them. Grimsby and another manservant raced across the beach to them. She and Ariel had been luckily been turned away from the shore; she doubted the men had seen the last glowing coals of magic in the dusky twilight from their current vantage point on the beach.

"Grimsby!" Lacey called back. She tried to stand up from the rock, supporting the smaller girl's weight the best she could. With the assistance of the two men, both looking pointedly away from the naked young woman, they managed to get Ariel to the sand. The teen struggled to stand on her own with the new limbs. She shook and wobbled like a colt, eyes glued to her new appendages with a dazed awe.

"I don't understand," Grimsby muttered. "Where did she even come from?"

Lacey steadied Ariel before she could fall. She had the entire afternoon to come up with a backstory. "The Lady Ariel was one of my party," Lacey lied smoothly. "I assumed her lost at sea with the rest of my entourage, but the sea is merciful and has returned her." Lacey paused again, dashing away pretend tears from her eyes. "I was just thanking the sea for my safety when I found her washed up in the cove. We have spent the afternoon in wonder at her safe return. However, she is deeply traumatized. I've been unable to move her from the rocks."

Ariel's hair dripped down her face, seawater mingling with her earlier tears. She regarded Lacey in interest, impressed with the story.
Grimsby coughed pointedly and waved a gloved hand at the other man who hurriedly began to unbutton his coat. Ariel smiled warmly up at the manservant as he wrapped her in his jacket. He smiled back nervously, taking a step away from her and fixing his gaze back on Grimsby. Ariel began to flip the collar and toy with the buttons, a small delighted smile on her face.

"It is truly miraculous," Grimsby managed, eyes sweeping over the redhead who gleefully playing with the tassels on the collar. "Your Royal Majesty finding one of her own party in this secluded cove...how fortuitous. We will find the Lady Ariel quarters suitable to her."

"She will stay with me," Lacey ordered, taking the teen's arm. Ariel nodded hurriedly in affirmation although it was clear she had no idea what was going on between the two of them. "Sir will help carry the Lady Ariel up the stairs. She is still weak from her ordeal." Lacey gestured at the long flight before them.

The manservant silently nodded, sweeping Ariel up and walking slowly up the stairs, the small girl barely a feather in his arms. Grimsby bowed Lacey ahead of him. As they neared the stairs, she turned to him with a small smile of apology. "You must think us terribly inconvenient," she remarked. "A Princess in rags and a lady without a stick of clothes washing up on your shores...."

"Not at all, Your Royal Highness," Grimsby replied. His eyes barely flickered to her ruined gown, although he obviously could tell she had gone for another swim in it. "The Queen has sent her personal dressmakers to your room for fittings," he said. "I trust you will find them more than adequate."

"Her Majesty is too kind."

--

A short time later, Lacey closed the door firmly behind the departing royal maids before sliding down its length to a heap on the floor, legs sprayed out from the soft robe she was wearing. Ariel watched with interest. Then, she went up to a nearby wall and slowly slid down as well until she landed in a similar position, grinning excitedly over at Lacey at her success.

Offering a half-hearted nod at the easily amused newly turned human, Lacey slumped her head back to bang on the door, repeating it a few times for good measure. She ignored the answering thump as Ariel mimicked her from across the room.

What a nightmare. The dressmakers had practically ripped her destroyed dress off her, all the while rambling on about what a waste of such a fine gown and shooting her dark looks at the ragged hem and sea drenched corset, as if it was her fault she had almost drowned at sea.

Yet, the very same harridans had cooed over Ariel. They had petted her and removed the enormous jacket, giggling and openly commenting over the young girl's nubile body. Ariel's muscular tail had resulted in a pair of finely formed thighs and calves, delicate feet and a round, firm behind. Her already tone stomach and substantial breasts made her teenage body the envy of every older woman there, including Lacey. She had been grateful at finally getting the corset off but was quickly let feeling unfit in comparison. She had just been lounging and eating at the Dark Castle, and her now slightly rounded stomach stared up at her as she pulled on her gown.

All the same, Lacey had to yank Ariel's hand away from her new womanly bits a few times. The others too busy praising the young girl's gorgeous hair to notice Ariel's curious explorations.
"The poor dear," they had simpered when they discovered Ariel couldn't speak.

"Losing her voice from all that tragedy."

"It's all so romantic, traveling all this way and to be separated at sea only to reunite at a castle across the ocean!"

Lacey had been grateful for the gossip, after all nothing spread news faster than busybodies.

Ariel had been fascinated by the entire process, swirling in circles in her skirts much to the amusement of everyone, bending and kneeling at random, jumping up and down in excitement, constantly prodding at her own bare legs as she was measured and fitted.

Lacey had been on edge and frustrated as she tried to keep Ariel in line. She constantly plucked the girl's hands away from sharp objects like pins and scissors or keeping her from tumbling out of the window they had opened to let in some fresh air. The maids had shot her disapproving looks when she hissed at Ariel to stay still. Lacey wound up having to bite her tongue, wincing whenever the girl came dangerously close to catching herself on fire or knocking over tables. She was deeply regretting her agreement to stay on and help the daft girl.

Surely, the Imp would appear soon and order her back any moment. The idea that she actually wouldn't mind his arrival soured her mood further. She was far and away from acting like the royal she should be imitating, but who was she to know what royals acted like here.

A flash of memory rose up unbidden.

Emma and her hamburgers and fries...the blonde laughing at a rude joke one of the jail regulars had told them earlier, biting happily into her usual order. Emma, who had turned out to be a fairy tale princess, had never acted much like one...

Lacey wondered what Emma would say if she ever got back to Storybrooke, if she would ever get to tell her about the time she played princess.

When the maids had finally finished combing out and styling the tangled sea salt enriched hair of the teen, they turned to Lacey, taking in the oily curls and salt soaked dead ends with sighs. They artfully powdered the brown locks with a formula and styled it high on her head in an elegant twist before pinning in her tiara. The oldest artfully curled the small hairs at the back of her neck. "The men will have a hard time tonight," she predicted, pulling a pin from her mouth. "Poor fools won't know which of you to look at."

"The whole castle is abuzz about you," another said from across the room, collecting the various soaps and perfumes. "The two shipwrecked ladies who even the sea thought too beautiful to keep. Why, some are even saying you must be mermaids to have survived such a thing!"

Ariel met Lacey's amused stare and tried to hide her own laughter by ducking her head. Ariel's hair had been left down, coursing over her back in voluminous waves, shining gloriously in the candlelight. Her hair had been pinned to the left in the front. It gave her sweeping bangs over her forehead. The simple hairstyle called attention to her large eyes and framed her sweetheart face nicely. "Calm down, loves, I'm only joking with you."

One poor maid had been tasked to pluck Ariel's overgrown brows though Ariel had smacked her hand away in surprised protest at the painful process. Lacey had let the maid clean her own brows up before Ariel would sit still and allow them to do the same. With a few pinches of rouge and lipstick, the two had been deemed ready to get dressed. The maids had left for the moment, giving
the ladies a moment to breath after the whirlwind of poking and prodding.

Barely after Lacey slid the door shut behind the busybodies and their pins and needles, a knock on the door echoed in their room. Ariel scrambled up, robe gaping open as she hurried over to help Lacey up off the floor to let in their guest. Two new maids had brought up the gowns the dressmakers had decided on for the two visiting royals. Another girl was seen behind them, carrying hoops and corsets, laces and garters with shoes in her free hand.

Lacey nearly groaned when they approached her with the corset. She turned all the same, this was de rigueur of life as a princess.

No wonder Emma had been such a fan of jeans and t-shirts.

Poor Ariel was gasping for air by the end of it, twisting behind to look what was going on. She wiggled in discomfort until one of the dressmakers had whacked her on the shoulder to stand still. Ariel's eyes had gone wide in wounded surprise.

"Hey," Lacey called out, frowning. "Take it easy, she's just overwhelmed."

"A lady," the woman grunted, ignoring Lacey, "does not fidget!"

Ariel huffed in annoyance. Lacey shrugged her shoulders, she had tried. Ariel grimaced back, pulling a face in return.

When they were dressed and powdered, they were left alone to wait for the call to dinner.

Lacey twisted and plucked her formal ball gown. It was a long golden gown with sweeping skirts and hoops underneath it made from a soft brocade. The skirts were detailed and layered on the hips to give it a fuller look while delicate straps around her upper arms kept her shoulders bare. Plucking the sweetheart neckline up a bit, Lacey readjusted her tiara out of restlessness.

Ariel stood in front of a mirror, swirling her skirts with her hips. She wore a sea foam green ball gown, skirts slightly less full than Lacey's out of respect to the higher lady's title. Over the full skirt, a sheer glittering material lay, giving depth to the matte color of the gown. The top corset disappeared down into a v from the sweetheart neckline, a small purple gem sitting at her sternum. Ariel plucked at the sleeves in annoyance as they continued to slide down due to large puffs of gauzy material at her shoulders. It tapered to a darker green, the same translucent as the top layer of her gown, disappearing down into an elegant cuff on her wrist.

"Want to trade?" Lacey joked as her hoop skirt nearly knocked over the small footstool by the bed. Ariel shook her head in a pained negative, plucking her sleeves up as they tried to slide down again. "Okay, remember," Lacey said. "We're from the Fourth Kingdom, do you know where that is?"

Ariel rolled her eyes, pointing over the ocean in question.

"Yea, okay, just making sure. Remember, our ship went down and I washed up on shore here yesterday. Then found my dear friend and companion Lady Ariel at the cove today, having lost her voice in the terrible accident at sea."

Ariel nodded in solemn understanding before pointing at Lacey and sinking into an odd bow.

"No, ladies curtsey," Lacey corrected her. She showed her the deep curtsy she had used for the queen. "The men bow."
Ariel repeated the movement. The girl was a fast learner.

"Now, just watch me at dinner. Use the same utensils I use to eat. Don't touch anything unless you know what to do with it, okay? That goes for food too, certain things you don't eat, like bones."

Ariel gave her a sharp look in exasperation, Lacey shrugging at her. "Just want to make sure we're on the same page. Also, there's going to be something called wine or mead there, don't drink it. You've never had alcohol before I'm guessing?"

Ariel wrinkled her forehead at her in response.

Lacey nodded. "Yea, don't drink anything but the water. Now, then, after dinner, there will be dancing."

Ariel twirled in a circle, skirt spinning before spiraling to a stop, panting silently and grinning.

"Wait for someone to ask you to dance, and then follow his lead, okay?" Ariel shrugged in acceptance, pouting prettily. Lacey pressed hers together, trying not to be jealous of a teenage mermaid's perfect figure and angelic like features. No doubt a few men in attendance tonight wouldn't care at all that the redhead beauty wasn't a princess.

"Anything else?" Lacey mused, ticking off her fingers. "Dinner, dancing, you'll sleep here with me..."

Ariel wiggled a bit, but Lacey ignored her as she tried to think what she was forgetting.

"We already discussed not touching yourself or others. Most people like to be respectful of boundaries and personal space which is..."

Ariel was now shifting her weight, face puckered in thoughtfulness and Lacey finally recognized that look. "Ariel- don't! Hold on, I need to- have you seen the chamber pot? Oh never mind, just hold it until I can find it!"

--

By the time they sat down at the royal table, Lacey was fried.

Ariel, ball of energy that she was, sat to her right, quietly enthralled with the silverware and dishes. She traced the wooden table's underbelly. Lacey reached over and took her hand under the table, squeezing it to remind Ariel to focus.

Ariel squeezed back, taking the contact as a reassuring gesture. Lacey just barely managed to avoid sighing in frustration. Barely.

"All rise for their Majesties King Hans and Queen Christiana of the Seventh Kingdom and his Royal Highness, Prince Eric."

A fanfare of trumpets covered the scuffing as the party around the long table stood to attention. The royal family entered from the grand hall, the King escorting his wife in on his arm.

Prince Eric trailed behind them. He smiled politely at the gathered royals with the ease of a confident young man but his smile didn't quite reach his eyes. Ariel's breath caught in her throat, and she rose slightly up on her toes for a better look. Lacey gently pressed her back down, keeping her eyes on the royal family.
Eric was handsome, Lacey had to admit, though he was younger than she had been expecting, barely college age by the look of him. He was tall, broad shouldered with biceps under his fitted white shirt. His cuffs were pushed up in a rather un-prince like way and the coronet of his station was noticeably absent from his hair. Lacey also had taken a moment during his entrance to admire his tight backside and powerful thighs in his snug breeches and high black polished boots. It didn't hurt to look after all.

As one of many visiting royals, Lacey had expected to be placed at the far end of the table away from the Royal Family and the other royals in attendance. It seemed however that their tragic story had made them interesting dinner companions. They were only a few seats away from the head of the table. People were whispering and pointing at them instead of the Royal Family.

As soon as the Royal Family was settled, a flurry of activity from the kitchen started to circulate down the table length. Servants poured wine and water in cups while others carefully laid out napkins on everyone's laps.

Ariel tugged at her napkin in confusion, nudging Lacey's foot in question. "Keep it in your lap," Lacey whispered, pretending to fix her own napkin. "It's to keep anything from spilling."

Ariel looked confused still but she put the napkin back down. She looked around, watching what everyone else was doing before reaching for her wine glass. Lacey coughed pointedly. Ariel quickly corrected herself and took the water glass instead as the table raised a toast to the health of the King.

"Thank you all for coming," he boomed. His hand clasped his son's shoulder. "As you know, Eric is now of marriageable age. His mother and I are looking forward to his announcing his bride on the morning after the third evening of our festivities."

Eric stared over at his mother in obvious frustration. She smiled kindly at him but turned back to her husband. Eric shook his head in frustration, long black locks flopping into his brown eyes. He jerked his head in that typical male way, shaking the locks back in place.

"We are honored to have so many lovely women in attendance tonight and thank you for making the long trip here to be our guests," the King continued. His eyes flashed down to Lacey and Ariel, before continuing. "For now, enjoy the feast and we shall see you at the ball!"

Eric followed his father's gaze and when he saw Lacey staring back at him, he inclined his head in a resigned polite gesture of acknowledgment. She pulled a face of bored amusement, rolling her eyes at the party.

Surprised, he grinned back, showing off his teeth that were just a bit crooked. This small flaw only made him more endearing. His cleft chin was even dimpled when he grinned. He looked away as his neighbor started to talk to him, gesturing pointedly with their fork. Lacey turned to Ariel to tease her about Prince Hunk but Ariel was looking down at her plate, eyes wide and lips shaking.

"Ariel?" she asked, nudging her with her shoulder. "Is everything okay?"

Ariel nodded, jerking slightly as the salad course was delivered to the table. Lacey picked up her salad fork, grateful for that article she had helped research on cotillions, waiting for Ariel to follow suit.

Dinner passed in the same fashion. Ariel barely lifted her gaze from the table.

A few souls around them spoke to them, asking about their home and the journey. Most were
fishing for details about their disastrous sea journey but Lacey artfully twisted their questions to avoid the subject, thanking them for their interest.

Ariel’s pretty blushes were noticed by a few men on the other side of the narrow table, each addressing a comment or two to her whenever possible.

Throughout the evening, Ariel ate very little of her soup or salad but almost attacked the fish they served for the entrée. She was halfway to carrying the whole thing to her mouth when Lacey kicked her under the table, prompting her to drop it with a splat back on her plate. A few women murmured at the end of the table, but a man close to them laughed, claiming he liked a girl with an appetite. Lacey flashed him a smile, privately noting to keep an eye on him.

When the Queen rose after the dessert course, the entire table did as well, chairs scraping backwards and forks clattering to the table.

"If everyone is done, please follow us into the grand hall where there is music, drinks and seating for those who may want to relax after their meal. For the younger folks and those still young at heart...," a man down at the end called out "Here, here" much to the amusement of the table. "We will start the dancing. If you'll follow us, we shall begin the festivities."

A polite clapping followed as the King led his Queen away, Eric trailing after them.

More guests were scheduled to come throughout the evening according to those sitting nearby. Lacey was curious to see if any good looking slightly older men may attend someone else's betrothall ball. Eric was a dish, no question, but Lacey was almost fifteen years older than him. She had never been one for younger men.

"Let's go," Lacey said, but the girl didn't budge. "Ariel, what's wrong?"

Ariel's lips quivered, eyes welling with tears. She shook her head frantically, silently begging to flee. She was scared.

"You're going to be fine," Lacey told her, trying to be patient. She was eager to see the ballroom. Elegantly dressed knights and ladies pushed past them, a dull constant noise as the party adjourned. "What's bothering you?"

Ariel looked sheepishly towards the door at the beautifully dressed women barely managing to avoid running after the Prince.

"Oh, them?" Lacey laughed, watching one silly goose nearly trip over her hem in her high heels. Lacey had managed to convince their maids earlier to allow Ariel to wear soled slippers, not trusting Ariel to be able to manage high heels. She missed the feel of heels, but had worn a matching pair, not wanting Ariel to feel left out. "I promise," Lacey said, eyes lingering on the door as more people emptied out of the dining hall. "You'll be fine."

Ariel looked uncertain.

"You've already saved a Princess from drowning, turned into a human and had every inch of you pinched and prodded. This," Lacey said, indicating the people around them. "This is nothing."

Ariel hesitated for a moment before nodding slowly, letting Lacey pull her along towards the door and her prince.
I hope you all enjoyed this chapter- I had a lot of fun writing Ariel and Lacey. And I hope you enjoyed reading them!

I know a few of you may be slowly looking around for signs of the Imp but fear not- he will be back soon. But you know he has his own business to take care of. And plus, more excuse for the ladies to bond!

If you are curious about the ball gowns- I based the ladies first evening ball gowns on the typical Disney princess gowns that Belle and Ariel are seen wearing in the Princess Line. Belle's is obviously her famed golden gown and Ariel's is one not seen in her movie but the green one she now wears in most licensing.

Here are the counterparts I researched to fit them based on 1890 style that is the Seventh Realm's current fashion:

Next chapter, I'll share more on the castle. I based it off the Frederiksborg Castle in Hillerod, Denmark. We haven't heard much about it yet as Lacey is still dealing with the whole Mermaid thing. But it's beautiful and awe inspiring.

Call out to Enailuj who caught my accidental kingdom slip. Thanks for letting me know!

I want to thank everyone who is reading- as a fledgling writer, all the reviews, follows and favorite mean the world to me and inspire me to keep working on this- to keep reaching to better myself by telling stories that scare the daylights out of me.

You guys rock.
Chapter 11

Ariel and Lacey followed the throng of people, passing through an arched doorway. Marble columns were perched atop pedestals flanking the large metal doors thrown open to the ballroom beyond. The doors were delicately yet ornately detailed with door handles shaped like dolphin fins. Two guards stood on either side of the door, their white and blue castle livery shining in the chandelier light.

Ariel stopped in front of them. One was the same man who had carried her up to the castle earlier. Ariel waved cheerfully, but when he failed to even acknowledge her, the girl looked to Lacey for help.

"I don't think he's allowed to move," Lacey said, tugging Ariel along. As they crossed the threshold into the parquet tiled ballroom floor, Ariel smiled at the echo her footsteps made on this flooring before stalling. Ahead of them, a few stairs led up to the main floor of the ballroom. Ariel had mastered walking down stairs with the help of Lacey on one hand and the marble railing on the other but they hadn't practiced going back up them.

"Excuse me, your Royal Highness."

A serving man in livery, the kingdom's golden crest on his shoulders, stood beside her. Behind him, a line of people were standing in disinterested silence. A few stared openly at Lacey and Ariel. "Your Royal Highness," the man continued. "If you would be so kind to join the others, we will begin the procession without further delay."

There was already music was playing beyond the stairs, but even Fae had politics it would seem. Not wanting to cause any suspicion, Lacey nodded tightly, and pulled Ariel to join the queue.

Heading to the back of the group, Lacey guided the young inquisitive mermaid past all the interested eyes. A few sat in chairs, others milled in groups and casually looked over but for the most part everyone seemed content to leave them alone.

All except one.

An older man appeared beside Lacey. He had a rusty silver hair that hinted he had once had red hair in his youth and sparkling eyes that hinted at a constant amusement. Lacey did not know his name but he had sat further down the table at dinner. Before she could speak, he dipped down into a graceful bow, forcing her to return his greeting with a half hearted curtsey. As the gentlemen straightened, he nodded at Ariel, his hand gesturing outwards in a sign of good will. Ariel sank into an answering curtsey.

"Your Royal Highness," he said with a deep baritone voice. "I am Duke Sebastian of Flounders, a small land in the heartland of the Seventh Kingdom. It is a pleasure to meet the famed beauties from the Sea of Silence. A shame that it has lived up to it's name by stealing such a precious gift as the Lady Ariel's tongue."

Ariel promptly stuck her tongue out him to prove it was still there.

"Ariel!" Lacey exclaimed in horror as the Duke burst into laughter.
"No, no, it's quite alright," he laughed, eyes locked on the baffled teen. "Lady Ariel doesn't care much for my wordplay, I shall have to remember that. I shall have plenty of time to learn, waiting here to be announced."

"Is this common practice?" Lacey hedged. "Being lined up like cattle?"

He chuckled. "A show of power, if you'll notice only those with high titles and large pockets are waiting," he motioned at the line in humored disgust. "Then, once we are all announced to the multitudes, we in turn will have to applaud their Royal Majesties arrival." Lacey frowned at this and he laughed at her frank expression. "Yes, exactly. Thankfully, this pomp and ceremony is only for tonight. Even so, half the eligible ladies here tonight will spend most of their evening talking to other bachelors, twiddling their thumbs waiting for Prince Eric to make his appearance."

Ariel looked crestfallen, shoulders deflating as she gave a dramatic, silent sigh.

The Duke chuckled but his eyes were on Lacey. "I see that one of the lovely ladies is a fan of his royal highness," he said. Lacey raised an eyebrow at him in challenge but he returned his gaze to Ariel. "You should see the boy when he isn’t dressed in his formal ware...quite the build on him."

Ariel blushed prettily, ducking her head. Her flaming hair should have made her blushes unseemly, but they only enhanced her natural beauty. The Duke regarded at Lacey again, a keen awareness in his sharp eyes. "As I am a poor old man with no wife of my own, may I escort the Lady Ariel into the gala this evening?" He winked before continuing. "I think Princess Belle and I both would quite enjoy ourselves at the expense of these other bejeweled guppies. Plus, our young friend here will be too busy trying to hook the main catch of the night to be much company to Your Royal Highness."

The Duke of Flounders seemed more than interested in her young charge, as if he didn't quite trust Lacey with her. Despite that, he had a wicked way of words about him. As they waited, Lacey and the Duke exchanged a few witty barbs about the ceremonious snooze of the procession. They openly commented on names and stations being announced with trumpet and fanfare, music and joy continuing on unheeding of the pageantry. Lacey learned quite a few interesting details about their fellow royals. Ariel just stood quietly to the side, eyes floating over the side room as it began to thin out.

After an hour, Ariel was fidgeting nervously, hands wrapped in balls in the sheer netting covering her gown. The Duke leaned down graciously, plucking her fingers from the material and rubbed them between his own. "Patience, my dear," he said softly.

Ariel nodded meekly in return, looking slightly ill. Lacey felt a sting of guilt. This stranger was treating the girl with more patience than Lacey had all evening.

The announcer came forward to exchange a quiet word with the Duke as the previous fanfare died down. Silently, Duke Sebastian held his arm out for Ariel, and the trumpets roared the now familiar din as "Duke Sebastian of Flounders and Lady Ariel of the Fourth Kingdom" were announced to the crowd below. There was a slight hush at the announcement, followed by a swell of conversation as people stated to discuss the newcomers. Apparently, the story of the girl found washed up on the castle shore had spread past the dinner crowd.

Lacey took the stairs carefully, her golden hooped skirt raised up to avoid tangling her feet in her hemline. She reached the crest of the stairs just as the trumped sounded behind her, ringing in her ears. "Her Royal Highness, Princess Belle of the Fourth Kingdom," bellowed the courtier.

A few people turned in interest but for the main part, everyone continued dancing and talking, too
caught up in the evening to pay attention to the ever growing announcements of royals. Lacey was too shocked to be relieved; she stared down in abject wonder at the ballroom and completely forgot her princess behavior.

The floor was laid out in geometric tiled patterns, navy, whites and gold diamonds. She had barely time to admire it before she noticed the ceiling. Every inch of it was covered in opulent detail. Fish jumped out of blue oceans, waves curled downwards to the ballroom below. In between, these mosaics, it curled upward, painted underwater scenes, complete with seashells.

Three large chandeliers hung in a line down the center of the ballroom. Golden tiers dripped down into layer after layer of shining candles and golden curricles curled around the base. Enormous diamonds shone like stars at the center of the base.

A servant pressed a flute of champagne into Lacey's hand as she tried to locate the Duke and Ariel. She had to make an effort not to gawk openly at the ornate splendor but her eyes wouldn't focus properly. Women in bright and detailed gowns swept gracefully around her despite their dress's girth. The men however were looking at her in an all too familiar way. Lacey ignored them. In the recessed window sills, a few couples were already embracing, oblivious to the few people who were watching in cheerful chagrin.

Halfway through the crush, she arrived at the dance floor. She stopped short and turned back to the entrance when a deep voice behind her interrupted her search.

"Excuse me, I couldn't help but notice you looked lost. May I assist you in some way?"

A tall sandy haired stranger, blue eyes deep and guileless, smiled down at her. He was gorgeous. Lacey's words of dismissal died in her throat. "I was looking for my companions," she said with a vague gesture towards the crowded room. "They seem to have abandoned me for the evening."

"A crime," he replied. He bowed slightly at the waist, his face upturned to hers. His features were angular. A pointed chin with full pink lips and a pointed nose that turned upwards ever so slightly. His eyes were framed with impossibly, long eyelashes. They were inky black, a sharp contrast to his almost blonde eyebrows. He smiled at her obvious appraisal, sharp canines flashing briefly. She pressed closer to him under the guise of the crowd. This kind of dance she knew, the familiar sensations of attraction. This was as close to normal as she had felt in this world yet.

He steadied her, long fingers curling around her gloved forearms. His fingers slid up the silken gloves to the bare flesh of her inner arm. Her breathing grew shallow, her body flushed in the heated ball room. His beige jacket showed off his broad shoulders and long neck and his tight maroon pants were flattering in more ways than one.

"I'm Belle," Lacey said breathlessly, smiling invitingly up at him.

Before he could respond, something caught his attention over her shoulder. He gave a quick bow, a look of regret on his features, before he disappeared back into the crowd. A tug at her elbow revealed Ariel.

"Ah, I see you have found our missing Princess, Lady Ariel," the Duke said, joining them.

Ignoring them both, Lacey moved forward after the mysterious stranger when the trumpets sounded again.

"Their Majesties, King Hans and Queen Christiana of the Seventh Realm!"
Everyone sank down in genuflection. Lacey tried to peer over their bent forms for the handsome stranger but Ariel tugged at her skirt in dutiful reminder until Lacey sank down as well. She kept her eyes tilted upwards in case he was still close.

“His Royal Majesty, Prince Eric!”

Ariel glanced up from her deep curtsey but since her balance still an issue, she almost toppled into the Duke. He straightened her without moving from his deep bow.

The Prince took the stairs at a bit of a jog. He nodded to the bowing crowd before he cleared his throat. “Thank you all for your attendance tonight.” His voice commanded attention. It was deep, rich and assured. He had a clipped cadence to his voice which echoed effortlessly in the room. “I am honored. Please enjoy yourself.”

The music started again as the crowd rose to talk eagerly once more. Ariel sprang upright as if she was on a spring. She stood on her tip toes to see over the crowd to where Eric had been standing, barely aware she had learned a new trick.

The Duke leaned over to Lacey to whisper, “She won’t have a chance at getting a private audience with the Prince tonight. Her best option is to circulate, play the crowd, let word of her reach the people pulling the strings.” He nodded to where the Queen sat, scanning the crowd. She occasionally leaned down and spoke to Grimsby. The King spoke animatedly with a few older men, easily ignoring the crush of people unless his wife casually touched his hand to draw his attention to something or someone.

Lacey continued to search the crowd for the blue eyed stranger. She barely noticed when a young man approached Ariel for a dance. When Ariel turned a confused face to Lacey, she missed it, too busy trying to find the handsome stranger from earlier.

The Duke stepped in. He nodded his blessing to her, “Return her back here when you finish.”

“Your Grace,” the young man agreed. He pulled Ariel into the set forming. Lacey ignored them as she rose up on her toes to see into the back corners of the ballroom.

“Princess,” the Duke said quietly. “It is of course, not an old man’s concern, but without chaperones, you and Lady Ariel should keep an eye on each other. Many here would not hesitate to use either of you in their own schemes.”

Before Lacey could reply with some scathing remark about strangers minding their own business, a woman in a bright red dress came tripping by them, glass of champagne dangerously close to spilling all over her dress. They turned as one to watch her stumble away and when they looked back at each other, they were unable to keep straight faces. The tension broke, they retired out of the way of the dancers to watch the rest of the throng.

“Where is the Prince setting up court?” Lacey asked, having given up on her quest to find her handsome stranger.

The Duke pointed towards a black marble structure centered on the far wall across from the windows. Prince Eric hates the limelight,” he told her. “Their Royal Majesties are under there, sitting in their thrones for all to see.

'Prince Eric, on the other hand, will be forced to dance for a majority of the evening. He should be ah yes.” He pointed to where the Prince's coronet glittered. He was dancing with a blonde princess in a pink gown, respectfully courteous and engaged but clearly underwhelmed with his partner.
“He looks like he’s having fun,” Lacey chuckled.

Ariel was in a different line of a set, but she did not see Eric. Her eyes were fixed on her own feet or the girl next to her. Ariel’s partner was doing his best to talk to her but she was too busy focusing on the steps to respond to his attentions. When the dance ended, the young nobleman sulked away. Another took his place and Ariel readily agreed to another dance, eager to try it again. When a new music number came on and the set changed to a circle, away from the previous line, Ariel looked indignantly at the band, confused and annoyed.

“Poor thing,” the Duke laughed. “You must have different dances across the sea.”

“We do,” Lacey agreed, absently.

“Oh look,” the Duke said laughter in his voice. “The Duchess Hansberg has gotten her talons in our Prince.” Eric had tried to sneak off the floor but an older woman stopped him, gesturing at the wall flower behind her who curtseyed awkwardly in response. "Her poor daughter Angelica is a sweet girl. Shy, prefers reading over dancing. A very smart girl but her mother refuses to let her stay unmarried. Looks like she has a prince in mind for a son-in-law.”

Angelica took Eric’s offered arm, looking more miserable than he did. As they joined the set, Eric focused more on her than his previous partner, finally coaxing a small smile out of his partner.

Lacey was enjoying the dancing, and even midly grateful for the Duke's company. Some men eyed her in interest but stayed away, seemingly intimidated by the taller man beside her. “Do you know the Prince?” Lacey asked.

“Not personally, only be reputation.” Eric swung his partner in a graceful arc, catching her around the waist which earned another small grin from the shy girl. Ariel, nearby, was making up her own steps to the dance much to the amusement of her whole circle. Neither noticed each other. “He’s been mostly away at sea since he was of marriageable age, but the citizens of his kingdom love him.”

Lacey reached for a glass of champagne as it floated by. “Just his kingdom?” she asked.

“Well, he is not well known in most of the other Kingdoms of the Realm. It may be different in the Fourth Realm, after all, everyone knows Queen Snow White.”

“Fairly,” Lacey lied as she took a sip. “Princess Emma and I have spent time together.”

“Ah, Princess Emma,” the Duke said knowingly. “Now, there’s a royal after Eric’s own heart. More apt for heroics and a life of adventure than court games and politics. His parents breathed a sigh of relief when it was rumored she gave up her title for a life of adventure.”

“Why?” Lacey asked. “It seems it would have been a good match.”

“Two young royals with no interest in ruling?” The Duke shook his head. “No, they would have encouraged each other to explore, travel, seek out the unknown. The Kingdom would have fallen to disarray. There are still those who would use the distraction of the King and Queen to their advantage.’

’No,” he said as he watched Eric deliver his partner back to her mother. “Prince Eric needs a wife who will encourage him to protect and serve, keep him steady and selfless.”

“Know anyone up for that job?” Lacey asked as another older woman brazenly claimed Eric’s next dance for her daughter. Ariel had claimed her own dance partner, a shy young man who had
been lurking at the fringes of the dance floor. The next set started and the Duke gestured Lacey to follow him towards the wings.

They settled in their new location, a much better vantage point of the thrones as well as the dancers. Lacey met the eyes of the Queen across the heads of the mingling party and offered a slight nod in recognition of her majesty’s gaze. Queen Christiana tapped Grimsby and whispered down to him. Grimsby glanced Lacey's way, a slight frown on his features but he nodded and melted away into the crowd.

“Everyone had hoped for a marriage between Prince Eric and the Princess of Gloucester in the Sixth Kingdom, but she was in love with one of those youngest sons away on a quest. I gather Prince Eric was relieved. It was more of a economic match than a romantic one.”

The two continued talking, watching as both Ariel and Eric were claimed dance after dance. Occasionally, Eric would offer a later dance, taking breaks to talk rather than dance with the women who thronged about him. Despite it all, he stayed polite and smiling.

“Should I go talk with his Royal Highness?” Lacey offered. She was not looking forward to two more nights of babysitting the mermaid. She idly wondered if the Imp would show up soon. She had already accomplished her mission, she saw no need for him to allow her to stay.

The Duke shook his head, “You would be just another Princess battling for his attention, better let it be more organic.”

“How am I to get a Crown Prince’s attention?” Lacey teased. She hiked her eyebrow at her companion. “Fainting spell?”

“Pardon me, Your Royal Highness.” Lacey turned in surprise to her right where Grimsby stood. Sweat dampened his brow in the hot ballroom. “Her Majesty Queen Christiana would like to invite you to talk a walk in the gardens tomorrow afternoon. Will you be able to attend?”

“Yes, of course. Thank Her Majesty for her kindness,” Lacey responded. Her eyes rose to the Queen, but the older woman only had eyes for her son. She looked saddened as she watched Eric, a mother’s concern for her only son’s happiness. Grimsby bowed to her, promising to have someone call for her at her quarters mid-day before disappearing back into the crowd.

The Duke snatched another glass of champagne for Lacey pressing it into her hands. “That’s how,” he said with a wink.

“Are the gardens extensive?” Lacey inquired.

He nodded in return, and gestured at the window behind them. “Very. They were a gift to King Han's mother from his father on their wedding day. It is a deeply meaningful past time for the Royal Family to take walks in the gardens; few are invited to walk with them.”

“Shall I bring Lady Ariel?”

“No, no, see what the Queen has to say. While no doubt touched by Lady Ariel’s extraordinary return from the sea, it does not change that Ariel is a lady.” He shrugged before he continued. “The Queen still has high hopes for her son’s marriage. She is tolerating the notion of ladies of noble birth but she has not yet accepted it.”

Lacey could see where this was going. “I do not plan on marrying,” Lacey told him. “I will be returning to my kingdom as soon as the ball ends.”
“How will you accomplish that?” the Duke asked with a laugh. “Swim? A eligible, and if you'll excuse me, beautiful princess washes up on their shores just as they open their halls to find a bride. I'm afraid you're rather stuck here, my dear.”

Lacey felt rather warm all of a sudden. She handed her glass to the Duke. “Will you excuse me?”

The grand hall now felt like a dream from which she couldn’t wake up. She stumbled past the dancers towards the back wall, ears ringing. She was so out of sorts, she didn’t notice Ariel waving her over. As she neared the back door, Lacey pressed her hand to her chest to steady herself. Her head was reeling from the champagne, and the heat, and that word...marriage...rolling around in her head.

“Your Royal Highness.”

It was the handsome stranger from earlier. He bent towards her in concern.

“I’m fine,” she waved her hand but it shook. “I just need some air...“

He motioned her towards a door and they stumbled outside onto a balcony of pale gray stone. A few couples were entwined on benches or in the shadows but none looked up from their own private entanglements. They found a private spot nearby where Lacey sat down heavily, her breathing more and more difficult. He bent down so they were face to face, his face clouded in worry.

“Can I get you some water, perhaps?” he offered.

He was close enough to kiss. Curls sprouted around his ears and around his temples, begging for someone to run their fingers through them. She reached for the rebellious curl close to his right ear when he captured her fingers in his own. “Princess,” he breathed, a warning and a plea.

Lacey ignored it, focusing on his lips as she tried to steady herself. She wasn't sure what had come over her, she hadn't had that much to drink...

"I don’t know your name,” she whispered.

He tiled his head forward until his chin grazed hers ever so slightly. “Dylan,” he responded, his name vibrating against her parted lips.

“Dylan,” she repeated. Then, she closed the gap between them and kissed him hungrily. He responded in kind, taking control of the kiss. At first it was modest but it grew passionate as he teased her lips with his tongue. She clutched at his jacket, the material balling up in her hands. The summer air was warm against her bare shoulders but the dizziness wasn’t fading. His arms trailed circles on her back, dipped carefully into the curls atop her head, before he tilted her backwards so he could deepen the kiss. Whatever madness was seizing her, she didn't know, but she let it envelop her as the flame of desire grew in her belly.

A high pitched giggle interrupted them and Lacey pulled away with a start. For a moment, she thought- but no, it was just some silly girl nearby.

Dylan, still breathing heavily, offered his hand. The adrenaline in Lacey's system had cleared her head, and she smiled in relief. She was confident in this, this game she knew. She stepped towards the stairs leading down into the gardens below and pulled him behind her into the darkness.

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“There you are,” Duke Sebastian greeted her knowingly. His eyes took in the blushed skin and tilted tiara. Lacey raised an eyebrow at him in warning as she reached up and straightened it slightly. “Lady Ariel was growing concerned.” He nodded towards the dance line, where Ariel still danced. She was silently laughing as her partner faked a trip in a complicated dance.

“She had no need to be,” Lacey responded as she gratefully accepted a cup of water from a silent servant. “I was getting some fresh air.”

He arched his brow at her, a knowing grin lurked at the corners of his mouth. “You were gone for over two hours,” he responded. “How did you enjoy the gardens?”

Lacey smacked him with the back of her hand in playful outrage. “I don’t know what you mean,” she said primly, hiding a smile behind her water.

“If the gentleman I saw leading you outside was any indication of your whereabouts, I must say, well done. Here, I was worried about Lady Ariel,” he teased as he took a deep sip of his champagne.

Judging by how long it had taken them to find a place in the gardens, the Seventh Kingdom had no such problems with prudishness. Lacey hadn't so much as touched a man since October...things had just progressed rather quickly. She looked over her shoulder but Dylan had not reentered the ballroom. A yawn tickled the back of her throat and she raised her hand to her mouth before it could escape.

The crowd had thinned out but Prince Eric was still surrounded by women. He looked exhausted but he nodded and did not say much. The King and Queen had already departed as well as most the others from their dinner party.

“What time is it?” Lacey asked.

“Near dawn,” the Duke said, just as Ariel stumbled back over, yawning. Her brow was damp with sweat and her sleeves long ago had slipped down to her elbows. “I should be leaving,” the Duke said, bowing to them. “I shall see you tomorrow.”

As he departed, Ariel turned towards the window in concern. She tugged urgently at Lacey’s gloved hand.

“Okay, okay,” Lacey yawned. "Let's go to bed."

They left the ballroom with a few other stragglers. Ariel was practically running, her skirts in her hand as she went down the corridors, Lacey hurrying after her.

“Jesus, Ariel, what’s the hurry?” Lacey complained as she fought back another yawn. As they passed a stain glassed window of a mermaid sunning on a rock, Lacey stopped to admire it. “Hey, look!” she said, oblivious to the young girl’s growing panic. “It’s you!”

Ariel came running back to grab at her hand and pulled her behind her into their rooms. Ariel reached up to take the tiara off her head, its weight was giving her a headache. She massaged her head in relief. Ariel gestured impatiently for help, pointing at the back of her dress.

Lacey crossed her arms over her chest and squinted at her in confusion. “What is your problem?”

Ariel grimaced in frustration and pointed at the window where the moons were disappearing before back at herself. Ariel bobbed up and down, gesturing impatiently at the buttons on her back.
“Okay, okay, hold your horses,” Lacey grumbled, moving to undo the buttons. Her fingers fumbled a bit at the small pearls and before she had even finished Ariel was wiggling out of it. The sleeves whispered as they slid down to the floor. Ariel undid the ribbons to her skirts and slid them down as well before she pushed her hoop off. She tugged at her stays with a open mouthed cry of worry.

Lacey blinked in confusion as the young girl stripped. "Ariel, what the hell-?"

Just as the rays of the sun peeped over the horizon, Ariel splashed into the bathtub from their earlier scrubbing. The dirty cold water still in there. Lacey stepped back as water splashed over the sides, exclaiming “Ariel!” in protest.

A bright light flashed from the pewter tub as weak sunlight began to fill the room.

At the sight before her, Lacey hurried to the door and threw the bolt home.

A little mermaid floated in a tub, a sheepish look on her face.

“Are you telling me you turn back into a mermaid at dawn?” Lacey sidestepped the garments strewn around the floor. “But-but how?”

“All magic reverts to its true form in the light of day,” Ariel answered miserably. Her scaled tail overlapped the tub’s edges. “Everyone knows that.”

The two lapsed into silence as the sun filled the room. The golden bracelet glowed faintly against Ariel's wrist on the tub’s edge. Lacey’s headache pounded behind her eyes as the mermaid forlornly closed her eyes against the sun.

It appeared she still had a lot to learn.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, boys and girls, I hope you enjoyed meeting our newest character Duke Sebastian of Flounders. I don't have any clue where I got that name.

Not at all.

Our new friend Dylan on the other hand... is an original character. *Steps back from the hissing* BUT he has a purpose. Other than Lacey's newest paramour. I promise.

Please see the below link for inspiration behind the Ballroom, Dylan and the Duke's attire:
http://theplasticview.tumblr.com/post/109798591697/the-gate-chapter-eleven-inspirations

Thanks for reading!
Chapter Notes

Big news guys- The Gate has a BETA.

And not just any Beta- a Fairy Godmother Beta. I would like to take this moment to enthuse my undying gratitude for the fabulous Ramloth.

I sent her this chapter last night and she sent it back to me this morning. Just stellar. She- unlike myself- paid attention in English Class and she really made this chapter top notch.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A loud rapping on the door signaled the start of the day.

Lacey ignored it. She burrowed deeper into the sheets despite the sunlight streaming in from the window.

The knocking persisted. “Princess Belle? Will you and Lady Ariel be taking lunch in your room or the parlor?”

Lacey rolled over to glare sleepily at the door. Ariel stirred from her own bathtub stupor, one eye open in response. Lacey yawned as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “We have a parlor?” she asked aloud.

Ariel shrugged. “What’s a parlor?”

“Well,” Lacey turned back to the maids with a frosty smile. “Isn’t there another entrance from the hall?”

“Lady Ariel is still sleeping,” Lacey lied. She brushed her bed head hair out of her face. “The parlor will be fine.”

The one with the tray blinked at her. “Your Royal Highness,” she said as if speaking to a small child. “The parlor is attached to the bedroom.”

Ariel raised her hands helplessly in response.

“I’ll meet you in there,” Lacey dictated, closing the door firmly in their faces. She slid the bolt
home before making her way quickly to the door she assumed to be the parlor. “Go back to sleep,” she told Ariel.

The teen nodded as she sank back down into the depths of the tub. Lacey exited into the parlor just as the maids entered from the hallway. Before the first maid even placed the lunch tray down, Lacey reached for it. Her stomach growled loudly which seemed to amuse the maids enough to forgive her for her initial abruptness. Lacey settled down at the parlor table to eat as the maids arranged themselves along the back wall. The food was just as tantalizing as the meal last night. Lacey had already devoured half the chicken before one maid stepped forward shyly. “Princess Belle? Perhaps it’d be best to get dressed?” She held up a tan walking suit.

Lacey slowly put the chicken down. She had forgotten she had agreed to walk in the gardens with the Queen today. "Thank you," she agreed, standing with one last forlorn look at her plate.

The two younger maids made short work of the removal of her nightgown. After throwing on her slip, they began to expertly lace up the corset. Lacey caught a glimpse of the head maid’s face as she picked up the demolished tray and she swore it was smugger than necessary. “Leave that,” Lacey wheezed as someone tugged her corset tight. She glanced over her shoulder in reproof but the little maids ignored her. “Lady Ariel may be hungry when she wakes.”

“But-!”

Lacey glared her down, which was impressive considering she was half dressed and at half lung capacity. “Thank you,” she stressed. "That’ll be all. You may go.”

The head maid let herself out with a hard click of the door, probably the closest to slamming the door a servant dared. The large mirror across the room reflected the two younger maids giggling silently behind her. They stilled guilty when they caught her eye in the mirror. Lacey shot them a wry grin as she shrugged her shoulders. The young one looked away with a deep blush, but the older one caught her eye for a minute longer with an answering mischievous grin on her face.

“Do you have names?” Lacey asked as she tried to distract herself from the painful tug of the corset around her ribs. The young one giggled again. She reminded Lacey of Ariel.

The older one shushed her with an elbow. “My name is Priscilla, Your Royal Highness. This giggle box is Charlotte.”

Charlotte tried to stop giggling and failed miserably. Her laughter was infectious and Lacey joined in only to be cut short as Priscilla tightened the corset further. ”How do you like working in the castle?” Lacey asked them, trying to keep her mind off the loss of blood circulation to her stomach.

Priscilla walked around to gather the walking suit from its hanger. Charlotte came around to adjust the corset. Her dark hair peeked out from underneath her maid’s cap and fell into her brown eyes. “It’s a pleasure,” Priscilla answered in rote. The older girl's hair was perfectly in place, but her glasses were smudged from soot, and her fingers had ink smeared at the tips.

“Does this castle have a library?” Lacey asked casually.

Charlotte looked over at Priscilla, who frowned slightly. With a subtle shake of her head, she prompted Charlotte to remain silent. “Yes, Your Royal Highness. The King’s collection is very grand,” she replied without looking in her in the eye. She held up a silken blouse for Lacey to slip her arms through.

“Does it have any books on the Land of Believers?”
Charlotte began on the tiny row of pearl buttons as Priscilla went back to gather the walking outfit’s skirt. “We wouldn’t know, Your Royal Highness,” Priscilla responded. “Servants aren’t allowed in His Majesty’s Royal Library.”

Lacey pulled a face before stepping into the puddle of fabric of the skirt. Priscilla pulled it up as Charlotte gathered the jacket. “That’s ridiculous,” Lacey scoffed. “How are you-?” Lacey shook her head in annoyance before she exhaled noisily. “Well, I’ll speak to Her Majesty about that. Educating workers to learn should be encouraged.”

Neither of them responded, but Charlotte gave her a small, pleased smile the next time Lacey caught her eye, and Priscilla was gentle as she combed out Lacey’s curls. As Charlotte laced up her walking boots, Lacey managed to sneak two more bites of the cold chicken before another knock came to the door. Without pausing, Grimsby entered and bowed low to Lacey as the maids moved to depart.

“Thank you, ladies,” Lacey called out.

Grimsby frowned in puzzlement at the unanticipated gratitude, but both young women smiled warmly back as they gently closed the door behind them. “Good afternoon, Your Royal Highness,” he greeted. “Are you ready for your audience with the Queen?”

“One second,” Lacey said. She hurried to the table where the lunch sat, and made a plate for Ariel. “Wait here, I won’t be a moment.”

She fumbled for the door handle and barely managed to swing the bedroom door open without spilling the food. Ariel had gone back to sleep, her head half submerged underwater so tiny bubbles floated to the surface of the bath water. Lacey closed the door firmly behind her so Grimsby didn’t peek in and placed the tray where Ariel could reach it. She collected her tiara, placing it in her hair before she double-checked that the bedroom door was bolted.

When Lacey rejoined Grimsby, she pointed towards the bedroom door. “See to it that no one enters in my absence,” she commanded before she breezed past him to the door. “Lady Ariel is worn and weary and needs her rest. I do not want to hear of anyone in our quarters until I call for them. Is that understood?”

“Of course, Your Royal Highness,’ Grimsby agreed without hesitation, apparently used to royals being particular. “I will see to it. Now, if you’ll follow me…“

He took her down the long hall. In the sunlight from the windows, the ornate detailing of the wall décor and the beautiful patterns of the rugs glowed bright. When they came to the staircase that led to the Grand Foyer, Grimsby walked past it, heading towards the other wing of the second story. Lacey followed behind him as best she could. The narrow skirt of her walking suit did not allow her to take long strides and the heeled boots pinched at her ankles. The walk with the Queen was going to be a chore.

They arrived at an open door where two guards stood imposingly. Grimsby walked past them, and Lacey followed him into what appeared to be the Queen’s day room.

“Ah, there you are.”

Queen Christiana waved Lacey in and dismissed Grimsby with her thanks. The Queen wore a light grey walking suit, full skirts with a beautiful tailored jacket over a white lace blouse. Her dark hair had been piled artfully in a bun with her crown her only jewelry. She looked young and fresh, the late night celebrations did not show at all on her classic features. Lacey tried not to hate her for
that. Charlotte and Priscilla had dabbed some rouge on Lacey's cheeks and lips, but the dark circles under her eyes weren't fooling anyone.

The Queen took Lacey's hands in her gloved ones. She squeezed their joined hands gently. “How are you enjoying your stay, my dear?”

Lacey smiled back. “Your Majesty has been very kind. Lady Ariel and I have wanted for nothing. I am in your debt for taking two shipwrecked souls in during such an eventful time.”

“Nonsense,” Queen Christiana replied. The sun poured into the pale blue chamber and illuminated the walls with their delicate wallpaper in a myriad of color. Through the window, the gardens stretched out towards the town. The green shrubbery reached upwards in hedges and waves and though they were beautiful from a distance, Lacey didn't look forward to being trapped in them all day. She had never been a nature person.

“I must apologize,” the Queen continued. “I was hoping to walk with you in our gardens today, but unfortunately a delicate matter of state has arisen and I need to see to it. I had asked my son to accompany you around the grounds, but he begs leave as he is rather tired of the gardens.”

Lacey smiled in understanding. “I believe he may just be weary of female companionship. I take no offense to his wanting some time to himself.”

The Queen nodded. “You will forgive a mother her whims, but I did tell him that as a visiting princess you had a right to an audience with him. He proposed to take you down to the town, but I told him you would not be interested in seeing the town marketplace when you could relax in our private gardens.”

“Your Majesty,” Lacey said, struck by a rather cunning idea. “As you know, I washed up on shore not far from your town market.” The Queen raised her hand to her chest in concern, startled by the frank addressing of such a traumatic memory. “I was confused, lost, and barely conscious when a young boy and his father found me on the beach. I would like very much to pay a visit to them to repay their kindness.”

“My dear,” the Queen leaned over and cupped Lacey’s face in her hand. “I am so grateful for such a woman to come into our lives and to have you here… Well, it brings a great joy to my old heart.” The Queen stood and called out towards the closed door. “Guards.” The door swung open to admit a guard who strode in at attention. His eyes were fixed on the space between the Queen and herself.

“Your Majesty.”

“Please bring Prince Eric at once. He has a promise to keep.”

Lacey settled her face in a calm, regal repose and tried not to rejoice at her own cleverness.

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As the royal carriage rolled straight past the extensive gardens and out the castle's main gate, neither of its two occupants said a word. A reticent Prince Eric held the reins to the impressive black horses which pulled the open carriage. Resisting the urge to fidget nervously, Lacey adjusted her tan skirt so the black lace panel in the front gleamed in the sunlight. She adjusted her matching
jacket. The hot tweed and the stiff stomach panel were already making her uncomfortable despite the pleasant breeze from their quick pace.

"Am I going too fast?" Eric asked, breaking the silence.

Lacey leaned back into the padded seat. "Can it go faster?"

He shot a surprised look over at her. When their eyes met, she offered him a devilish grin and jerked her head at the horses in challenge.

He grinned back. He whipped the reins and yelled a command. The horses took up the challenge with eagerness. They strained at their bits and rushed forward over the uneven surface of the dirt road. Lacey’s loose hair whipped around her face, and she laughed in carefree delight at the adrenaline rush. She leaned forward when the carriage hit dips in the road and whooped with unladylike joy as Eric took a sharp corner which almost spilled them both out the open sides.

They finally slowed as they neared the town, both breathless with laughter. “I have to get me one of these,” she said, patting the open carriage in affection. Eric nodded to a passing farm cart heading out of town. The children in the carriage leaned over the wooden sides and waved in glee at the crown prince.

“IT’s not really the carriage,” Eric said, more to himself than to her. He carefully guided the horses into a trot to ease their muscles. “IT’s the horses.”

Lacey turned to face him more squarely. “So, nothing to do with the driver?” He tensed, and Lacey laughed. He would make a terrible poker player, his face showed his every thought. “Oh relax,” she said with a reassuring pat on his forearm. "I'm not here for your hand in marriage."

“Princess Belle,” he started in embarrassment as his hand went to rub the back of his neck.

“It’s fine,” Lacey said. "I know your mother is pushing me at you. I just wanted to get some one on one time to assure you know that I do not share her intentions.”

“I understand.” His eyes were fixed on the road ahead but his shoulders relaxed. “I appreciate your candor. I must say I'm... relieved.”

Lacey lifted her hand to her heart in fake distress. “Ouch. Way to let a girl down easy.” He looked abashed and she started to laugh. "Eric," she chuckled, shaking her head fondly. "I'm just teasing you. Relax."

He laughed, a warm, sharp bark complete with a head toss. It was a young man’s laughter, free of heartbreak or sorrow. “The Fourth Kingdom has some very independent princesses," Eric said. "I wonder at the caliber of the princes.”

“Terrified mostly,” Lacey quipped which earned her another laugh from the young prince.

"You know, you remind me of the Princess Emma," Eric said, glancing over at her. "We met a few years ago when our parents started trade relations. Do you know her personally?"

“I do actually.” Lacey touched her tiara. “She’s a strong woman.” Eric waved a hand in greeting to a walking woman who stopped and waved enthusiastically in return. “They all love you here,” Lacey marveled. Children tumbled down a field behind them to hurry after the carriage.

“I’ve served with most of the men in the village out at sea.” Eric shrugged. “I spend time down here when I can, with the people. Listen to them, hear what they have to say. I've found it a better
system than listening to a bunch of old men tell me what the people are saying.”

Another man stopped his work in the field to wave at them as they approached the town’s more busy streets. The young prince next to her continued to wave, smile, and greet his people like the prodigal son returned. He was more comfortable here with the people than he was at the castle.

“Why not pull an Emma and run off into the sunset?” Lacey proposed.

Eric shook his head ruefully. “My father has been raising me to rule since I was old enough to understand the game of chess. I couldn't leave my people without a king.”

“You have chess here?” Lacey asked.

He gave her an odd look in return. “All the kingdoms have chess, Belle,” he replied. “Just... checking,” she mumbled.

“Your Royal Highness!” An older man waved happily at them, a young boy perched on his shoulders.

Eric waved back. “Good to see you, Gil! I have business at the market today, but I’ll stop by next week.”

“You’ll be married by next week!” Gil called back with a bawdy gesture.

Eric colored a bit and ducked his head down into his shoulders as they entered the busy area of the town. There were plenty other horses and carriages crowding the road. Her previous ride from town had been in a closed carriage, and she barely remembered anything other than the ball of nerves in her chest.

It was a quaint town. Most buildings had two or three stories, each brightly colored with unique engravings over the doors. Here and there, there was a flock of ravens, a dolphin leaping underneath a sun and even a mermaid but no house numbers. “What are the engravings?” Lacey asked as they passed by a house with a donkey and a rabbit cavorting.

“That,” he explained, pointing back at the donkey and the rabbit, “is the Ass and the Hart on Rue Mer. A young widow lives there with her sister.”

Lacey twisted in her seat to see if she could get a better look at the house. “What about that one?” she asked as they passed by a house that boasted a snake with its tongue in its mouth.


People opened windows and waved down at them as they passed. A few young women called out to Eric, and Lacey enjoyed watching him squirm each time a pretty girl pouted up at him. “Fans?” she teased, just to watch the blush creep down his neck.

“The market is just up ahead,” he said with an embarrassed cough. He guided the horses towards an inn and stable. Horses were being brought in and out from the barn. “We’ll leave our horses here at Fisherman’s Rest.”

Eric spoke a few words to the stable boy and pressed a gold coin in his hand before. When Eric helped Lacey down from the carriage, she noticed his calloused fingers and the scars crisscrossing his palms. He reminded her of the firemen that drank at an old neighborhood bar of hers, all business and honor but with burns and bruises. They lived fast and hard and enjoyed every
second of it.

Eric was still young though. Every time he blushed or shrugged, she remembered in her world, he would be just another college kid, fresh to campus with his daddy’s money, buckets of charm, and a determination to prove himself regardless.

“Did you want to go see the carpenter now?” Eric asked.

Too busy staring at the bustling inn, it took her a moment to realize he had asked her a question. “Sorry, what did you say?”

“Did you want to go see your carpenter now or go to market first?” he repeated.

“The market,” she answered. She had actually no real intention of going to see Gepetto. It had just been a reasonable excuse to go to the town with the prince to avoid spending the day with his mother or locked in a room with a mermaid. “We’ll have plenty of time to stop by on our way out of town.”

As he escorted her down the street, more and more people stopped to bow or curtsey, all pressing for a closer look at Lacey.

“They’ll have us married off by the time we reach market,” Eric whispered down at her as he waved to another family on the other side of the road.

“Is it my crown?” she teased back as she sidestepped a horse’s droppings in the street. “Because I’m not that kind of girl.” She enjoyed needling the young prince. It was an unsuspected pleasure for an only child. “So, tell me more about your realm,” she said, curious despite herself.

“Well, since most of the Seventh Kingdom lies on the coast, our family and the other three major royal families of the Seventh Realm all have castles on the sea. However, my father saw opportunity. He encouraged trade with the other kingdoms, such as Princess Emma’s. He had hoped to secure trade relations with a marriage but...,” Eric shrugged guiltily. “I was sailing to the Eighth Kingdom when a storm hit...you know how that goes.” Lacey nodded hurriedly, clearing her throat before he could press about her own near brush with death. “When I returned, my mother decided I had tempted fate long enough.”

"Grounded you, huh?"

"Grounded?" Eric said thoughtfully, mulling the word over. "Yes, that’s an...excellent way of putting it. She begged me not to go back to sea." Eric looked out over the marketplace to where the docks were filled with ships and sails. "So, here I am. Grounded."

“What about the other realms in the Seventh Kingdom?” Lacey asked. "What do they specialize in?"

“There are four in total. The kingdom to the west specialize in fishing. They provide most of the fish to the interior of the kingdom as well as to the Sixth Kingdom’s palaces, which enjoy year-long fish. The other northern families are ship builders. They have a closer supply to lumber in the north. Most of the ships in all the realms come from there.”

"I met Duke Sebastian of Flounders," Lacey told him. "He said he was from the heartlands?"

Eric grinned. "Flounders, huh? Father always says the Flounders are as loyal as they are exasperating."
"Sounds about right," Lacey said. "He mentioned it was rather unusual for a crown prince to be off at sea?"

“I suppose,” Eric continued as they drifted away. “I just felt like I couldn’t ask these men to trust me to lead them without an understanding of how their lives worked. Ever since I was old enough to hold a rigging, I traveled with different crews to different realms, learning the cultures that make up our world, and building relationships to improve our trade.”

Lacey stopped short to stare up at him. “You’ll make a wonderful king, Eric, even I can see that. So, why are you running from it?”

He folded his arms and looked down his long nose at her. “You aren’t like most princesses, Belle.”

“I get that a lot,” she said. “You didn’t answer my question.”

They reached the end of the first row of stalls, so they stood and looked over the busy dock. Ships were raising their sails as they prepared to launch into the golden afternoon, while others loaded. People yelled directions at each other, their voice mixed neatly with the calls of the seagulls overhead.

Eric avoided the question with one of his own. “Well, why don’t you want to be queen?”

“Is that a crack at my age?”

“No! I was just-!”

“I just managed to survive something that should have killed me,” she said. There was a kernel of truth in her lie, which bothered her. “I’m not interested in finding someone right now. I’m too busy trying to figure out what my life means to me. What I’m going to do with my life, and if that means just trying to survive one day after the other… that’s what it means.”

The sun was starting its slow descent down the eastern sky. “My mother and father were a love match,” Eric told her. “Most are these days. Were your parents?”

Any memory of her parents stung. She shut it back away in the dark part of her mind. “I suppose,” she answered vaguely.

“Well, I don’t just want to marry some girl because of her birth or what her kingdom can do for mine. I’ve been all over the world and I’ve yet to meet her. Now with my father’s memory lapses, Mother wants him to hand the crown down, and if I take the throne unwed, I may never meet her.”

Lacey spoke before she realized the words were out of her mouth. “You didn’t meet the Lady Ariel last night, did you, Eric?”

He shook his head. "Was she from Flounders as well?"

Lacey shook her head. “She was one of my party from the Fourth Realm and who I thought was lost to me forever in the shipwreck but she was washed in your cove the day I arrived. It was a miracle. The sea returned her to me but now… I think perhaps the sea wasn’t delivering her to me.”

He attempted a confused smile, one corner of his lip rising slightly before falling back down in disappointment. “Belle...”

“I’m not matchmaking,” she lied. She turned back to the market place, curious to see the other side
of the wares and stalls before they began to close, and they headed back to the castle for the night. “Besides, I call first dance tonight.”

He bowed to hide his laughter. “You have it, Your Royal Highness.”

“Excellent. Is that pie over there?” she asked before she hurried towards the enticing smell, Eric’s laughter at her back.

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The sun sank deeper into the sky towards the ocean’s horizon.

“We should be heading back,” Lacey said with a sigh.

“Especially if we want to stop by and see your rescuers,” Eric agreed. “Didn’t you say they lived off the beach? There’s an old carpenter on the dunes, but he doesn’t have a son.”

“No,” she said with a shake of her head. “Pinocchio is the one who found me. I’m not sure if he’s technically his son, but there’s no need to see them. We should probably head back.”

“Nonsense,” Eric protested. He headed towards the dunes to the west of the market. “It’ll just take a moment, and I’m curious. I like to think I know most of the people in this town.”

She rolled her eyes in resignation and followed after him. After a few blocks, they arrived on the sandy dunes. Gepetto’s cottage was dark in the fading daylight. A frenzy of clocks signaling the hour greeted them as the sun sank behind the cottage. Eric’s face lit up in open curiosity at the noise. Lacey resisted the urge to sigh as she thought of the mermaid back in her chambers and her unbridled passion for all new things.

“He makes clocks,” Lacey said under her breath. Just as she went to knock, someone yelled a greeting to them from the main road. Eric turned to wave back, but a bright white light from underneath the cottage door caught Lacey's attention. She stared at it transfixed, hand still raised in midair.

“Did you forget how to knock?” Eric laughed. He rapped the door with his knuckles. The sound echoed in the small hut as the clock noise died down, but nobody answered. Eric repeated his knock. “Hello! Anyone home?”

The door swung abruptly open. Both adults looked down at the little boy who opened the door, frown on his face. “I’m not supposed to open the door when Papa is out,” Pinocchio said matter-of-factly, arms crossed over his bony chest.

“You’re doing a great job,” Lacey muttered at him, earning her a surprised look from Eric and an annoyed one from Pinocchio. “Will your father be back soon?”

“I guess,” Pinocchio said sullenly, kicking at the dirt floor. “He just leaves me alone here all day so he can sell at the market.”

“Well,” Eric scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. “You must be the young man who saved Princess Belle from the sea?”

Pinocchio glanced up at her, a sly smirk on his face. “Actually,” he started. “She-!”

“Your Royal Highnesses!”
Gepetto had arrived. He was attempting to bow with a large sack on his back, which was almost the same size as the boy. Eric hurried forward to relieve him of the bag before he carried it into the hut, while Lacey helped Gepetto straighten.

“What did I tell you about bowing,” she admonished. He looked much more tired than he had the other night. “Are you getting sleep, Gepetto?” she asked as she helped him into the house past a sulky Pinocchio. She didn’t see Jiminy, either the man or cricket, anywhere.

“Plenty,” he answered. He reached out for Pinocchio but the boy sidestepped his father’s hand and stayed stubbornly out of reach. “I’ve just had a long day at the market...”

Eric put the bag down and clasped a hand on the shoulder of the green vested Pinocchio. The boy glanced up at him, startled. “With this fine young man here at home? He’s old enough to start selling wares down at the wharf, sir. You should bring him down tomorrow. Show him how it’s done.”

Pinocchio nodded in excitement but Gepetto shook his head wearily. “He should be going to school,” Gepetto insisted as he tried to stand. “Not down at the wharfs.”

“Perhaps I can help,” Eric said, brightening. “For your services to the Princess Belle, I would be happy to help make sure he could attend the local school. Pay for his books and anything he may need, get a proper education and perhaps a job at the castle.”

“I don’t want to go to school!” Pinocchio interrupted with a slam of his foot. “I want to go to sea with the boats!”

Gepetto raised a trembling hand to his face in weariness.

Lacey turned to Eric, desperate to get out of the cottage before it got anymore uncomforatble. “We should be going. I just wanted to stop in and thank you again… Is Jiminy at home? I wanted to thank him as well...“

Gepetto shot a worried look towards Eric who in return was gazing at Lacey in confusion. She ignored both of them as she smiled politely at Gepetto.

“You are most welcome, your Royal Highness,” Gepetto stalled. “I’m afraid Jiminy is out. He’s meeting with a friend... I don’t expect him back before the end of the week.”

Lacey nodded. If the flash of light from earlier hadn’t been Jiminy turning back into his cricket form, what had it been? She looked over at Pinocchio who had stomped off to the corner to play with Figaro.

“You’ll excuse my boy, Your Royal Highness,” Gepetto said to Eric in way of aplogy.

Eric shook his head. “I was that age once,“ Eric said with a warm smile, but he shot a concerned look at the surly boy as they left. Lacey frowned in sheer irritation at the little brat as the door snapped close behind them. The glowing light still bothered her. There was entirely too magic at play in this realm, and no sight of the Imp.

“Didn’t realize Gepetto had a son,” Eric said, a frown on his face. “His wife passed almost fifteen years ago in childbirth. He must have adopted the boy from one of the girls on the docks.”

“Yeah,” Lacey said absently. She turned back to look at the cottage as they headed towards the inn. “You’re probably right.”
She didn’t say much on the ride back to the castle. Her thoughts were back in the cottage by the sea.

Chapter End Notes

Curious about the fashion and the location of Eric's kingdom? Here are some inspiration/research photos:
http://theplasticview.tumblr.com/post/109799987622/the-gate-inspirations-chapter-twelve

In other news, as many of you know- I am over on Tumblr as B_does_the_write_thing. Last Sunday, I had a prompt-a-thon and a few lovely Anons prompted Gate ficlets which I have posted over here as Beyond The Gate. So, if any of you are interested in checking those out, they are available on Ao3.

If you are on tumblr, come find me and follow for the next prompt-a-thon. I loved The Gate prompts because it let me delve into other characters beside Lacey and show you a bit more of the world.

I hope you all enjoyed getting to see Lacey and Eric bond a bit as well as get to see our favorite surly boy and his adorable papa. Ariel and a certain someone who shall remain.... nameless... will return next chapter.

If you are loving The Gate, please let me know! This is such a labor of love for me and every comment, kudo, Tumblr message really makes my day and inspires me to come back here to continue crafting this story. I love sharing it with all of you and I love hearing your thoughts on it- this has been a great community and as Prissygirl and the completebookworm could tell you after this chapter- I will probably put you in here as a token of affection.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lacey opened the door to a wave of feminine laughter. A group of women all clustered around the vanity including Priscilla and Charlotte as well as the dour head maid. Ariel sat at the vanity, half hidden among them. She beamed at Lacey, waving her hand in greeting.

“Welcome back, Princess!” Charlotte cried, returning to her task at hand. “We were just finishing up Lady Ariel’s hair. Doesn’t it look exquisite?”

It truly did. Ariel’s riotous vibrant hair was swept into a braided bun high on the crown of her head. The teen was carefully monitoring Lacey's reaction in the mirror so she gave her a small nod of approval. Two dresses had been laid out on the bed, one a pink velvet brocade and the other a monochromatic silk. “Which one is mine?” Lacey hedged.

“The black and white one if it pleases you, Your Royal Highness.”

Without having to be told, Lacey gratefully peeled off the sticky wool jacket of her walking outfit, the scents of the docks still clung to it. Priscilla reached up to unfasten the buttons of the blouse. Finally free from the chafing material, Lacey gratefully rubbed her neck. A fresh breeze from the open window chilled the sweat of the day on her skin. Across the room, Charlotte pinned a pink flower in at Ariel’s temple, who touched it in reverence.

The older maid from the morning swatted Ariel’s hand away. “Don’t touch it, precious or it'll wilt before the night’s over.” She turned her attention to Lacey, now just in her corset and stays. “Should probably give you a bath,” the woman harrumphed. “But Eric was late getting you back from town so we’ll just have to spritz you with some bath oils. Come on over to the chair so we can do something with your hair.”

As their attention shifted to Lacey, Ariel stood from the vanity to allow her to sit only to settle down at Lacey’s feet. Lacey raised an eyebrow at her. Ariel shot her a disgruntled look which only caused Lacey to laugh. “You want to hear about my day?”

Ariel nodded, reaching out to clasp her hands in excitement.

The maids pulled her tiara off and began to comb out Lacey's hair from where the wind had knotted it. “The Queen was unable to honor our plans so Prince Eric and I went into town. He showed me the market and told me all about his kingdom.”

Ariel nodded eagerly, gesturing for her to continue.

"You'd love the market," Lacey told her. "People come from all the kingdom to trade there. I brought you some ribbon," Lacey said, twisting to see where her skirt had disappeared to. The older maid twisted her head back around forcibly. "Ouch!" Lacey grumbled, jerking her head away from the woman's grip. She gave her a dirty look in the mirror, which was artfully ignored. "What else would you like to know?" Lacey asked Ariel, too distracted to remember what she had been saying.

"What did you think of the prince?" Charlotte asked her.

"Charlotte!" Priscilla scolded, nearly dropping the oils at the girl's boldness.
"No, no, it's fine," Lacey said quickly. "He’s very kind, smart, and eager to lead but also rather humble, almost unassuming. Still a young man in so many ways, but I rather think he'll grow to be a great one."

The maids were silent as they continued to work, but Priscilla was smiling, obviously pleased Lacey liked the Prince. However, the head maid was frowning slightly in the reflection of the mirror. “I have the first dance with the prince tonight,” Lacey confided. At this, the older maid pulled Lacey's hair tight to twist it into curlers. "Ouch!" Lacey complained, reaching up to rub at her scalp. "Watch it!"

"My apologies," the still unnamed maid replied, continuing to twist harder.

At Lacey's feet, Ariel's eyes were downcast in dejection.

"Oh, for heaven’s sake," Lacey grumbled. "However, when I twist my ankle while dancing, he’ll return me back to my companions. Lady Ariel doubtless will be happy to dance the remainder of the set with the Prince."

Ariel scrambled to her knees, clutching at Lacey's hands and squeezing in excitement.

"Off the floor before you stain your gown!" the maid clucked at Ariel, but her tone was more exasperated fondness than scolding.

Ariel got to her feet with a clap of her hands and began to sway back and forth to the time of a silent orchestra. Her arms rose to embrace a ghostly partner, and she waltzed around the room much to the amusement of the maids.

Lacey watched the older woman’s face. “I have no designs on your prince,” Lacey murmured as she closed her eyes against the powder Charlotte applied to her cheeks.

The head maid made no response that she had heard her but as she continued to twist Lacey's hair into ribbons, she employed a gentler touch.

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By the time Lacey and Ariel were deemed presentable, the twin moons of Fae were already high overhead. As Lacey was thanking the maids for their efforts, she caught Priscilla and Charlotte admiring the room’s book shelves. Lacey pulled the head maid aside to request the two young women stay to clean the room and to draw a warm bath shortly before dawn. If the woman thought the request strange, especially considering the room was already sparkling clean, she did not say anything. She ordered Priscilla and Charlotte to stay while the rest departed. Lacey and Ariel left the two young women to their “cleaning”, both already migrating towards the book shelf in barely suppressed glee.

They made their way to the stairs, following the sound of the music. The second evening of the festivities had been underway for a few hours now. Due to their late arrivals, the Princess Belle and Lady Ariel were swiftly announced and made their way into the ballroom with little fuss. Ariel even managed the stairs without glancing down at her feet.

Lacey towed Ariel through the crowd, trying to find a suitable space outside of the crush. A few of Ariel’s admirers from the night before came up to request a dance but Lacey begged their pardon and sent them on their way grumbling in disappointment. While Ariel searched for her Prince, Lacey was looking around the ballroom for Dylan’s tall frame or perhaps the Duke’s stately one when a familiar voice behind her made her turn in greeting.
“You look radiant, Belle,” Prince Eric said warmly.

Lacey smiled, rather pleased with her outfit this evening herself. Her dress was pure white silk with black strokes. The pattern rather reminded Lacey of the wrought iron garden gates from the woods. The design curled on the bodice and then swirled down over the hourglass shape. This bodice was higher than her previous evening’s gown, more delicate though the curls of the design framed her breasts perfectly. The small puffed tulle sleeves of white and black framed her neck before her white opera gloves descended to her fingertips in a tasteful show of modesty.

The dress was mercifully light, but it was still hot in the ballroom. Thankfully, the back doors had been opened due to the size of the crowd. The sea breeze tickled the bare back of Lacey's neck and stirred the feathers pinned in her hair. “Apologies for our tardiness,” Lacey said, taking in the Prince’s more formal attire this evening. He wore navy blue breeches and a sharply cut waistcoat. “I was not deemed fit to enter the ball until they got all the knots out of my hair from our ride today.”

Eric smiled mischievously but before he answered, Ariel caught his eye and words failed him. With Ariel’s muteness, both of them were left staring in stunned silence at the other. Lacey quite forgotten.

Finally, Eric seemed to remember himself. “Belle, will you do the honor of introducing me to your companion?”

Trying to hide her amusement, Lacey nodded regally. “Prince Eric, this is the Lady Ariel.”

While Lacey had been unsure about Ariel wearing pink with her coloring, it suited her. The rose colored bodice gathered over her cleavage, and the bodice narrowed to a sharp v over her flat stomach. It did have large mutton chop sleeves high up on the shoulders unlike her previous evening’s dress but it was tied neatly with ribbons to the fanned golden collar that rose up to frame her face and hair. Ariel practically glowed.

Eric’s gaze continued to trace her delicate features. He lingered on her quivering eyelashes for a second and then he turned to Lacey as he fought to find his voice.

Lacey managed to avoid shaking her head at the besotted expression upon his face and continued the introductions. “Lady Ariel, this is His Royal Highness, Prince Eric.”

Ariel sank into a curtsy, her eyes still locked on the floor. When Eric helped her up from her curtsy, her eyes flew to his in nervous anticipation. Without a moment’s pause, the two smiled foolishly at each other. “I am honored to make your acquaintance, Lady Ariel,” Eric murmured and Ariel colored at the use of her name. When she did not respond, Eric glanced at Lacey with barely suppressed nervousness.

Growing tired of watching the two consume each other with their eyes, Lacey faked a small yawn. “I am afraid our day trip has worn me out, Your Royal Highness,” Lacey lied. “If it pleases you, perhaps you might dance with my companion while I go outside for some fresh air?”

Eric shook himself from the waking dream before him. He smiled sheepishly. “I promised you a dance…”

Lacey shook her head. “I’ll count it fulfilled if you spend it with Lady Ariel.”

Neither moved from the spot as Lacey left them, Ariel’s small frame dwarfed by his taller one as dancers swirled around them. A few scheming noblewomen cursed bitterly as Lacey brushed past
them. Half the ballroom were already talking about the beauty that had captured the Prince’s attention. Eric led Ariel to the dance floor. People stood aside to look as the handsome pair started a slow waltz despite the livelier music. The other dancers began to stop to watch the beautiful couple. Lacey smiled to herself as she skimmed the wall, headed towards the balcony.

“Artfully done,” a smooth voice congratulated her from the doorway. She smiled as the Duke stepped out into the light. Tonight, he wore a shadowy gray blazer and dark pants. He held a glass of champagne out to her in celebration.

“That was almost embarrassingly easy,” Lacey confessed.

“Could be true love,” the Duke remarked.

“The course of which never did run smooth,” Lacey quipped back.

“A cynic?” he laughed. “How unexpected of a princess such as yourself.”

“Really? Why would you say that?”

“Rescued by a lowly carpenter from the sea’s grip? Taken to the castle of a prince who just happened to be looking for a wife before heroically plucking your own companion from the sea? My dear,” he twinkled down at her, winking before taking another drink. “You are the very epitome of a princess in peril, just awaiting a prince to sweep her off her feet. A cynical view on love does not usually come in such a romantic package.”

The orchestra had switched to a slow waltz. A few other couples joined in but most watched as the Prince tucked Ariel’s head to his chest. Nothing existed outside the two of them.

“Duke,” Lacey sighed. “You’ll have to hold my secret. You see, I am far from being a model princess. I don’t believe in true love. I simply believe in attraction and the power of a person’s own self-interest. I don’t mind sharing this with you because I can tell you are a similar soul, or you wouldn’t be standing here, distracting me from my rendezvous.”

The Duke’s lip twitched in amusement. “If I am such a soul, why not curse me as the scoundrel in this piece? Every good story needs a good villain.”

Lacey shook her head, the feathers fluttering about her tiara. “Perhaps this isn’t that good of a story, Duke Sebastian.”

“I don’t believe that. Do you?”

Another nobleman joined them. Duke Sebastian greeted him and made introductions before they began to discuss the maritime trade. Growing bored, Lacey nodded in farewell before she headed towards the back door. Noticing a woman standing before the open door, handkerchief in hand as she watched the dance end, Lacey turned for one last look at her success. Eric was bowing to Ariel as she sank down in a graceful curtsey. There was no shaking or clumsiness evident in her now.

Outside, a few other couples were giggling on benches but most were more subdued than last night’s lovers. Most were simply enjoying a break from the overheated ballroom. Walking to the balcony edge, Lacey glanced down into the gardens. Another waltz started in the distance. Lacey stood there still as a statue as she gazed out into the night. Her white silk dress glowed in the darkness. She closed her eyes against the two moons in the sky and lifted her chin to let the breeze off the sea play across her face.

For a moment, she could almost be back in Storybrooke. The music and the giggling lovers faded
out as she listened to her own breath. The foreignness of this place was a constant reminder of her powerlessness. She was very much alone in this world she did not understand. Utterly alone in a world of mermaids and Imps, men-crickets and princes…

Would it be different if she had Emma beside her? Or someone who might look at her the way Eric had gazed down at Ariel without even knowing her name?

Could that even be real?

Magic was real, Lacey had accepted that.

But true love…

The memory of Ariel on the sea rock came back to her. A teenager crying in pain as her fins split into legs and her voice was ripped from her. All for the love of a stranger.

Lacey had tricked that poor mermaid into doing that to get a bag of ink. Because…

Because she had never really believed that a prince would fall for the girl in just three nights. Lacey had manipulated an idealistic girl and hadn’t thought twice.

Cynic? She pressed her palms harder into the balustrade, more like a manipulating pawn, ignorant of the end game but carrying out the master plan without question. She snorted in rebuff at her maudlin thoughts. She was eager to take her mind off the confusion and twinges of guilt building up in her stomach. Where was Dylan?

The silence had spread. The breeze was no longer blowing, and the birds of the gardens and beach had fallen silent as had the partygoers. Lacey opened her eyes. The stars were shining still and the palace lights still blazed behind her. Someone’s eyes raked across her exposed neck. Her skirt rasped against the rough stone as she spun, and there he was.

“Hello dearie.”

The Imp stood before her as if he had been there the whole time. His thigh high boots covered black breeches of scales which disappeared underneath a green and red leather evening jacket. Past him, the dancers were frozen in time, laughter and merriment etched across still faces. The nearest couple had their hands buried each other's hair, an intimate snapshot of young love.

Lacey snorted. “Took you long enough.”

He bowed in response, his hand extending out towards her in a courtier pose.

“I got you your precious ink before the first night had even started.”

“Ah! You made a deal, dearie,” he cackled as he straightened with a flourish. “As a representative of mine-“

“I have to honor my promises? Fine, I have one more night with Ariel before she goes off and lives happily ever after.”

“Oh! Careful,” he squeaked, leaning in closer to her. “That sounds awfully like jealously…”

“Don’t be silly. I helped the happy couple find each other. I assume I’ll be allowed to leave my room to attend the wedding?”

The Imp had made himself comfortable, leaning against the castle walls. She settled neatly on a
nearby stone bench which was unoccupied due to its proximity to the window and the light. “The magic will wear off on the dawn of the third evening,” he shared, picking at his claws. “It’s not forever, you know. Then, she’ll return to the sea.”

“Or become a Princess,” she countered, “which after tonight seems possible.”

“Oh?”

She ignored his sarcasm. She adjusted her gown so it draped enticingly over her legs, her ankle peeking out.

The Imp watched her primping with unconcealed disdain. He furrowed his brow. “What are you doing?”

“Waiting for someone. So, if you would be so kind as to unfreeze time, and let us non-magical folk get back to our lives?”

He pushed away from the wall and Lacey tensed despite herself. Her current surroundings had given her some courage but her apprehension of him had not entirely faded. “Careful, dearie,” he warned. “It would be best not to confuse stupidity for bravery.”

Before she could respond, the music and the breeze crashed back in on her as time restarted. The Imp had vanished much to her irritation. Before she could react, Dylan exited the ballroom, looking around in the darkness.

He was wearing the same outfit as the night before. Puzzled by this, Lacey did not call out to him. Why would he wear the same outfit as the night before?

When his eyes fell on her, he came over swiftly. She shook her head to clear it of thoughts and rose to meet him. As they reached each other, he lowered his head for a kiss. When he flicked his tongue to trace her teeth, she opened her mouth to him. He moved them away from the window, shielding her from anyone looking out into the night.

He broke the kiss to trace his thumb along her cheek down to her jaw. “Belle...”

She tugged him towards the stairs to the garden. Yet, he didn’t budge.

He traced the back of her hand with his other thumb, rubbing in circles that made her feel warm and pliable in his grip. He gently pulled her back to him. For a moment, it was pleasant in his arms. He was solid and warm and smelled like the sea. However, after a few moments, she began to overheat. She twisted her way out his embrace, readjusting her bodice and sleeve caps before turning back to the garden. “Shall we?”

“Belle.” He pulled her clasped hands up to his chest. “Marry me. Be my wife.”

Lacey licked her lips as she issued a tight smile but it did not reach her eyes. She was horribly aware how much larger he was than her and how it would look to her hosts if a princess was caught out on the balcony in a non-nobleman's embrace. “Dylan, let’s just enjoy this evening. We can go back down to our nook in the garden, and then I want you to meet Ariel.” Lacey wet her lips, glancing back inside to see if anyone was nearby but everyone’s attention seemed to be on something else. A quiet romantic string piece was playing now, and she thought of an idea. “Dance with me,” she said, pulling her hands free. “Please?”

He watched her, slight concern in his blue eyes before he nodded gravely. He offered her his arm and guided her inside. She hoped the Duke might step in and distract Dylan so she had a chance to
think, but the Duke was nowhere in sight. Dylan’s arms went about her, raising her arm as he started to move to the music. He was as graceful on the dance floor as he was learning her body. The gilded ceiling spun overhead as the music picked up its tempo. She thought she glimpsed Ariel dancing nearby, a whir of pinkish reds, but Dylan was moving her too quickly. He was waltzing her closer to the main door that led back to the castle.

Lacey’s feet strained to follow his steps, her lack of dance knowledge forcing her to simply follow behind him, powerless to stop him or change course. The music swelled on a high note just as she met Ariel’s gaze as Eric swept her past. Ariel’s smile slipped away as she caught sight of Lacey’s expression but Eric whirled her away.

The music ended with a flourish. Before Lacey could sink into a curtsey, Dylan lifted her slightly, turning her expertly to the stairs and escorting her down them. The guards did not budge.

“Dylan, stop!” Lacey dug her heels into the carpeted rug of the hallway. “What is going on?”

When he saw Lacey was alarmed, he stepped back towards her, falling to his knees before her in apology. “Princess Belle, I apologize,” he mumbled, pressing his warm cheek into her hands. She blinked, thrown off but moved to cradle his face in her gloved hands. She let him trace patterns with his fingertips over hers. “I- I was hoping to go somewhere more private. I thought perhaps... if you can not agree to marry a merchant’s son out of love, perhaps... you could still spend one last evening with him instead?”

A throbbing pulsed below her stomach as Dylan nuzzled his head firmer into her skirts, blue eyes gazing up at her with promise. Lacey sank down, her skirts puffing out as she took his face in hers and kissed him slowly. He stood and lifted her upwards with him until they were pinned to a nearby wall. Portraits of royals stared down at them in wordless disappointment.

After a heated session where her bodice moved lower and lower and her skirt rose higher and higher, footsteps stopped them as she whimpered into his shoulder. He pressed a kiss to her collarbone, sweat from heat and pleasure mixing on their skins. “Is there somewhere we can go?”

He trailed his fingers along her dress, leaving sticky prints on the intricate gown. It was hard to think after his ministrations. Her body screamed to just force his hand back and finish his teasing but the unusual weight of the tiara on her head made her take a breath. “The cove,” she whispered, a devilish grin on her face.

“After you, my lady,” he whispered, sucking her neck until she pushed him away with a cry. She tugged his hand towards the door that would lead them down to the private beach.

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After they had finished rolling in the sand, Lacey lay sated. Her bodice ripped open and her corset was underneath her head in the sand. Its hooks and ribbons were no match for Dylan’s capable hands in their passion. Her skirt was crumbled beneath her. What would she tell the maids? She pushed it out of her mind, tracing Dylan’s bicep in the fading moonlight as they lay on the beach.

Dylan was quiet, not sleeping, but staring out at the sea. The moons dipped closer and closer to the horizon. She tugged a lock of his hair to get his attention, meeting his blue gaze with a smile. “Can I see you again tomorrow?” she teased, rising up on her elbows to kiss him. When he pulled away, Lacey was left leaning on her elbows and blinking up at him in confusion. “Dylan?”

He caressed her face in the fading darkness. “Will you marry me and be my love?”
“Dylan,” she turned away from him. “I can’t.”

He stood as the moons disappeared beneath the waves. “I won't let you go.”

“What are you doing?” she asked, rolling over to watch him.

He picked up a rock and reached underneath it to pull out a rubber skin.

“Wait- is that a wet suit?” Lacey asked, laughing.

He ignored her as he draped it about his shoulders, coming back to her and raising her into his arms. He kissed her deeply as his fingers tore the ribbons that kept her skirt tied around her waist, letting it fall way from her until she stood naked as he was in the oncoming dawn.


He stopped his ministrations and started to wade out into the water.

Lacey shoved his chest in playful protest. “I’m not the one who needs to cool off.” She tried to wiggle out of his arms but he held her tight, wading further into the waves. “Dylan,” she said, growing serious as she noted his set jaw. “Put me down, this is not funny!”

“You called me.”

She pushed feebly against him but her legs were already in the water and his grip was like steel. “Dylan- stop it, I’m not kidding!”

“You’ll love me,” he assured her but another voice carried over the wind.

“Ariel! Wait! Come back!”

Lacey twisted in Dylan's arms to find Ariel rushing towards them. The young girl’s feet kicked up sand as she ran towards the beach, Eric not far behind her. Ariel’s waved in warning, her mouth moving frantically but no sound escaped. Ignoring Eric’s continued cries for her to stop, Ariel plunged into the water after them. As the sun began to rise, Eric stumbled to a stop as he saw Dylan clutching Lacey to his chest.

“Ariel!” Lacey shouted, reaching out as Dylan waded deeper. Ariel dove into the water just as the sun peeked over the horizon but so did Dylan. They plunged downwards into the murky unlit depths of the ocean. Lacey pushed against his strong chest, his heart beating madly against hers just as a white light shot around her. Lacey’s eyes burned in the salt water, but she could not close them. Before her eyes, Dylan twisted into a seal-like creature as the white glow faded from him. His blue eyes had transformed into two black eyes, hands twisting into flippers that wrapped around her and dragged her down.

Lacey opened her mouth to scream but only bubbles emerged as she was dragged into the depths of the sea.

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks again to Ramloth- my Fairy Godmother Beta Queen.
So, I hope all of you have been getting a chance to check out the inspirations behind the Gate's fashion and settings. Prince's Eric's Kingdom is all set in the 1890 fashion period of Europe- and I really love the looks from that era.

You can see this chapter's fashion inspirations here:
As the sun rose over the Seventh Kingdom, its rays gently cut through the curtain of clouds to break the embrace of the sea and sky. Light sparkled across the ocean’s waves, spreading over the shoreline to where a man knelt in the sand. Various attendants poured down the castle stairs like ants, all calling for their prince in panicked confusion. His blue gaze, which had been compared to the sea and sky more times than he would care to admit, focused on the receding ripples that were fast disappearing as a new wave crested in the morning surf.

“Your highness!” squeaked Grimsby. He stumbled in his elevated evening dress pumps as he tottered through the damp sand towards the tide. “What in-?”

The prince ignored them all, staring out at sea with a despairing expression that stilled even the usually proper Grimsby’s chattering.

“Eric?” he wavered, forgetting propriety in his concern for his young charge. He stooped down a bit to peer into the young man's face before following his gaze out towards the sea. “What is it?”

Eric did not answer. He continued to scan the horizon, searching for either the red glint of a young woman’s hair or the glistening green scales of the mermaid tail which had broken the water surface moments after Ariel had dived in.

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Under the waves and ignorant of the scene unfolding on the beach, Lacey struggled to escape the grip of the sea creature.

The chill of the ocean increased as they plunged down to the depths. Lacey's head went fuzzy as her eyesight blackened. Her skin was pimpled with the cold everywhere but where she was pressed to the soft skin of Dylan’s new form. He cut smoothly through the waves, pressing her to his side with his flipper as his tail bore them forward along the current. Lacey pushed against him again, feebler and feebler as her oxygen dwindled away. The sunlight from above now completely faded as they passed underneath a rocky projection, an underwater grotto of sorts.

With a sudden movement of his great head, the creature looked over at her, whiskers tickling her cheek which quivered in her suffocating terror. With a powerful slap of his tail, he surged upwards and their heads broke the surface of the water. They were in a cavern of some sort, an underwater air pocket. Dylan released her, but did move from her side, making odd noises as he sniffed about her.

Lacey barely noticed, too busy gasping for air. Floundering slightly, she bobbed up and down in the water, nearly blind with the curtain of hair plastered to her face. She pushed her hair out of her eyes and with a sinking sensation realized Emma's tiara was gone. Lacey felt oddly naked without it, as if a part of her had disappeared in the waves. There were other things to be concerned with, starting with how she was going to survive this mess. Dylan stared at her shrewdly as she began to swim towards what looked like high ground.

The underwater space was cold, damp, and dark, but a meager light came from a softly glowing plant covering the walls of the cave. As she swam, Lacey began to shiver violently, a mixture of
cold, rage and fear. “I am sick,” Lacey hissed at the creature. “Sick,” she repeated louder, “of being carried away in the night by crazy magical creatures who want to drown me!”

Her voice echoed in the cave around them. Dylan snorted loudly, tossing his head before gliding towards her in the water. She turned and tried to get a better grip on the rocks to boost herself up, but her shivering made it all but impossible. An unexpected, upward push from the huge creature underneath her propelled her ungracefully to the rocky platform, scratching her elbow and knee painfully. She turned to lash out at him but as Dylan lumbered himself up on the platform himself, she got a good look at his new form.

He was more sea lion than seal with a massive head and a mane of fur with close-cropped ears laid flat on his skull in challenge. His black eyes were narrowed; long whiskers twitching fitfully and his dark brown skin. He lumbered closer to her, head raised proudly with his chest thrust out.

Lacey hastily backed up a bit. Her nudity was more annoying than embarrassing so she carefully got to her feet. “Look,” Lacey started, careful to keep the gaze of the creature before her. “Dylan, I think you may have misunderstood...“

He let out a loud growling bark, head flipping to the side in negation.

Lacey stilled, catching a glimpse of the sharp teeth lining the very powerful jaw of the thing before her. “You can’t keep me here,” she tried to explain but Dylan was lumbering back to the water, flippers smacking comically on the stone as he awkwardly waddled away from her. “Hey,” Lacey called, “Wait, you have to take me back!”

He ignored her, diving gracefully into the water and disappearing under the ripples, back down to the cold depths of the dark, deep sea.

She shook her head in disgust as she walked towards the edge. “Great,” Lacey mumbled. “You’re just like every other man. Walk away as soon as you don’t want to hear-!“

A redhead popped out of the water, eliciting a small scream out of Lacey who fell backwards in alarm.

“Belle!” Ariel exhaled in relief.

“Dylan! He’s a-!“

“Selkie,” Ariel finished for her.

"Wait- a what?”

Ariel let out an exasperated huff, a trick she must have learned from Lacey. “He’s a selkie. I noticed him as you were dancing but I didn’t think you would be silly enough to go down to the shore with him! When I didn't see you in the ballroom, I thought the worst. What in the depths were you thinking?”

Lacey got to her feet in astonishment. “Are you yelling at me?”

Ariel looked down guiltily “I get a bit testy when I worry,” Ariel admitted, toying with the strings of her corset. “It’s just... I saw the selkie drag you under and if his cave was too far out at sea you wouldn't have survived the swim.”

“What about Eric?” Lacey interrupted. "He was right behind you he would have...he would have seen you change."
Ariel’s eyes dimmed. “He’s safe on shore, but we need to get out of here before the selkie returns from his hunt.”

“Can we go back to what the hell a selkie is?”

Ariel cocked her head at her in confusion. “You don’t know what a selkie is?”

“I’m not from the coast,” Lacey answered. "Give me the cliff notes version."

Ariel shook her head, tail flicking the surface behind her in agitation, but she seemed to understand well enough. “Selkies are shape shifters. They can shed their skin to go on land, but they have to return to the sea at day or risk being stuck on shore forever in their human form…“

Lacey had once again been ignorant enough to almost get herself killed. The safety of the Imp’s castle had been boring, but she was quickly realizing how right he and Emma had been about the dangers of this world.

“…brought you back here to be his bride,” Ariel concluded, unaware Lacey had stopped listening. “So, we need to go before he comes back, because I’m not sure I can outswim an alpha selkie while towing you.”

“Wait, bride?” Lacey turned, catching the last half of that. “That chauvinistic-! I told him-!”

“Belle, we really need to go before-!”

“Oh, but my dears, you just got here!” A tentacle came slithering out of the shadows, suction cups puckering and echoing as seven other long tentacles followed, carrying out a monster from the darkness. "Why the rush?"

“Ursula!” Ariel whimpered, ducking her head. “We- we are honored by your presence…”

“Are you?” the creature drawled, coming fully into the light. It was like nothing Lacey had ever seen. She had the head and torso of a woman, dark skin with sagging breasts pebbled with starfish and barnacles. Her hair was a dirty gray, twisted on her lead like a conch shell, seaweed tangled in like highlights, but her bottom half was that of an octopus. “And yet your companion does not bow.”

“Uh, Ariel?” Lacey stuttered, mind fried by this new development. "What am I looking at here?"

“But then she is not from the sea, is she?” Ursula continued as if Lacey had not spoken. She raised a tentacle to her cheek in exaggerated confusion. “In fact, she’s not even from this world.”

Ariel glanced at Lacey in confusion before back down at the water’s surface in consternation. “She’s from the second kingdom, Ursula, from the inlands. She does not know-!“

“Silence,” Ursula hissed, wrenching her gaze from Lacey to the little mermaid. “I’ll get to you in a moment, you little thief.”

Ariel quailed, ducking her shoulders under the water level so only her eyes and hair showed in the darkness.

The creature moved towards Lacey with a sickening squelching noise of tentacles and suction cups. “Tell me, what are you doing in my realm? And don’t lie to me. I’m not as gullible as that little guppy.”
Lacey was careful to keep her eyes fixed on the rocks behind the octopus-woman. Her usual habit of asking a million questions squelched by the insanity of the entire situation. “I was brought here against my will. By a- a selkie! I did not mean to intrude in your kingdom.”

Ursula waved a thick arm in dismissal. “I’m aware of that. You cried into the ocean and called him forth from the depths.”

“Belle, you didn’t!”

Ursula turned on Ariel fiercely and the small girl disappeared back into the water, her eyes the only part of her visible under her floating red hair. “Oh, but she did,” Ursula said with savage glee “And he answered. I can smell him on you. You mated with a selkie on land, and now he has brought you to the sea to be his bride. You’ll of course be dead within a week from thirst, but they don’t understand those things, the dumb fools. But what I’m really interested in,” the Goddess continued, swirling closer so she was merely feet from Lacey, “is why our little mermaid here has come to your rescue.”

There was something at play Lacey didn't quite understand. She raised her shoulders in a careless shrug to play for time. “Hero complex?”

Ursula’s eyes narrowed into slits. They were filled with an intelligence, power, and age that she had only seen in one other set of eyes in her life. While Urusla's were black inky orbs, the Imp's had been golden, reptilian. With a laugh, Ursula twisted away from her, scuttling to the water’s edge before slipping in and gliding smoothly to Ariel, who twisted away slightly but did not flee. Ursula grabbed her arm from below and hoisted her right arm up roughly. The golden bracelet was still locked on her wrist. “What a pretty bauble,” Ursula cooed. “Quite rare. Wherever did you get it?”

“Belle gave it to me,” Ariel answered dutifully. “So, I might see what it was like to walk on the shore.”

“A gift?” Ursula asked. “She asked for nothing in return?”

“N-no, Ursula,” Ariel stumbled, holding herself as best she could to alleviate the painful grip on her arm. “I saved her from the surf.” Ariel’s eyes met Lacey’s and she smiled even as tears sprang to her eyes.

Lacey swallowed the lump in her throat.

“Oh, so she just gave it to you as a reward?“ Ursula needled, her fingers tightening on Ariel's arm until the girl was grimacing in pain.

“Leave her alone,” Lacey demanded. She stood tall, ignoring her nudity and staring down the odd monstrosity, which bobbed below her in the black water.

“You? You dare order me?” Ursula raised herself in the water as it rose up around her in a fountain spring propelling her and Ariel to Lacey’s height, water rolling underneath them in a tempestuous fountain. “The Goddess of the Sea?”

“Belle, don’t,” Ariel pleaded, arm pinned to her side.

“Tell her the truth,” Ursula spat, eyes flashing in sadistic delight. “Tell her or I’ll break her arm and then tell her myself.”

Silence filled the cave. Lacey drew in a gulp of the stale air before she turned away her glare from
Ursula to meet Ariel’s hurt gaze.

“Belle?”

“Ariel, I’m not an actual princess.“

“That’s okay,” Ariel replied, shaking her head. “I knew that.“

“Wait- what?” Lacey had thought she had been quite rather convincing.

“Well, one princess can usually tell another one.“

“You’re a princess?” Lacey exclaimed. “You didn’t tell me that!”

Ariel offered a sheepish grin, but Ursula squeezed her arm and Ariel’s smile slid off her face in pain. “A thieving little codfish is what you are,” Ursula admonished, flinging her up on the rocky shelf beside Lacey.

Ariel cried out as she skidded to a stop, Lacey quickly kneeling to her and helping her sit upwards. “I’m sorry,” Ariel murmured, gently touching the bracelet. “I had to! I had no choice but to steal it.”

“You didn't steal it, I gave it to you,” Lacey said in confusion.

"Not that...” Ariel said miserably. "You said it wouldn't work without it."

“The squid ink?”

Ariel nodded, biting her lip as tears sprang to her eyes. “The Giant Squid is in the northern sea sleeping. It would have taken days...”

“So, you stole it,” Lacey realized, looking up at Ursula. “You stole it from the Sea Witch?”

“Belle!” Ariel cried out in horror as Ursula roared in rage.

“You dare! You dare call me by that name!” Ursula swelled, black ink tendrils turning the waves blacker and blacker, the glow of the cavern moss dimming as darkness spilled from the monster before them. The ink stretched out, seeking them. Ariel quivered but held tight to Lacey, vainly trying to protect her from the oncoming wrath. “Only one dares defile me by speaking those words, you little tramp!” Ursula’s eyes were glowing in the darkness, purple light spilling out around her in the black ink. “I should have known! Of course, he would send a pawn to do his dirty work! Only Nix would dare-“

“Nix?” Ariel said in confusion, recoiling from Lacey. “You work for Nix?”

“I don’t even know who Nix is!” Lacey shouted over Ursula's maniacal laughter. “The Imp-!“

“Has many names, you foolish child,” Ursula replied. “His true name was lost generations ago, and now all know him by the names of their darkest fears. In the sea and in the coastal kingdoms, he is known as Nix. And he and his minions are not welcome here!”

Ariel gazed at her in betrayal, mouth open in disbelief. “Belle, how could you? How could you work for that thing? I thought...I thought you were my friend.”

“Ariel, I didn’t-“ but she could not finish, the mere name of the Imp caused a panic in the young girl.
“This ends now.” Ursula commanded. Her tentacles reached out to ensnare the two of them. Lacey tried to scuttle backwards, but rock was at her back. The world shrank away as the tentacles loomed before her.

A roar interrupted the darkness as a selkie heaved upward from the depths of the water to launch himself at Ursula. Screaming in affront, the Sea Witch was knocked down into the water, the massive creature following her down, roaring and bellowing in challenge. The selkie bit and snarled at the tentacles that wrapped him in their grasp, his giant head butting the sea witch’s stomach. Her grip loosened, allowing him to swim closer, knocking her into the shelf ledge and stunning her slightly.

“You’ll pay for that you jumped up, codfish,” Ursula growled. He roared back his response and bit the tentacle wrapping around his neck in retaliation.

“Come on,” Ariel hissed, grabbing Lacey’s arm and dragging her forward to the water’s edge. “Come on!”

“But-!” Lacey barely managed to get out before Ariel slipped back into the water. Gravity and Ariel’s strong grip dragged Lacey down into the depths with her. The waves and ink from the fight obliterated her vision so she squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath as icy needles jabbed back into her skin. An iron grip on her wrist was the only way she knew Ariel was ahead of her. Lacey kicked her legs and waved her free arm to help propel herself down, and then when Ariel pulled forward, she pushed forward as well.

After what felt like an eternity in the darkness, Ariel tugged her upwards. Lacey went gratefully, and her hand broke the surface. She kicked upward, joining Ariel in the light of the early afternoon sun. “We have to get to shore,” Ariel stated, not quite looking at her. “Ursula will be sending her minions after us as soon as she finishes with him.”

“He was holding his own,” Lacey started but stopped as Ariel looked back at her in irritation.

“She’s the Goddess of the Sea,” Ariel said with finality that Lacey had yet to see in the young girl. “He never stood a chance, and he knew it. He died protecting his mate.”

“I wasn’t his mate!“ Lacey choked as salt water rose in choppy waves to fill her mouth.

“Don’t,” Ariel said curtly. “You called for him, bonded with him, and then got him killed. He deserved better than that.”

“Ariel,” Lacey said weakly. Confusion and guilt spread in her chest. “I didn’t mean-!”

Ariel ignored her, swimming off and dragging her roughly alongside her, not speaking another word as they let the current carry them through the surf. The waves carried them closer and closer to the shoreline of the nearing landmass.

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It was early afternoon by the time the waves deposited them safely on the far side of town’s shore. The castle was leagues away now, the sun glistening off the towers like a far away beacon. Lacey laid motionless in the damp sand, letting the tide ebb and flow around her as Ariel lay beside her in the surf. Neither spoke as the sun continued its journey across the sky. Lacey’s mind was filled with images of Dylan kneeling before her in the gardens, full mouth pressed against her, pleasure flowing through her veins from his touch.

Now he was dead. Because of her.
Lacey couldn’t even summon the energy to defend herself from the voice inside her head. She had no idea when the teen’s naivety had rubbed off on her but she felt an unusual guilt clawing at her throat. Beside her, Ariel prompted herself up on her elbows in the surf, letting the waves break around her.

When it became obvious that Ariel had nothing further to say, Lacey opted to go off in search of clothes. As she climbed the unsettled hill, she looked down upon the empty fields between here and the town leagues away. Glancing back over her shoulder, Lacey briefly debated whether or not to explain to the mermaid where she was going, worried that she would disappear in the ocean before she could return. The stubborn set of the girl’s chin warned her she would be ignored so Lacey set off down the hill.

As Lacey made her way through the fields of Eric’s kingdom, the afternoon grew warmer. She spotted what looked like a main road cutting through some woods but she avoided it. Last thing she needed to explain was why a Princess of the Kingdoms was wandering around in her birthday suit. She continued through the empty fields. While mildly embarrassing at first, it soon became second nature. The soft soil under her soles was comforting and by the time she reached the outskirts of civilization, she had almost forgotten she was nude.

Fortunately, it appeared to be laundry day at one of the houses along the edge of town. No one was in sight, so Lacey grabbed the first two dresses she saw. She returned to the beach fully dressed in a light muslin white dress. To her relief, Ariel still sat perfectly still, half buried in the sand and waves as low tide ebbed around her.

“Hey,” Lacey greeted nonchalantly, holding out the dress. “Found some old house a few miles from here, looked like it might be some kind of summer house for one of the nobles. They were airing some dresses so I grabbed us some.”

“I don’t need one,” Ariel answered curtly, not bothering to look back.

“Course you do,” Lacey said, seating herself on a boulder that had lodged itself in the beach. “Sun will be down soon, and we’ll have to hurry but I think I saw a main road earlier. Eric was telling me the docks close at sunset, so we won’t have a problem finding someone to take us to the palace.”

Ariel flicked her tail in annoyance, smacking the water with a loud crack. “I’m not going.”

“Ariel, come on,” Lacey growled, rubbing sand off her skin in annoyance. “I’m not going to just leave you here.”

“He saw,” Ariel said softly, hair falling in her face. “He saw me change.”

“So what?”

Ariel laughed, broken angry music ringing against the surf. “Why won’t you leave me alone?” Ariel asked in anger, turning to look at her. “I can’t return to the sea, because Ursula is waiting for me, and I can’t leave the shore, because as soon as the sun rises in the morning, I’ll be a mermaid again, with no voice, no hope, and no chance of making it home.”

“We’ll go to the Imp! He can-!”

“Do what?” Ariel snapped. “Descal me alive? Filet me for his dinner? Debone me to hang on his wall?”

“God, no,” Lacey said in horror. She dropped the extra dress to the rock as she stood and
approached the mermaid. “I wouldn’t let him.”

Ariel eye's were shiny with tears, her mouth pinched. “I left my people at just the chance of seeing Eric one more time! I threw away my life, because you gave me hope, and all to learn-!” She sniffed, tears rolling down her cheeks. “To learn I aided that leviathan and his underling by giving them the most powerful thing in the seas. I am disgusted with myself, and as soon as the sea grants me its peace, I’ll end my life here on the shore.”

The cries of the gulls and the sails of the ships out at sea were the only thing beside Ariel that managed to penetrate Lacey’s haze of shock. “You are telling me you are giving up? You’re just going to sit here and die?”

Ariel turned away, ending the conversation as the sun dipped below the horizon. A flash of white light left a trembling, crying girl in the surf at Lacey’s feet, naked legs sinking into the sand as the day ended.

“No,” Lacey murmured, watching the silent sobs of the girl before her. “No, that’s not happening.”

She pulled the girl up. Ariel tried to wrench away, but her unsteady balance caused her to pitch to the sand, stumbling towards the boulder as Lacey dragged her to up the beach toward the dress. “You saved me from the sea,” Lacey said, mouth drawn tight as she struggled with Ariel. “Now I’m going to save you from yourself. You are getting dressed, we are going to the castle, and you are going to kiss that prince and get your stupid happily ever after.”

Ariel sank down on the boulder, crying pitifully as she dripped salt water over the dress. She refused to look at it or Lacey.

“God, you teenagers are just the absolute biggest dramatic pains in the ass-!”

“Whatever did you do to it?” came the absolute last voice Lacey wanted to hear at the moment.

Ariel gasped, falling backwards behind the boulder and shaking in terror at the newcomer who stood beside the boulder grinning at her manically.

“God, can’t you magical assholes just arrive like a normal person?” Lacey snapped. “All this popping in and out of existence is annoying as hell, you know that right?” She turned to Ariel who was frantically staring at the Imp, who was glaring back at Lacey. She ignored him. “Ariel, I’ll have him turn you into a sea shell, carry you up to the palace myself, and turn you back into a brat in front of the entire court - stark naked - unless you get dressed right now.”

Ariel bobbed her head in affront, looking at the Imp before back at Lacey in a clear negative. “Oh, for pity’s sake,” he growled. “I won’t peek.”

Ariel wavered a moment before angrily huffing. The Imp glanced over at her in a clear indication that the little mermaid had indeed learned that from Lacey in their time together. Ariel dragged the dress behind the rock and started to slip it on.

“Now, want to share what you’re doing here? I doubt it has anything to do with us almost getting killed because of your little spat with the she-devil of the sea?”

“Oh, that?” he shrugged, smirking slightly. “I figured you had it under control.”

“That and you’re too scared to set foot or hoof in her realm?” Lacey shot back. His eyes narrowed. Point scored.
“You’re fine,” he dismissed, whizzing a hand in the air at Ariel. “Plus, you managed to save the little princess here, too. Now, let’s get out of this dreadful kingdom before the Witch sends a storm to wash the city away.”

Ariel stared in horrified anger at the Imp, mouth open in disbelief.

“I’m not taking her,” the Imp continued in irritation, crossing his arms. “One of you annoying females in my home is more than enough.”

“Stop being so dramatic. She’s not going to destroy a whole town just to get a mermaid and a princess back,” Lacey snarled, walking past him to help Ariel lace up her dress. “You just want me to go back and go bonkers in that damn pigsty of a castle you call home.”

Ariel patted Lacey’s hand frantically, getting in the way of her lacing up the dress.

“Ariel, stop it! Stay still so I can-!”

Ariel grabbed Lacey’s hands, pushing her around so she faced the sea. Lacey stopped short. Clouds and waves, black like ink, spiraled towards them in the darkening sky. Ships with white sails rushed towards the docks, the lighthouse on the hill emitting the beacon light, shining feebly against the clouds that rushed towards it like an oncoming end of days.

The Imp gestured towards the storm wall that was quickly growing as it advanced. “You were saying?”

She was the cause of this, and there was nothing she could do now but stand here and watch it come. Overwhelmed, Lacey said the only thing that came to her mind as she stared at the obvious oncoming destruction of Eric’s kingdom.

“Fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to the ever wonderful Ramloth for her awesome beta skills- she really helped shape this chapter and I would be lost without her.

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter! You got the resolution to Dylan (and I must say I was surprised/pleased more people weren’t DOWN WITH DYLAN- way to hang with Lacey on her adventures guys!) and the introduction of a cool ”villain” as well as the return of the Imp! (AKA Nix- which I borrowed from this mythology: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neck_(water_spirit) And yes I do find myself terrible clever.

So, thoughts? I am rather fond of all the readers on The Gate because I find you guys constantly blow me away with your insights and reviews. This is such a different kind of story (affectionately termed dark lace) but I really think by the end of it- it’s going to be a great adventure story.

Plus, we haven’t even gotten to the good part yet.
Thanks again for reading everyone!
No one spoke over the roaring of the wind as the unlikely trio stared out to sea.

“Bit much,” the Imp declared in apparent boredom. “Can’t imagine what you did, but it seems it’s time to go.”
Lacey took one final look out at the dark clouds. They hung heavier and blacker than any she had ever seen in her life. “I’m not leaving Ariel.”

The Imp grinned at her, showing off his full row of hideous rotten teeth in all their glory. “I could just change her into a fish. If she survives the flotsam and jetsam, Ursula would never find her…”

“Knock it off, there's no time for this. We need to get to back to the castle.”

“Oh,” he turned, eyes dancing. “Well, that’s not a problem,” he crowed with a toss of his head. “But it’ll cost you!”

“Fine,” Lacey bit out. “Charge it to my account. Now, let’s get out of here.”

The Imp wiggled his shoulders as he clasped his hands together in mirthful glee. “Oh goody,” he sang as another peal of lightning lit the sky. His eyes glowed golden at her in the pure white light. Behind him, Ariel looked like she was going to be ill.

“Ariel, come on,” Lacey urged as she kicked the sand off her bare feet.

Ariel crossed her arms before promptly sitting square down in the sand. Her head tilted up at Lacey before she shrugged in defeat and twisted back to look out to sea.

“For God’s sake!” Lacey cursed, fingers curling into claws at her side. “We do not have time for this right now, kid!”

Ariel ignored her. The Imp had the audacity to giggle. At that moment, Lacey was unsure which one she wanted to strangle more. A flash of light from the lighthouse caught her attention. It was brief and short, followed by two long ones and then another short one. “The hell?” Lacey murmured, peering up through the gathering gloom.

“It’s a warning,” the Imp told her. “It’s alerting the kingdom at large to batten down the hatches.”

“Fat lot of good that’s going to do them,” Lacey sighed. “We have to get out of this storm or we’re as good as dead.”

“But what, I wonder, are you going to give me in return for this little safe passage?”

Lacey stared at him, letting her eyes fall shut for a brief moment as she considered the myriad of ways she could disembowel him with her own hands before she slowly opened them again. Sea salt and wind tore at her as the soft patter of rain began hissing closer to them on the waves. Listen up, Nix, or whatever your name is,” Lacey growled. “You have to protect me if you’re going to cash in on your little deal with Emma. So, if I die in some magical freak hurricane, you, beast that you are, are out of luck. So, you can either transport me and the mermaid to the castle this goddamned minute, or you can kiss your deal goodbye.”

He stared back at her, unflinching. Then, the skies above them opened up and rain sleeted down at a hard angle. Beads hit her skin like tiny daggers and though she winced, Lacey never took her eyes off him. “You don’t have to be snippy,” he finally quipped, rolling his eyes at her. “I’ll get you two to the main hall so you can have you precious little reunion with the prince but,” he held up two fingers, one on either hand as if to frame his next thought, “I will not be held responsible for your little fish friend beyond that. Any sign of real danger from the castle denizens, I’ll pull you back to the Dark Castle before you can so much as sneeze. If any harm is to come to you, it will be at my hands. Do you understand?”

Ariel stood, dusting off her skirts and slipping a sandy hand into Lacey’s. With a squeeze, Ariel
turned towards the Imp and made a snapping motion. When the Imp merely raised a brow at her, Ariel huffed and stomped her foot in impatience.

“I think she’s ready to go,” Lacey smirked.

The Imp gave her a sharp look for her acerbity. “Remember what I said, dearie,” he cautioned. “One hint of danger and back you come. Remember, all magic comes with a price.”

“Just do it, already,” Lacey growled. “You can collect the debt after I’m done fixing this mess.”

Without a further word, he smiled his crocodile grin. Then, with a snap of his own fingers, the noxious purple smoke curled back up around them. Ariel clutched at her through the fumes, burying her face in Lacey’s shoulder. Lacey kept her eyes locked on the Imp until the fumes thickened. He kept her gaze steadily, and Lacey could almost swear he looked apprehensive as the smoke closed around them.

That’s when the screaming started.

Waving away the tendrils of smoke, Lacey tried to find her voice in the midst of the chaos of which they had just appeared in the midst. Ariel was still clinging to her, shoulders shaking in silent shudders. The royal hall swam into focus. It was filled to the brim with panicking nobles but there were also men in uniform throughout the hall, looks of stern apprehension on their brows and their weapons raised.

“Silence!” King Hans demanded and the crowd obeyed, calming as the smoke began to disparate.

From the shadows, Grismby hurried forward. He held out a guard’s livery jacket to Lacey while shrugging out of his own coat. “Take this before you freeze,” he said. Lacey numbly took it. Grimsby already coercing Ariel to release her death grip on Lacey.

“What in the name of the goddess is going on here?”

Lacey found the full majesty of King Hans bearing down at her. “Your Majesty,” she started but stopped when the Queen stood and pushed past her husband.

“Where is my son?”

The Queen's voice did not waver or break, but her face was haunted. Lacey fell silent, uncertain what to say to a mother's pain.

Grimsby was in the process of ushering Ariel towards the back doors of the hall but she stumbled to a stop upon the Queen's breathless inquiry. Grimsby met Lacey's eyes over Ariel’s head. A silent warning passed between them but it was far too late for that now.

“Your pardon, Your Majesty,” Lacey bent herself into a curtsey. “I was under the impression he was here?”

“He disappeared after you,” King Hans said. “He took the finest ship in our fleet to go after you two who he claimed were kidnapped by a selkie.”

“He what?” Lacey interrupted as Ariel’s hand flew to her mouth in horror. “He’ll be killed! The storm!”

King Hans ignored her. “How is it that you two disappear from our castle at dawn only to reappear in our hall through some black magic?” King Hans demanded. A soft chorus of agreements rang
from behind her.

Lacey turned to look over her shoulder, glaring at the fawning nobility before returning her attention to the King. “The Sea Goddess was displeased with our survival,” Lacey covered. The King’s nostrils flared but he remained silent as she continued. “I was taken by one of her minions to the coast—“

“Lies,” came the soft barb from the back of the room, which carried throughout the silent, straining hall.

Lacey bit her lip to restrain herself as more noises of agreement floated towards her. “We managed to escape,” Lacey ground out. “Through the intervention of… the Imp.”

Silence followed this statement. From behind Grimsby, Ariel’s waved at her, palms raised upwards as if to stop her.

King Hans glanced at the official looking fellow in the uniform again. “The Imp?”

The uniformed man shook his head, but his eyes were now on Ariel who stilled upon his notice.

Lacey scoffed in exasperation, cramming her hands into her pockets to warm them. “Never mind, who he is. We came to warn you.”

“Young lady,” King Hans held up a hand for her silence. “You were washed upon our shores, came to us via a peasant and we took you in our home all for the sake of your birthright. There have been serious doubts as to your story since your disappearance this morning.”

“Serious doubts?” Lacey echoed. She turned to the room behind her, all waiting with bated breath. “Quiet day here at the castle? Had to start some rumors about the new girls in town? Pathetic, the lot of you.”

Outraged gasps almost drowned her out but Lacey took another step towards them. The few in the front stepped back, causing a ripple effect throughout the hall. Power, heady and intoxicating, rose in Lacey’s chest as she stared them all down. “You’re right, I am no mere Princess of the Fourth Realm. I am a queen in my own land,” Lacey hissed as her hands rose up from her sides. “The girl at my side is a princess in her own kingdom, here for the sake of your own precious Prince. None of you had the courage to rain doubts upon us when we stood before you in the crowns that are our natural birthrights, but as soon as we disappeared from your sight, it was fair game?”

A motion on the far right of the room caught her eye but she continued. “We risked our very lives to come back to warn you of the Sea Goddess’s wrath. The entire kingdom is in peril and you sit here like birds in a cage! The end is outside these very windows. Believe me, no stone wall will protect you from the storm that is coming.”

The Queen looked ill, her eyes squeezed tight against the reality of their situation. The King just looked murderous, eyes shining with determination. “Seize them!” he declared.

The guards advanced on Ariel. Grimsby stepped forward as if to reason with them, but a guard raised his sword and brought it's hilt down upon the man's head. He sprawled across the floor blood flowing from his head. Lacey took a step towards them, but a line of guards advanced on her now, effectively separating the two women.

One seized Ariel, who began to wiggle in earnest.

“Ariel!” Lacey shouted. “You get your hands off her, this instant or God help me!”
“Get her!” came the voices of the now reawakening crowd. “Get the witch!”

Ariel kicked wildly at her would be captor. When a lucky kick found the man’s groin, he collapsed with a groan much to Ariel’s stunned surprise. She was the last thing Lacey saw before the hood came down over her eyes.

“Run!” Lacey urged Ariel, her voice muffled by the fabric. "Ariel, run!"

“Silence the witch!”

A heavy blow slammed into her temple, and then darkness.

--

“Belle.”

There was a throbbing pain at the base of her neck. Fucking hangovers... just the absolute goddamn worse. Lacey hurt all over, plus, she was wet and her mouth tasted like blood, tangy and metallic.

“Princess!”

Wait...blood?

With much reluctance, she cracked her eyes open enough to see the lined but familiar face of the Duke Sebastian of Flounder. “Your Royal Highness, you must get up this instant or we’re both as good as dead.”

“Duke?” she managed, wincing at the new stab of pain from the small movement. “What are you-?”

“You must get up,” he urged. He was standing in the dim light of a torch, his back holding open a metal gate. “The guards will be back any moment from fortifying the sea wall. We have to leave now!”

“But-!“

“My lady,” the Duke repeated calmly. “We really must be going.”

Stumbling to her feet, Lacey staggered towards him. Her entire body was sore, as if she had been thrown to the ground and stomped upon. She shied her eyes from the torchlight, the meager light sending shooting pains through her skull. “What’s going on?“

They started down a dark hall. They passed other cells, either empty or with an inmate huddled in the darkest corners waiting for the end. The air was thick around them. The storm was about to break over the castle. The rain drummed against the stone walls and the wind whistled through the cracks like a siren.

“You, my faux princess, have been sentenced to death," he told her over his shoulder. "A young courtier saw you traipsing with the suspected selkie and told the King you seduced the poor man to the cove where you used his life force to summon the storm.”

“I summoned the storm?” Lacey repeated in disbelief.

“It would appear so,” the Duke answered. He hurried her towards a staircase, winding up, up, up and out of sight above them. “After you,” he said with a slight bow.
Staring up, Lacey had to clutch at the walls to keep her balance. Her eyesight was fuzzy from the blow to her head and she briefly wondered if she could have a concussion. As if to answer her unspoken question, a wave of nausea swept up from the pit of her stomach. She just managed to choke it back down. "It was the Sea Witch," Lacey told him. Her body railed at her from the continuous motion but something in the Duke’s calmness was giving her the strength to push forward.

“So, I suppose you had nothing to do with the Goddess’s rage?”

Lacey turned to glare suspiciously at the Duke, pausing slightly in their climb. “Why are you helping me?”

“Because,” he bestowed upon her a dastardly smile. In the torchlight and in their rush of adrenaline, he looked forty years younger. Her very own rogue in shining armor. “Goddess help me, I do love spunk.”

Lacey let out a laugh despite herself as she turned back to the climb. “Do you know where Ariel is?”

“She escaped the Royal Guard,” the Duke responded. Lacey was annoyed to hear he sounded unwinded. Then again, he hadn’t escaped a selkie and a sea witch and single-handedly dealt with a teenage mermaid and an infernal Imp today. “Grimsby is unconscious in the sick room, but as soon as he awakens, he’ll be tried as a traitor to the realm.”

“What the hell was he thinking?” She was still at a loss as to why the grumpy old bag of bones had tried to defend the mermaid, forsaking all his protocol and honor.

“Think, my girl,” the Duke admonished her. “That man would die for Eric. It's common knowledge he's like the son he never had. Without rhyme or reason, Eric disappeared to sea this morning to find the woman he claimed would be his bride. He very likely will lose Eric tonight, the least he could do was protect his would-be bride.”

Lacey stopped, under guise of astonishment, but really just to gain back her breath. Her vision was still swimming and she felt another wave of nausea roiling in her gut. “Eric wants to marry Ariel?”

The Duke nodded as the torchlight played shadows over his face. “He made a royal decree that he would wed the Lady Ariel or give up the throne. It caused quite a stir this afternoon, almost as much as the stories about your disappearance. Of course, once the storm was spotted, things grew more serious.”

“That romantic idiot...,” Lacey slumped her head back to rest against the cool stone. The throbbing pain ebbed slightly as the coolness calmed the bruised skin. The Duke glanced behind them as a shout echoed up the stone stairs. The guards had returned.

With a sigh and slumping of her shoulders, Lacey started back up the thrice-damned stairs. This time, the commotion of armor and ringing steel covered her ragged breathing. “Where are we going?” she demanded as they neared a landing. “We can’t go outside or we’ll be blown to Oz.”

“Oz?”

“Never mind,” Lacey muttered as she gained the landing. The Duke pushed past her, to rap three times upon the door before them. “Who-?”

“Shush.”
Lacey frowned at his back. Before she could respond, the door creaked open to reveal Priscilla and Charlotte’s pale, scared faces. “Princess Belle!” they chimed in relief, gesturing her forward. “This way!”

Lacey pushed past the Duke, stopping when she noticed he wasn’t following her. “Duke, come on,” she motioned for him to join them.

“This is where I am needed,” he answered gravely. With a ringing of metal, he pulled his sword free from his scabbard, sharp and gleaming in the torchlight. “Remember me to the future Queen Ariel.”

“You’re mad,” Lacey shook her head. "Stop playing hero and let's go!"

She reached out for him but Priscilla’s hands caught hers and tugged her away. “We must hurry!”

The Duke gave her a slow nod as the door swung closed behind him. Lacey stood unmoving, unable to comprehend what was happening.

“This way,” Charlotte called.

Priscilla tugged her hand again. "We need to go," she told her softly.

Lacey let Priscilla pull after the younger maid, brushing past spider webs and dust sheets hanging over furniture.

“Where are we?” Lacey asked as she batted away a large cobweb.

Priscilla was glancing behind them every few steps. “The lower hall,” she answered, though her attention was elsewhere. “It used to be the summer quarters before the last great tide. No one uses it anymore.“

The effects of water damage were almost invisible in the darkness but the torch light from Charlotte’s torch flickered over water rings and a few warped wooden panels. When the light disappeared around a corner. Priscilla kept moving forward. As they made the turn, a shadow accosted Lacey. Her muffled scream of surprise quickly turning into a name. “Ariel!”

The teen’s face was covered in tear tracks. Charlotte stood just behind her, looking at them both in worry. Priscilla stood at the rear, listening for something behind them. Lacey’s hands rose to cup Ariel’s damp cheek and wiped away the tears that were still falling from her eyes. “Oh, Ariel,” Lacey whispered through her own haze of fear and pain. “It’s going to be okay, I promise.”

A shout rang out and then another.

Priscilla nodded, “They’ve gotten passed the Duke. We haven’t much time.”

“The storm!” Lacey reminded them. “We need to get to the Queen, make her see reason!”

“The Queen is in mourning for her son,” Charlotte whispered. “She’s refusing to see anyone, even the King!”

“Nonsense,” Lacey bit out. “This whole castle has gone mad!”

“Prince Eric is the only heir to the throne,” Priscilla spoke up with a hint of steel in her shaking voice. “Without him, our kingdom will fall. He has made an open vow of love to the Lady Ariel and his intention to give up the throne if he cannot marry her. Those who would take control of the
castle were dancing on his grave before he even left for sea. Now in the eye of this storm, he’s as
good as dead.”

Ariel stomped her foot, shaking her head rapidly. The two young women glanced at her in surprise
as the sound of the wood door splintering cracked through the hall.

Ariel grasped at Priscilla and pointed out the window, towards the cove. Priscilla frowned and
shook her head as she took the girl’s hands. “You can’t go out in the storm!”

Ariel refused to listen. She took one look at Lacey, gave her a small shrug and a tiny smile and
then bolted off down the dark hall.

“Damn it, Ariel!”

“Princess!” Both maids blurted, hands rising to their chest in horror at her language.

“You two, hide!” Lacey commanded them. “If they find you, tell them you tried to stop us. Cry if
you have to! Do not get in their way, do you understand? I won’t have any more people playing
hero for me today!”

They nodded with some hesitation.

Lacey pointed a finger at them both, looking them dead in the eye as she fought the growing
pressure of her headache. “I mean it, everyone in this damn world is so goddamn noble and I’m
sick and tired of it. Hide, cry, do whatever you have to but survive.”

“Wait!” Charlotte handed her the torch just as the sounds of booted feet came echoing towards
them.

“Thank you,” Lacey whispered, smiling at them both in turn. Priscilla’s chin wobbled slightly but
she nodded curtly, every inch a professional. Charlotte’s eyes were filled with tears and she looked
down at her feet before they could spill.

“You two are so much more than just maids,” Lacey insisted, trying not to let her own emotion
show. “So much more. Show them.”

And then, she was off. She knew where Ariel was going.

She just had to get there in time to stop her.

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When she finally heard the outer door bang open, Lacey was close to catching up with the
mermaid. Ariel may be more athletic than she was, but she had three decades with her legs
while the young girl only had three days.

Ahead, there was the dark glow of the evening sky and the strikes of lightning illuminating the old
hall. Ariel was nowhere in sight, but the now familiar cove was before her. Stumbling outside,
Lacey nearly blew sideways as the wind hit her. Her torch went out with a hiss in the maelstrom.
Dropping it, Lacey pushed out farther into the cove. The stairs from the main floors were to her
right. Directly ahead of her, Ariel was shedding her borrowed jacket and gown. The fabric was
snatched away by the wind, disappearing over the rocks. Ariel’s pale, naked body shone in the
darkness, a beacon to those desperate souls still out in the storm.

“Ariel!” Lacey called, but her voice was lost in the wind and shrieking rain. Waves crashed loud
beyond them, the tide nearly to the door of the castle’s lower quarters. “Ariel, wait!”

Perhaps the girl heard her or perhaps she sensed her, but Ariel turned back to look and merely smiled. Then, without further hesitation, the little mermaid undid the clasp of the golden bracelet and let it fall into the sea. Instantly, the white light of magic enveloped her.

When it faded, Ariel was gone.

Oddly, magic reached up to where she stood on the steps and began to curl around her.

For a moment, Lacey thought perhaps everything was going to be okay. Then, she remembered the Imp’s promise.

“No,” she yelled, hurrying forward into the sand. “Oh no, you don’t!”

She raced towards the sea, wading awkwardly into the turf so she was half submerged in the one realm the Imp could not reach. She was not leaving Ariel or Eric. Not yet. She stood to her knees in the surf, staring out at the raging sea. If she left now, went back to the Dark Castle, she would never see either of the two young royals again. She would never see the Duke or Grimsby or tell them she was sorry.

“No one else!” she shouted into the wind. “Do you hear me, Sea Witch? Do you hear me, Imp? No one else!”

She closed her eyes and sank to her knees in the rising tide, her neck and face barely above the waves. The cresting high waves even this close to shore slapped her face, cold freezing water stinging her eyes and filling her mouth with salt. The pull of the current sucked at her greedily. The Sea Witch knew she was in her domain.

Perhaps now she might spare the kingdom.

A ragged laugh broke through Lacey’s throat as the next wave came crashing towards her. As the current enveloped her and dragged her out towards the sea, her head blossomed in agony. She went boneless as her eyes rolled back in her head, unconsciousness taking her just as surely as the tide was.

As she slipped underneath the waves toward her own death, her last thought was a simple question.

When had she become such a romantic?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading! I always think The Gate has the best readers- and every time I see a comment from one of you- it makes my whole day. I just love talking Gate with you all- thank you thank you thank you for being a part of this journey with me!

-B
Death was freezing.

Fighting against the chills racking her body, Lacey balled up tighter. As if on cue, another shiver rippled through her and her muscles seized up in pain. She wouldn’t even be allowed to die in peace in this lousy world…

“Princess?”

For the second time that evening, Lacey looked up into the worried face of an elderly man. For a moment, she let herself believe. “Duke Sebastian?” she croaked.

Even as the words left her mouth, a frigid wave of seawater came crashing down around her. Sputtering, Lacey sat upright, fully awake despite the heaviness in her head. “No, Your Royal Highness,” her rescuer struggled to stand and bow but the wind blew him too far off balance. “It’s only me."

“Gepetto?” Lacey gasped, flinching as another wave threatened to capsize their small rowboat. “Sit back down this instant. What the hell are you even doing-?"

A roar of wind blasted from the north. Lacey clutched desperately at the sides of the small dinghy while Gepetto sat abruptly, grabbing for the oars on either side. “Careful!” he warned cheerfully, peering out beyond her into the rolling waves.

Lacey glanced behind her. This turned out to be a colossal mistake. Waves the size of skyscrapers rose around them. By some miracle, Gepetto steered them away from the worst of them. His face was lined with concentration but a glimmer shone in his eyes. Another wave threatened to capsize them but Gepetto relished the challenge, leaning against the wave to right the boat.

Lacey stared at him in bewilderment. “What is with you older men being excited about the prospect of imminent death?”

“Death is just the next lady on our dance card, Your Royal Highness,” Gepetto rowed harder into the current. “I saw you floating out to sea, near drowned. I managed to fish you out but the ocean doesn’t seem quite done with you yet.”

“Gepetto, you have to turn back!” Lacey reached out to grasp at the oars.

Gepetto easily leaned back to elude her, his face clouded. “I’m sorry, but I can’t do that.”

“Why the hell not?” Lacey shouted as another wave crashed over the two of them.

Gepetto rowed harder, eyes locked on something she couldn’t see in the storm. Another wave crashed beside them, propelling them forward. Gepetto never faltered. They scooted ever closer to the center of the storm. “My boy,” Gepetto yelled over the wind. “He ran off to sea this afternoon. Jiminy went to find him but with night fall, I had to go after them.”

Lacey closed her eyes against her nausea the sea was bringing back. A sudden dark shadow under the water grazed them on the far side. “Watch out!” Lacey fell towards the waves, faces inches
away from the water’s surface when Gepetto snagged the back of her soaking wet jacket and hauled her back in the boat. “What was that?”


“You mean the Sea Witch?” Lacey panted in confusion. “Ursula?”

Gepetto shook his head. “He is the Goddess’s favorite pet.”

The dark shadow returned, just off the far side of the boat. Gepetto was bent forward, peering through the sleet rain, his entire hair plastered to his head and rags soaked to his skin. He never saw it coming.

“Oh shit,” Lacey groaned.

Rising behind them, an enormous black eye blinked at her. Lacey’s numb fingers clutched the side of the wooden boat tighter as the sentient pupil reflected their small dinghy back at her in the lighting flash overhead. With a roar of water rushing into his gaping maw, the giant whale turned his head and pushed forward against the current. Within moments, he had them in his open jaw.

“Hold on!” Gepetto shouted as he frantically tried to out-row their oncoming demise. Lacey simply closed her eyes as the large jaws started to close around them. Seawater rushed back down the gullet of the beast with a screaming hiss and the light of the storm disappeared from overhead.

Another good man was meeting death because of her.

Figured.

When Lacey came to, she was distinctly unsettled to find herself sweating profusely. “Gross,” she groaned. Pushing her soaked hair from her eyes, she shrugged out of the still wet coat Grimsby had thrust upon her. Finding her feet, Lacey tried to piece together what had just occurred. Once again, she had been on the brink of death and had somehow been snatched from its jaws.

Rather literally this time.

A faint echo came from the darkness around her. For a moment, she struggled to hear it but it came again, clearer this time, “Princess! Princess Belle?”

“Gepetto?” she called out, taking a tentative step. She nearly pitched forward as the rubbery, moving texture beneath her shifted at her slight shift in balance. “Gepetto, where are you?”

Gingerly stepping into the darkness, Lacey muttered to herself, “Better yet, where am I?”

“Careful!” came the old man’s voice. “We’re in the stomach.”

“I’m sorry,” Lacey breathed heavily through her nose. “We’re where now?”

“In the belly of the beast,” came the reply out of the darkness.

“Oh no, this is not happening,” Lacey let her head fall back. “I am not going to die by whale digestion.”

“Princess, can you make your way over here? I found our boat.”
Lacey slowly picked her way towards his voice. “The boat is still in one piece?”

“You sound surprised!” he replied heartily. “I’ll have you know, Your Royal Highness, I used to be quite the seaman before I settled down to carpentry.”

Trying to walk in the darkness, she sank into something hot and mushy. Recoiling, she felt bile race up the back of her throat. Gagging back the hot liquid, she brought her shaking hands to her face. The clammy feel of her pruned fingertips was a relief for a mere moment before they started to warm. Lacey needed him to keep talking if she was going to find him, “Why retire?”

“The sea is no place for a family man,” Gepetto’s voice held a hint of regret. “My wife wanted me to give up the sea in the hopes of being blessed with a babe. The Goddess never answered our prayers.”

“But Pinocchio,” Lacey shook her head, taking a deep breath before starting forward again.

“A blessing, but not from the Goddess.”

“Nix?” Lacey guessed before she could think better of it.

“Goddess protect us!” came his affronted reply. “Everyone knows not to deal with that blackguard.”

“Right,” Lacey murmured to herself. “Nix on the Nix, Lace.”

She stopped when she hit a large obstacle of some sort. It was slimy but solid. She had little interest in finding out what it was. “Gepetto?”

“Over here!”

Turning towards the right, Lacey made her way towards a spot of pale yellow in the darkness. “So, Pinocchio was a blessing?”

“From the Blue Fairy herself.”

“The who?”

The rolling of the beast caused his stomach floor to convulse slightly. Lacey fell to one knee, her hand sinking into the slimy texture of his stomach lining. She briefly wondered about the absence of stomach acid. Then, she remembered Gepetto saying this was Ursula’s favorite pet. She had some idea where they were headed and why they were still alive.

“Magic?” Lacey pressed on. Gepetto’s voice was growing louder now, so she knew she was getting close.

“Yes,” came the muffled reply as the yellow light grew brighter. “Can you see the lantern?”

“You have a lantern?” Lacey asked in disbelief. “Talk about a boy scout.”

“I’m afraid I’m not much of a boy, Your Royal Highness,” he replied cheerfully. “But yes, Pinocchio is a very special child.”

“So, in the daylight-?”

“He turns back to the wooden puppet I carved for my wife. She loved the little marionette. In her final delirium, she thought of him as her own son. When she passed, I took to eating with him and
“talking with him. I loved him as I would have loved a child of my very own flesh and blood.”

“That’s when the Blue Fairy came?” Lacey guessed. Gepetto raised his hand to her, waving her onwards as he lifted the lantern to light her way. “Made him a real boy?”

“Yes,” Gepetto offered her his hand and helped her into the boat. Lacey sank to the seat with a sigh, burrowing her face in her hands. “She told him if he was brave and true, he might fully become a real boy in time. But years have passed, and now he has given up all hope of being anything but puppet by day and boy by night.”

“What about Jiminy?” Lacey mumbled through her knees. “Where did you get a magical bug?”

“Jiminy found us,” Gepetto relayed with genuine fondness in his voice. “He functions as the voice of reason in our home. He understands the magical bonds and restraints that bind Pinocchio that I do not. He gives comfort when I cannot fathom the possibilities.” Gepetto trailed off before sadly. “I fear this time, it’s too late. If Pinocchio truly loses his heart, he’ll turn back into a wooden puppet for good.”

“That’s why you’re out here?” Lacey raised her head to stare at him. “You’re here to save him from himself?”

Gepetto gave her a weary smile. Lacey shook her head as she let her face fall back into her palms.

“Parents,” she muttered.

“The love for a child rivals true love itself, Princess,” Gepetto said kindly. “I would do anything for my son.”

“Like foolishly rowing out into the middle of a hurricane?”

“A fool decision which saved your life,” he reminded her.

“I was prepared to die,” Lacey shot back as she twisted away from him. “In fact, my death might have saved you, your son, and the damned cricket. The Sea Witch wants me dead, and this storm was her way of ensuring it.”

Gepetto stared back at her in deep thought. Lacey looked away, sighing and crossing her arms around her chest. When a gentle touch upon the back of her hand caused her to look back at him, Gepetto was taking her hand in his with a fatherly smile. “You were prepared to die for a kingdom of strangers, Princess Belle,” he said. Tears crowding Lacey's vision, and she tried to blink them away. “Now, tell me. Is that so very foolish?”

“Yes,” Lacey choked out.

Gepetto shook his head at her, squeezing her hand in his wrinkled ones.

“No,” he whispered. “It’s very brave.”

She told herself she didn’t believe him. She told herself she was to blame. She thought of Ariel and Eric, who may have lived long lives without her interference, about Graham who came rushing after her in the forest, Dylan’s smile in the gardens, and Duke Sebastian’s final goodbye. And now Gepetto who had saved her from the sea’s grip twice was going to pay for his kindness with his and possibly his son’s life.

Lacey let herself fall into his arms as sobs overwhelmed her. As the lantern flickered with the
motion of the whale through the waves, Lacey, for the first time in years, let herself be comforted.

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It couldn’t have been more than an hour later when a high-pitched whining echoed throughout the cavernous blackness. Both Lacey and Gepetto immediately clapped their hands to their ears. The screeching increased in volume before a jolt nearly tossed the two from their seats. Gepetto mouthed something at her in the light of the lantern.

“What?” she shouted back, but the words were lost in the higher frequency. Gepetto made a down motion with his free hand before clapping it back to his ear. “I don’t understand. What-?” Lacey yelled. Gepetto made another downwards motion before he placed his own head between his legs. Understanding, Lacey did the same.

Another jolt slammed against the side of the rowboat but her curled position kept her inside the wooden structure. A large roaring quickly replaced the continuing squealing. Glancing up from her hunched position, Lacey saw Gepetto doing the same. As a look of dismay crossed his face, Lacey twisted her head around to see what was happening. A rush of seawater barreled towards them, the rolling black waves visible even in the meager light. Gepetto grabbed a hold of the oars with the crooks of elbows and Lacey released her ears to grasp at the side of the rowboat.

She saw him shout something which could have been either “hold on” or “blow hard”.

She chose the first one, clutching at the splintering wood for dear life. As the first waves slammed into the boat, she pitched forward with the forward momentum. Gepetto’s shoulder caught her and she fell backwards as the boat lifted up from the stomach’s bottom. Gepetto was already straightening to row against the tide but another wave slammed them further back into the blackness. The lantern pitched from its precarious position between Gepetto’s legs. Releasing her death grip on one side of the boat, Lacey leaned forward to snag it before it could tip over. Raising it overhead, she met Gepetto’s gaze. He smiled at her in approval, gesturing with a nod of his head.

Another roar of seawater rushed into the cavern, slower this time but still quite rapid. Lacey fought to keep her seat in the tumultuous rocking of the ship while keeping the lantern raised for Gepetto. The motion of the ocean caused the nausea from earlier to return with a vengeance. Keeping her eyes on the floor of the boat, she tried to hold it back, but another lurch caused her to lose her slip of control and she turned to the side of the boat to release the meager contents of her stomach into the dark waves. Another heave of her stomach followed and then a third but Lacey kept her hand holding the lantern high as she could in this position.

Closing her eyes and leaning her chin to the side of the boat, Lacey fought the wave of dizziness spinning behind her eyes. Without warning, the squealing slipped into a low, deep hum, broken up in long and short bursts. “Just let me die,” Lacey moaned into the wooden side of the boat. Shards of wood pricked her cheek but she pressed harder against them to center herself against the dizzy spell.

Another jarring lurch caused her to come completely out of her seat for a moment, before crashing back down again. The lantern swung away from her into the darkness before it banged back against her forearm. The hot searing burn of the glass against her bare skin caused her to cry out but she didn’t dare drop it. Without light, they were as good as dead.

"Steady, Your Royal Highness,” Gepetto shouted over the sloshing of the waves in the giant chamber. “I can see the uvula!”

“The what?” Lacey shouted back through the seawater splashing against her face.
“The uvula!” Gepetto replied cheerfully as another wave hit them on the far side.

“I don’t know what you’re saying!” Lacey cried out. “We’re in the middle of a giant whale’s stomach rowing for our lives and you’re actually enjoying this!”

Gepetto’s laughter quickly disappeared as the waves started to roll back towards whence they had come. “Here we go!” he yelled, pushing his arms forward and then slamming them back.

Lacey felt the boat scoot forward before slamming back down into the water. “You are crazy!” she screamed at him, slamming her free hand down on the bench beside her. “Absolutely nuts!”

If he heard her, he gave no sign. With another massive hiss, the water stilled its forward movement. As the boat settled back into the water, Lacey glanced furtively around, trying to figure out what was coming next. “Oh, no” Gepetto muttered to himself. The softly spoken words echoed in the eerie silence of the now still waves.

“What?” Lacey demanded, glancing out into the stillness surrounding them. “What’s happening?”

“We’re about to get out of this creature,” the old mariner explained, eyes looking upwards.

“Well, that’s good right?” Lacey held the lantern out over the edge of the boat in the direction where Gepetto had been rowing earlier. “I don’t see-?”

“Not that way, Princess,” Gepetto corrected. He flexed his arms as he rolled his shoulders back. His chin was tipped upwards, staring towards the ceiling.

“Is that-?” Lacey started as the glow of stars winked into existence above them. “Is that the sky?”

“Sure is,” Gepetto intoned.

“How can we see the sky in the stomach of a whale?” Lacey demanded, staring upwards in captivation. “It’s like a sky light...”

“The blowhole,” Gepetto corrected. “Whales breathe air just the same as you and me, Your Royal Highness.”

Before she could respond, the water below them bottomed out. Lacey belatedly realized the waves had buoyed them up so they were closer to the top of the whale. Now, as they plummeted downwards, she had a decent idea of what was about to happen. “No,” she groaned. “No, this is not happening.”

“I’m afraid it’s this or a slow death of starvation and thirst,” Gepetto explained gently, eyes locked on where the blowhole had disappeared from their view.

“You don’t know that,” Lacey said hotly. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and just drown in here!”

As if to negate that possibility, the water suddenly thrust upwards as the great beast exhaled at the surface of the ocean. Lacey felt her mouth open in a scream, but the noise was lost in the rush of air and water being thrust upwards. The lantern ripped out of her hand as she reeled backward. As it disappeared in the water beneath them, Lacey lost her sight as her eyes failed to adjust to the darkness. Squeezing her eyes shut against what could only be imminent death by either being pulverized against the ceiling by the waves beneath them or certain death by being thrown through the sky and back into the tumultuous sea, Lacey didn’t see the sky coming into view.

In the black behind her eyelids, her old apartment in the city came to mind....empty wine bottles
lined around the kitchen floor, dishes in the sink and books piled in corners.

Comfortable, familiar, safe.

Gepetto’s gave a shout of challenge, a wordless noise of defiance. A gust of wind brushed against
the back of her neck.

They were out.

Then, she was weightless, floating through the air.

She willed her eyes open as another scream ripped through her throat. Gepetto was being pulled
away from her as gravity wrenched them both from the burst of air expelled by the
whale. Thrusting her arm out towards him, she managed to snag the back of his vest. Though he
didn’t look it, the old man weighed more than she. He quickly dropped back down towards the sea
below them. With only the moon and stars above them, Lacey didn’t see the surface of the water
until it was near at hand. Remembering her one summer at the camp by the lake, Lacey released
Gepetto. She raised her burned arm to her chest, squeezed her eyes shut and snapped her mouth
closed as she pulled her body into a straight line.

Thankfully, the water was breaking against the sides of the great whale. Lacey felt her feet hit the
water, just as a wave crashed down, displacing the water surface. As her head disappeared beneath
the waves, she struck outwards, trying to swim away from the beast. Before she could get further
than a few strokes, a weight wrapped around her left arm and then another swirled around to
envelop her right ankle. Straining from holding her breath, Lacey fought against the instinct to gasp
out in alarm. Twisting, she looked around to find two green-gray bands wrapped around her
appendages.

With a flick of her wrist, she attempted to dislodge one only to find it tightening. Flexing harder,
Lacey tried to free herself again, only to find two beady white eyes staring at her from the end of
it. Bubbles escaped her lips as she yelped in surprise, seawater rushing into her lungs. Coughing,
she only inhaled more of the poisonous water. As her body went into convulsions, the two eels
pulled her forward. Powerless in her current state, Lacey let them.

She was unsurprised when she felt her head break the surface of the water. The eels dislodged, and
a wave propelled her forward, her knee bursting with pain as it came into contact with a hard
surface. With a wild grab, Lacey clutched at what appeared to be a coral reef, the rough corals
scrapping against the raw burn on her forearm. She ignored the pain radiating from her knee cap,
pushing forward until she found herself half out of the water, laying in the cold wind of the night
breeze.

After retching up the seawater in her stomach, Lacey let her cheek rest on the cold porous surface
of the marine oasis. The waves broke around her, crashing against the small of her back where her
hips and legs still dangled in the tide. A moment passed before her head started to clear from the
adrenaline. She opened her bleary eyes, looking out into the black abyss of the night sea.

“Gepetto?” she croaked, coughing again as seawater splashed into her open mouth. Straightening,
she pulled her legs up a little more. She tried again, “Gepetto!”

The breakers swallowed her cries and no response came back from the waves.

“Gepetto!” she cried out, sinking her forehead back down to the hard coral. She let tears fall from
her stinging eyes as she crouched in the middle of the ocean. “Gepetto, goddamn it, answer me!”
“Such language!”

Lacey scrambled as far out of the sea as she could on the small surface. Mere feet away from her, rising up in the foam of the waves, the Sea Witch smiled at her with a sardonic glint in her eye. “Now, now, princess,” the Sea Witch chided as she grinned down at her from the high wave she was riding. “It’s time we ended this.”

In her left hand, she held out a triton, gleaming gold even in the meager light of the moon. With relish, she aimed it straight at Lacey’s heart.

Lacey barely saw it. She was too focused on the Sea Witch’s right hand, for in its clutches was a little mermaid.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks as always to my very own Fairy Godmother Beta, Ramloth.

Thanks for reading! As always, hope you enjoyed! This chapter was a bit of a bottle chapter but hey, whale swallowing people. Classic stuff, amiright?
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Thanks as always to Ramloth, who is wonderful at being a beta and even more wonderful at being a sounding board.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thunder crackled in the distance. The storm overhead annihilated the light from the skies, but Ursula emitted a sickly bioluminescent glow. Ariel’s face was downcast, pale and drawn as she stared into the churning waves. Her tail was slack, fins barely grazing the water.

“I’ll admit,” Ursula said. “I was not surprised to find this little guppy had sacrificed herself. Her voice lost forever, all because she chose you over her little prince. But you, my dear? Now, that was surprising.”

Lacey didn’t respond. The sea raged and spat and she was blue with cold, shaking with terror, and yet oddly calm.

“I’m full of surprises,” she replied. “Ask anyone.” Her words somehow rose over the howling of the storm as it battered and breached the mainland somewhere miles behind them.

Ursula narrowed her eyes at her, her grip tightening on Ariel’s arm. “You mistake stupidity for bravery,” Ursula told her snidely. “It’s no matter, the waves bow to my power.”

Just behind Ursula, there was a shadow on the waves. At first, Lacey assumed it to be Monstro, but it never disappeared from the horizon. It grew larger and larger as it neared them. It almost looked like a ship, but Gepetto’s rowboat had been destroyed and all the other ships had been called back to shore.

All except...

A small flicker of hope caught in her chest. Lacey couldn’t restrain the giddy grin that crossed her face. “Nix couldn’t even be bothered to come deal with you himself,” Lacey continued recklessly. “What does that say about your almighty power, you overgrown sushi roll?”

The Sea Witched swelled with rage. “Overgrown, am I?” she asked, looming over Lacey.

No, the Sea Witch was actually growing. She was the size of a small house by now. Lacey, stunned, took a step backwards, only to slip on the slick surface of the rock and fall to her knees. Her elbow scraped the rough surface and she hissed in pain. Beads of blood popped up on her skin.

Ariel began to struggle. Lacey’s words were lost in the wind, as another wave leapt up to crash over her. She clung to the rocks, sputtering sea water.

Ariel must have gotten the upper hand somehow. "Why, you little-!" Ursula exclaimed, and then heaved the little mermaid at Lacey like a missile. Leaning out, Lacey snagged the girl’s hand as she bounced into the tumultuous waves beside the rock. They both cried out at the sudden tug on their arms, but Ariel’s fingers grasped her wrist. Lacey pulled her upwards until the pale girl lay beside her.
They clutched at each other as Ursula continued to grow and twist, until soon they were crouching before a leviathan.

“Ultimate power!” Ursula crackled as lightning split the sky behind it. Lacey’s eyes darted to the dark horizon, searching for the ship, when it flashed into view, before disappearing as another swell dipped it back to the surface of the sea.

Putting her arm over Ariel, Lacey hugged the girl closer to her. Tendrils of wet hair stuck to her face as the younger girl wrapped herself around her, burying her face in her chest as she prepared to meet her death. “It’s okay,” Lacey whispered to her as the creature overhead continued its mad tirade. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

Lacey had no idea if she was lying or not, but she had to believe it. If nothing else, she owed Ariel some small iota of peace. She stroked the other girl’s back, murmuring reassurances as the wind began to increase. Lacey suddenly felt a razor sharp piercing sensation on her leg. She wrenched it, bleeding, away from the foaming waves.

Except it was more than waves rolling and twisting about the rock. The eels had returned. Easily noticeable in the fray were the two larger ones that had dragged Lacey to the surface, one’s mouth thick with her blood. A whole nest was splashing in the waves, all leaping and flailing as they tried to gain access to the rock’s small surface. Lacey kept Ariel’s head averted at the sickening noise, but she had no doubt the girl heard the cries and shrieks of the screaming eels.

“You will learn your place before your death,” came the booming proclamation as the Sea Witch raised her hands to the heavens. The trident glowed golden in the inky blackness, a warm tone so at odds with the purple sickly glow of the creature.

“Ariel,” Lacey whispered. “Can she be killed?”

Ariel shook her head in uncertainty, fingers tightening on Lacey’s arms as a sob wracked her body.

Everyone seemed to think this Goddess could not be killed but the Imp had referred to her as a witch. At the mere mention of the word, Ursula had grown furious, which left Lacey to wonder, could witches be killed?

“Okay, plan B,” Lacey muttered. “Can she be distracted?”

Ariel offered a queasy smile as she nodded earnestly.

“That a girl,” Lacey said determinedly. “She’s got her creatures pretty worked up but I think we might have a chance.”

“Mortals!” hissed the creature, growing aware that her powerful display was going unnoticed. “I shall sink all the kingdoms below the waves, bring all of this world into my domain!”

In the sea, the Imp was powerless. But they were not technically in the sea…

“I thought this was supposed to be the Sea of Silence?” Lacey hollered back over her shoulder. “I can’t even hear myself think over all your showboating!”

Ursula screamed in affront. “You dare? You dare order the Goddess of the Seas to silence?”

“You heard me,” Lacey stood, standing before Ariel as she twisted back to face the Sea Witch. “Imp!” she whispered as loud as she dared under her breath, throwing her hand up. “I wish to make a deal!”
As the words left her mouth, the familiar touch of magic brushed past her, swirling on the winds of the storm only to break apart against the massive girth of the Sea Witch.

Both of them sat motionless as Ursula began to laugh uproariously. She pointed her glowing trident down at Lacey, quaking with mirth as the winds picked up her seaweed-tangled hair. "Fool! As if the magic of a mere Enchanted could –!"

Lacey never found out what the magic of an Enchanted could do. Not an instant later, the Sea Witch pitched forward with a gurgle of surprise. Her head fell back as the black storm clouds swirled overhead before Ursula groaned in mortal pain.

The point of a ship’s bowsprit had impaled her, breaking through the scales of her torso. Unable to twist and grab the ship with her hands, the goddess moaned as black inky blood began to escape into the rolling waves.

Ariel clutched at her, pulling her closer as the large tentacles rose up from the sea to wrap themselves around the ship. It was only then that Lacey noticed the few black shapes marring the already tumultuous sea.

One was drifting closer to the rock. As the rain pelted her face, Lacey could just barely make it out. It was a small dinghy. Standing on it, face upturned in horrified marvel was the face of a small boy.

“Pinocchio!” Lacey hollered over the sound of the storm and the splashing screams of the eels. Even as she watched though, they began to quiet and disappear, leaving the rock as they sank back into the depths of the sea.

The boy did not hear her at first, but when she repeated it, he turned in confusion. The instant he recognized her, he crossed his arms in a snit, glaring at her through the few feet that separated him.

“Ariel,” Lacey tugged at the other girl’s arm. Ariel, aghast, was watching in horror as Ursula’s death throes began to drag the ship into the deep. “Ariel, I need you to tow that boat over here, quickly before it wrecks on the rocks.”

Sparing her a quick glance of disbelief, Ariel slipped into the sea. She made it effortlessly through the raging waves to grab a hold of the boat. Wrapping her hand in the rope dangling from the side, Ariel made the swim back with ease, depositing the rope in Lacey’s hand as she bobbed beside it in the water.

“Pinocchio,” Lacey shook her head. “What are you doing out here?! Your father was worried sick!”

A look of guilty unhappiness crossed the boy’s face as he sniffed, “I want to go home.”

“Yeah, well, you and me both,” Lacey growled but she hopped into the boat, less gracefully than she would have liked, to grasp the oars.

“Princess!”

Twisting, Lacey found a cricket staring up at her from the boy's wet and bedraggled overall pocket. Ariel peered curiously over the side of the boat. “Jiminy, good job on the rescue mission.”

An angry chirp was her response. “Prince Eric! He’s still on the ship!”

A bolt of lightning crashed overhead, illuminating the look of horror on Ariel’s face. Then, as the
thunder rolled just after it, her face grew serious. Before Lacey could stop her, Ariel pushed off from the boat towards the half sunken ship. Black inky tendrils were wrapped around it as a lover’s embrace, cracking the ship hull near in two as the waves slowly lapped up to accept the offering.

“Ariel, goddamn it!” Lacey cried out, nearly tipping the boat over as she tried to catch a hold of the little mermaid. Her hand plunged into the cold surf, catching nothing but a chill. For a heartbeat, she stared towards the maelstrom before she lifted her chin and turned back to face the small boy and Enchanted cricket. “Can you row?”

The boy nodded hesitatingly, wiping the back of his face with his sleeve. Lacey nodded back as she handed him an oar. She did not remark on the tears on his cheeks. If this whole ordeal had been terrifying for her, she couldn't imagine what the six year old boy had endured. “We need to get back to shore.”

“Follow them,” Jiminy chirped. A few other dinghies’ were quickly overtaking them, men cold and huddled looking at her in open astonishment.

“Care to explain?” Lacey asked the cricket, putting her back into the first row and finding the tides push against her oar. Memories of a rowing class at her local gym swam to the front of her mind as she and the small boy began to row against the tide towards home.

“Well,” the indignant response came. “This is all your fault, you know.”

“Of course it is,” Lacey sighed. “But if you wouldn’t mind explaining?”

“You, coming to the house with the Crown Prince!” he sang up at her in a fury, hopping as best he could in the boy’s pocket. Pinocchio just looked downcast, ignoring her eyes as he rowed.

Pushing her shoulders back as a sharp pull almost caused her to lose grip on the oar, Lacey swore under her breath, causing the two sitting across from her to audibly gasp.

“What?” she demanded, continuing the motion of rowing despite her arms starting to cramp. “You’ve never heard a lady curse before?”

Pinocchio shook his head rapidly, big eyes glistening. She could see him much clearer now as the horizon behind her grew lighter. Pinks and oranges stained the sky as dawn began to break over the sea.

“You might want to get out of there,” she said pointedly to the cricket. Pinocchio paused in his rowing to gingerly lift his friend from his pocket. He carefully sheltered the cricket from the rain, placing him on the seat between him and Lacey. All of this left Lacey to row on her own, causing her to release more unladylike language. She caught the stunned look of a nearby sailor. “What are you looking at? You want to come over here and help me or just stare?”

Happily, he was saved from having to respond. A glowing white light suddenly pierced her vision. Lacey raised her forearm, careful to keep a grip on her oar, to shield her eyes. When she lowered it, Jiminy was sitting between her and the younger boy, glaring at her.

“He ran away to sea! Poor Gepetto was beside himself!”

“How is that my fault?” Lacey yelled back. “Grab an oar and help!”

Muttering darkly, Jiminy grabbed the oar, plunging them oversea as he matched her strokes. “He would have never thought about it if the Prince hadn’t suggested—!”
“I would too have!”

Lacey faltered in her rowing as a wooden puppet popped up behind Jiminy’s back. He looked just like Pinocchio, down to the judgmental scowl and button nose and full bow lips. She remembered Gepetto telling her all about his wooden puppet that his wife had loved so much it had given him life.

“I hate hiding in the house. I hate it in the village! I hate being a puppet! I wanna be a real boy!”

“Pinoc,” Jiminy sighed. “Come sit by me.”

The puppet clacked over until he sat in the boat between them, frowning up at Jiminy in childlike disappointment. The other boats had pulled ahead slightly as the shore began to loom in sight. Even as they continued to row in silence, Pinocchio’s soft sniffles made her skin tighten unpleasantly. She tried to think of a way to tell them that Gepetto had not only followed them to sea, but had vanished in its depths.

Her eyes traced the intricate woodwork that formed Pinocchio, the frames were beautifully done and she could see the love and care Gepetto had put into the construction of him. “You know, kid,” Lacey said, surprising the others. “Your dad told me about…you know, the enchantment.” Pinocchio turned to look at her, even as Jiminy frowned at her over his head. “He loves you a lot. You know that, don't you?”

The boy gave a hesitant nod. “But he won’t let me out of the house.”

“He’s not ashamed at you,” Lacey told him. Blisters were beginning to form on her palms. “He was just trying to protect you.”

The boy stood up, swaying dangerously as he avowed, “I don’t-!“

“Pinocchio!” Jiminy admonished him.

The boy hung his head and sat back down. “I don’t need protecting,” he said lowly. “I’m a real boy.”

Unsure of herself in this situation, Lacey fell silent. Jiminy gave her a smug look over the puppet's head. "Now, Pinocchio," he began. "We've talked about this. Enchantments don't work like that. The love of your parents brought you to life, and the Blue Fairy's gift allows you to be a real boy when the moons are overhead. If you ever want to be a real boy, you must learn to be brave and true-"

“Uh, well, I got news for you,” Lacey interrupted.. “I’m a real girl, and I’m terrified most of the time.”

The puppet perked up. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Lacey confessed. “I’m scared out of mind right now. I just want to go home to my own bed. I never want to see the ocean again, and I want nothing more than a shot of tequila with a chaser,”

Both of them stared up at her in confusion. “My point is, I’m scared. Real boys and girls, Dads and Moms, we’re all scared sometimes. Being fearless doesn’t make you real. It’s being brave in spite of the fear.”

“So,” Pinocchio said, his voice wavering. “I can be scared?”
To her surprise, Jiminy nodded. “Yeah,” he said, his voice thick. “You can be scared.”

“Okay.”

The blue sky was spreading as the sun rose higher. Tears stung her eyes, ready to fall down her cheeks if she gave in even at all. She hated the world at that moment, she hated the boy in front of her and the cricket man that was rowing alongside her, she hated the Imp and Emma and the damn crown prince with his mighty intentions.

Most of all, she hated herself.

When the boat finally hit the dunes of sand, the crew of the ship was there to haul them off it. Jiminy was met with some excitement, apparently he had gone missing on the main ship shortly after sunset and they had thought he had gone overboard in the storm.

Pinocchio, on the other hand, was met with warm embraces.

“Thought we lost you!”

“Gave us quite a scare, boy!”

“Natural seamen! Did you see him? No fear!”

None of them seemed to notice or care he was made of wood. The young boy beamed up at them, blissfully happy as they all chatted away.

A small group of villagers had gathered, drawn to the beach by the unusual activity in the storm’s wake. Pinocchio began to move towards them, eyes bright with pride. Jiminy followed right behind him, both of them twisting their heads around as if they were searching for someone.

Realization hit Lacey just as Pinocchio called out in consternation, “Papa? Where are you, Papa?”

Jiminy looked perplexed as well until he turned back and met her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Lacey rasped, arms crossing over her chest. "He...he went after you."

Disbelief, shock, and then sorrow chased across the man's face in the span of seconds. Lacey looked away hastily to find a familiar face from the village at her side. The man Eric had stopped to talk to the other day.

“Gil, wasn’t it?” she asked, thankful for the distraction. The man quickly helped her to sit on a nearby overturned dinghy. A few quickly stood up from it, all staring at her in growing interest.

“Princess Belle, thank the Goddess, it is an honor to see you again.”

“The Goddess had nothing to do with it,” Lacey murmured, wincing as her fingers cramped unpleasantly. “Have you seen Ariel?”

“Belle!”

Standing, Lacey hurried forward. Pinocchio was on Jiminy’s shoulders, pointing out to sea. Just as the last wave of the morning tide rushed in, a tumble of red hair and pale skin flashed before disappearing back beneath the waves.

“Ariel!” Lacey shouted, rushing forward. Her oversized borrowed jacket flapped behind her in the air, as she stumbled and fumbled down to the surf’s edge.
As the tide retreated, it left the little mermaid, curled protectively around the prize she had been carrying. Lacey fell to her knees, peering down at Eric’s pale and lifeless face.

The men behind her all gathered to pay their respects to their fallen leader. As someone’s hand fell on her shoulder, the others began to whisper behind her, the word mermaid and cursed rising and falling in hushed tones.

“Tis the Goddess’s will,” came the hushed voice of Gil beside her.

“Bullshit,” Lacey told him, shrugging him off. “He’s not going to die. No one else is going to die today.”

“Belle,” Jiminy’s said in a strangled voice. “So, Gepetto's…?”

“I’m so sorry,” she answered the question he hadn’t dared to ask. She hadn't been able to save the man who had saved her but perhaps there was still hope for the young man lying in the sand before her.

“Move,” she told Ariel, nudging the mermaid aside. Kneeling on the warming sand, Lacey opened Eric’s mouth with her fingers, checking to make sure his airway was unobstructed. A few men protested at this, but none dared disturb her. Putting her hands in the center of his chest, Lacey began to push down, counting to thirty in her head. She made the movements hard and fast, her arms protesting at the motion after her rowing.

Titling the royal’s head back by lifting his chin, Lacey put her palm on his forehead and made sure his airway was fully open. Her palms were sweaty and covered in sand, dusting his raven locks with golden speckles. She hoped to God or whoever was listening that she remembered this from summer camp as she pinched his nose shut. Leaning down, she covered his mouth with hers, blowing as she watched his chest rise. After two breaths, she lifted away to check if he was breathing.

Ariel had tears leaking down her cheeks, still clutching Eric's hand in her own. Someone had draped their jacket over her naked chest, her fin glowing emerald in the sunlight.

Lacey repeated the thirty compressions, going slightly faster as she bent back down to tilt his chin up. The beach was falling silent as the men watched, all crowding around her. Murmurs of “witch” and “magic” drifted over to her but she ignored it. Magic wouldn’t help her now.

Finally, as she breathed into his mouth for the fourth time, all hope fading, Eric gave a great convulse and sputtered up water from his lungs.

“Prince Eric!” Gil cried behind her, helping him sit up. Lacey was almost knocked sideways as the men hastened to their leader’s side, but Ariel steadied her.

“What?” Eric said dazedly, lifting a hand to his brow where the sand was thickest. “Where am I?”

“You saved him!” Gil cried, turning to Lacey with a joyous expression. “True Love has conquered death!”

Lacey shook her head rapidly, holding her hands up before her. “It’s CPR,” she told them. “Science, not magic.” Blank looks were returned to her and she sighed. “You’ll get there eventually.”

In the interim of this, Eric had turned to Ariel. He raised a shaking hand, lifting it to her cheek. “I was looking for you,” he whispered.
Ariel smiled in painful joy, tears leaking down her face as she buried her face in his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her, stroking her hair as he murmured words of love and affection into her cheek.

“Kiss her!” Lacey hollered, smiling despite herself. “Go on! Kiss her!”

A few men behind her agreed based on their hoots and whistles. "Kiss the girl!" one shouted in encouragement. Despite that, a few men were still throwing Ariel dark looks, while others were staring between her and Lacey as if to determine which girl the prince should be kissing.

Eric blushed deep as Ariel’s, but his look was determined. “I love you,” he told her, placing both hands on the side of her face as he brushed the tears from her eyes. “I would have followed you beyond the sea and into the depths. Don’t ever leave me again.”

She nodded, head bobbing in the comically sweet Ariel way of hers as he lowered his lips to hers.

A flash of blinding white light, sparkling off the water into a million dazzling stars burst from their entwined arms. Lacey shielded her eyes, blinking dizzily as the light faded away to reveal the couple still wrapped in a kiss.

“Ariel,” Lacey gasped. “You’re-!”

“Still a mermaid,” came a new voice from Lacey’s shoulder.

Beside her, hovering in mid-air was a tiny little fairy, dressed all in blue.

“Blue Fairy!” Pinocchio cried out in childish delight. “I’ve missed you!”

“Hello, Pinocchio,” the fairy said warmly. “I’m very glad to see you.” Her eyes fell on Jiminy, standing just behind him, and she smiled at him as well. “And Jiminy, my friend, it has been much too long.”

The men were backing away in reverence. A few even had even sunk to their knees in the wet sand. Lacey stood at odds, blinking in the dawn sunlight as she tried to make sense of what was happening. “You’re Gepetto’s Blue Fairy?” she asked incredulously.

“I am,” the little woman responded grandly. “I also know who you are, and who you say you are, Princess Belle.”

Swallowing hard, Lacey tugged her coat tighter around her. The fairy shook herself slightly, small sparkles falling off her in waves at the motion. “Allow me, my dear.”

With a warm burst of magic, unlike the dark thick smoke and thunder that the Imp’s felt like, a simple day gown of white cream appeared in the place of her sodden coat and borrowed dress. Ariel too now wore a purple seashell bikini top contraption, her pale smooth skin on full display.

“I hope you don’t mind, Ariel,” the Blue Fairy twinkled. “I thought perhaps the men might be more comfortable.”

“Thank you,” Ariel said, before her hands flew to her throat. “My voice! Eric, I can speak!”

The Prince laughed, nuzzling her neck as she started to laugh and sing, wordless melodies that rang over the beach, joy and relief infecting even the most superstitious of men surrounding them.

“Of course, you can,” the Blue Fairy chimed in. “True Love has broken the spell of silence.”
“Oh, Eric,” Ariel cried. “I love you. I love you, I love you, I love you!”

“And I you,” he told her, grabbing her hands and bringing them to his lips. “Marry me. Make me the happiest man alive and be my wife.”

“Yes,” Ariel murmured, eyes shining like emeralds. “A thousand times yes.”

“Oh, Prince Eric,” Gil said, coughing slightly as he looked down at Ariel’s green tail, half in the surf. “She’s...“

“Royal blood,” Lacey finished saucily. “Princess Ariel of the Seven Seas.”

“Belle,” Ariel laughed. “There are thirteen seas!”

“Right,” Lacey murmured. “I knew that.”

Pinocchio came up besides her, looking up at the Blue Fairy seriously. “Yes, Pinocchio?” the Blue Fairy asked, dipping down to be closer to his upturned face.

“Where’s Papa?” he asked, and the men grew quiet as they realized loss was still among them. “I want my Papa.”

“Pinocchio,” the fairy sighed, sadness coloring her tone. “I’m so sorry, my child. Your father has gone to be with your mother.”

“But,” the puppet’s voice quivered, “what about me?”

Jiminy’s hand came to rest on his shoulder, tightening on the boy’s wooden arm as he bent down next to him. “I’ll take care of you,” he told him. His face was pinking under the sun but it glowed with determination. “I promise.”

“And so you shall,” the Blue Fairy decreed. “For you are no longer one of the Enchanted, Jiminy Hopper. With this selfless act of unconditional love, you are freed from your curse.”

Faint white light, almost silver in the light glowed faintly around the figure of Jiminy before it faded away. Pinocchio smiled up at his friend, fingers reaching up to him. With a laugh, both stunned and moved, Jiminy swung up the child, holding him in his arms as he gazed in wonder down at the tiny, upturned face of a wooden puppet.

“What do you say Pinocchio? Would you like that?”

The boy nodded. “Papa would want that,” he said seriously. “I want him to be happy when we see him again.”

Having lost her sleeves to wipe away the moisture in her eyes, Lacey turned back to the Blue Fairy with a thickness in her voice. “You couldn’t save Gepetto?”

“He was at peace,” the Blue Fairy told her kindly. “He died in the arms of the sea, on a quest to save his son. It was what he would have wanted.”

“He would have wanted to be with his son,” Lacey said, her voice rising. “What the hell is the matter with you people?”

“You do not know our ways,” the fairy warned her, zooming up closer to her. “Perhaps you should not judge, Lacey of the Land of Believers.”
Lacey stilled, staring down the pipsqueak before she looked back at Ariel. “Couldn’t you enchant Ariel?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” the Fairy told her. “I will perform the same spell as Nix, but the end would be the same. She is a mermaid and he is a human. Nights, she can walk at his side but the days she will be who she is truly.”

Eric and Ariel were giggling at something, fingers entwined in the sand. They did not look like they had a care in the world, his bare feet brushing against Ariel’s fin.

“What's the price?” Lacey asked, unable to tear her eyes away. "I'll pay it for her. Just tell me what it is."

“Oh, Lacey,” the Blue Fairy murmured sadly “He has taught you nothing of the ways of magic.” With a wave of her wand, small and slight in her grip, the Blue Fairy sent a wave of magic cascading towards the young couple. It settled into Ariel’s skin, glistening and glowing like candle light before it faded away. “As long as the love they bear each other is true,” the Blue Fairy told them all. “Princess Ariel will walk among you under the night sky.”

Cheers rang up at this as Eric captured Ariel’s lips in a kiss, wrapping his arms around her and lifting her upwards until she was holding her arms up on his shoulders, laughing as he twirled her around. Her tail raised high as she could, sparkling in the rays of the sun.

Lacey crossed her arms, jealous of their bliss. They did not know two good men had died tonight in the name of their love, that a young boy had lost his father, and a cricket had lost a friend. How many else had died? Lacey rubbed her arms as the breeze from the sea drifted to the shore. It didn't matter. She'd bear that burden for them. It was the least she could do.

When tears began to pool in her eyes, she was surprised. Surprised that she cared so much about people she had known so little. She was so used to keeping people at an arm’s length, and yet…

Desperate to elude the guilt, Lacey stepped forward to join Ariel and Eric, hoping their happiness would rub off on her. As she went to meet them, the fairy flew in front of her, effectively cutting her off. “We do not have long,” the fairy told her cryptically.

“What do you-?”

“He is not what he seems,” the Blue Fairy said quickly. “You must remember that, Lacey. He is not what he seems-!”

Before Lacey could respond, maroon smoke began to materialize. It rose up from her feet, swirling faster and faster as it crowded out the beach and the sounds of joy and laughter. The last thing she saw was the Blue Fairy’s face, worried and pinched. The fairy tried to say something else but it was lost in the maelstrom of the magic.

When it cleared, Lacey was back in her room at the Dark Castle.

“Wait,” Lacey sputtered, stepping forward as she reached for people who were no longer there. Her breathing became faster and faster as it dawned on her. “No! I didn’t-!” She stopped, letting her voice trail off as she looked down at her feet, still bare and covered in sand. “I didn’t get to say goodbye…”

Chapter End Notes
And with that, comes to a close, the first adventure of Lacey French in Fae.

I hope you have all come to enjoy getting to know Gepetto, Pinoc, Jiminy, Duke Sebastian, Ariel, Eric and of course Ursula. I throughly enjoyed writing them and I'm going to be honest, having Lacey leave Ariel against her will broke my heart.

But we are also back at the Dark Castle after a few days of Lacey being out without the Imp, and let's be honest, she has some things she wants to say to him.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

As always a warm round of appluause for my wonderful beta fairy godmother-Ramloth.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lacey’s footsteps did not echo in the stone halls of the Dark Castle as she headed to her room barefoot with sand still stubbornly sticking to her feet. One hand, slightly tanner from her recent days in the warm sun, reached out to twist the knob. It was trembling.

It couldn’t be later than noon, but Lacey was exhausted. She had spent her entire morning roaming the hallways, searching for the Imp to demand he return her back to Eric’s castle.

“I’ll be perfectly safe there,” she had practiced to her reflection in a knight’s shining armor. “Eric and Ariel will keep me for the year, and then you can return me back home. You get what you want, I get what I want, and Emma doesn’t have to know.”

Despite her best efforts, Lacey had no luck locating the impossible beast. As her jaw cracked under the increasingly frequent yawns, she had admitted defeat and headed to her quarters. Whether or not they were still there was the question.

Growing annoyed at herself, she turned the knob with a vicious twist of her wrist. Pushing it open and striding forward with no further hesitation, she found her room looked the same as it had when she had departed. Padding across the gold and rose-flecked woven rug that covered the cold stone floor, Lacey pushed off her borrowed threads that smelled of the sea. They slumped to the floor as she stepped out of them, kicking them away from her. The blankets on the bed had been turned down, by the castle or by her hand before she left, Lacey couldn’t remember.

Crawling in it, she laid upon her back, naked with sea salt still clinging to her body. As heavy as her eyes were, she didn’t let herself close them. She hadn’t dreamed while in Eric’s kingdom. Her days had been filled with mermaids in bathtubs and walks along the piers. Her nights had been full of dancing, making love to a mysterious man and risking the lives of everyone around her. When she had slept, it had been deep, the slumber of the exhausted.

Yet here in the Dark Castle, who knew how far away from the little mermaid and her prince, the little wooden boy and the sea that had claimed his father, Lacey didn’t dare close her eyes.

Five days, she counted out in her head. Five days, she had been gone from this place. Now she was back, and nothing here had changed.

The bookshelves were still tall and straight. The window was still uncovered, golden light streaming in through the thick panes of glass. It was also dead quiet as only the Dark Castle could be. At Eric’s, there had been the sounds of the waves, seagulls crying out as they floated by and the ever present noise of people in the hallways. Here, it was eerily still and silent, as if she was the only living thing for miles.

Lacey turned her head back to the canopy of her four-poster bed, tracing the lines of fabric as she
tried to forget she was responsible for the deaths of at least three men and perhaps even more.

When she finally succumbed to sleep, the nightmares returned.

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Having grown accustomed to being cared for by living breathing people, it took Lacey time to adjust to the castle’s magical ways. When she finished washing, her borrowed clothes had disappeared from the floor. Her only option was to go wandering nude or to allow the wardrobe its way. A simple dress of mint green and darker forest green panels was her only option when she opened the doors, leaving her at the mercy of the castle when it came to the built in corset.

The kitchen had been more than happy to provide her with her preferred tea and cake early evening snack. Lacey had taken the plate back to her room, sitting on her window seat, legs dangling as she watched the moons rise over the land. The sunset broke against some mountains in the distance. Was that where the Gate back to her world was or were those just another mountain range?

Without her noticing, the castle disposed of her empty cup and plates, providing instead a book at her side as if to try and persuade her that it was in fact preferable to the sweet faced Charlotte and bold Priscilla. At the memory of the two maids who she had left scared and alone in the storm, Lacey pushed the book off the seat. She took pleasure in the dull thud as it hit the floor. However, when she turned back to the window, the magic returned the book to her side, gently nudging her as if to admonish her for the fit of temper.

“Go bother your master,” Lacey told it darkly. “While you’re at it, tell him I want to speak to him when he turns up from wherever he’s hiding.”

The castle did not respond, but Lacey picked up the book anyway. It was a biography of a pirate king, full of grammar misusage and spelling mistakes. Still, it was vastly more interesting than the moons and far less painful than her memories.

--

The return of the Imp went unnoticed by Lacey.

Having been staying to her rooms and letting the castle care for her in its own strange way, she did not notice any difference until a few nights after her own return.

Stretching her legs, Lacey explored the third floor of the castle, peering into nooks and crannies, which were perfectly dusted except when it suited the castle. She unearthed one skeleton with a spider living its eye, what appeared to be a dragon egg shell left in the embers of a fireplace, and a small stool, child-sized with a fingerprint visible in the dust.

Just as she began to grow bored, the unmistakable sound of someone climbing the stairs came from the other side of the wall. Pressing her ear against the solid stonewall, she followed the sound as best she could until her ear was pressed against a fabric tapestry of some bloody ogre battle.

Stepping back, she assessed it. As the footsteps grew fainter, Lacey pushed her hand against the ancient fabric, smirking to herself when it did not hit a wall. “Hidden passageways” Lacey asked the castle with a shake of her head. “Not terribly original.”

She followed the winding stairs upwards. The earlier footsteps were now silent as she crept quietly up the stone passage. Her breath grew slightly ragged at the steepness of the stairs. Why would the Imp even bother climbing these if he could just magic himself wherever he pleased?
And if the Imp hadn’t been who she had just heard, was it one of his old students?

“Come, come,” came her answer from just out of sight at the top of the stairs. “I haven’t all day for you to lurk in the shadows.”

“Oh. It’s just you.”

“You were expecting someone else?” he teased, bowing low as his hands swung out beside him.

Blowing air out of her nose at him, Lacey looked around the room in bored curiosity. The circular room had high ceilings, indicating it was likely in the top of one of the towers. Wooden rafters were high above them, old tatters of fabric swaying in the wind from a crack in the stones.

“Where are we?” Lacey asked

“The north tower,” he told her with another horrible giggle. “Can’t you tell?”

She shrugged, meandering over to the shuttered window. She couldn’t see them but the twin moons were out. One had waxed to three quarters and the other waned to a crescent sliver in the sky. “Do you have a north star here too?”

“Obviously,” he retorted, twisting a hand at her in annoyance. He gestured to the window, which suddenly blew open, shutters banging against the stone tower. Up in the very center of the heavens, a blue dot winked down at them from its spot in the heavens. “All the lands share the Polaris.”

“Obviously,” Lacey shot back under her breath. She crossed her arms as the warm summer breeze lifted her hair about her shoulders. The land as far as she could see was wild and free, no towns or cities as far as the horizon. It made her more lonesome, yearning for the sounds of people and life. The utter, still silence of the Dark Castle pushed down on her as Lacey struggled to find the words that she had been practicing in her head the last few days.

“Look,” she finally said, turning around to face the Imp. He had migrated over to a bookshelf, tapping a stick against one palm as he surveyed the various tomes. He ignored her, scrunching his nose as he peered at the names printed along the spines. “I was wondering...”

“How difficult is it to find Lacewings?” he was muttering under his breath, leaning closer to the books.

He was not going to listen while distracted. She marched over to stand beside him, trying again. “As I was saying...“

He didn’t look over at her, still peering near-sighted at the books. Lacey took a moment, glanced at the few rows to her left and right and then plucked the book labeled 202 Uses of Lacewings. She handed it over to her confused guardian, smiling as she did so. “Now, about the rest of my time here,” she said brightly. “Don’t you think it would be better for everyone if I stayed in the Seventh Kingdom?”

He cocked his head at her, opened his mouth and then spun on his heel. He walked back towards a large oaken table in the center of the room.

Lacey choked back a groan. “Come on,” she said, following after him. “Doesn’t it make sense?”

“Mm,” he was murmuring to himself. “Can’t remember if I have any shredded boomslang skin left...fluxweed picked on a full moon... plenty of leeches left.”
“Gross,” Lacey recoiled from the table as the various ingredients appeared before him as he bid them.

“Ah, yes, knotgrass and powdered bicorn horn…”

“Are you even listening to me?” Lacey demanded, crossing her arms peevishly.

“Child’s play,” he said happily, looking up at her with a black stained smile. “Except for the last bit!”

“What?” she asked, instantly upset with herself as his eyes grew brighter and his smile grew larger.

“Why, the transformation potion!” he cackled, slapping the book shut. “I just need the skin, nail, or hair of a blind witch!”

Lacey stared at him. For a moment. “So, about staying with Ariel,” she began again, only to be cut off by the slamming of his hand against the table.

“That will take some work,” he said to himself, turning and toying with some of the recently appeared ingredients. “No matter, I have just the trick for it.”

“Look Imp- or Nix…or whatever your name is,” Lacey said forcefully, moving around so she was directly across the table from him. “I want to go back.”

He considered her request, moving his head from one side to the other as his eyes danced around the ceiling before they dropped back down to hers with a wicked smile. “Hmmm. No.”

“Why not!” Lacey demanded, her own hands coming down to rest on the table. “Give me one reason-!”

“One?” he asked her laughingly as he lifted a single brow at her. “How about three?” He lifted one long, clawed finger. “First, you made the deal to returning to the prince’s castle accompanied by your fish friend, you remember, don’t you?”

“But I-!”

“Secondly,” he continued as if she had not spoken. “You were responsible for the deaths of a total of fourteen people in your little adventure.”

She tried not to stagger, she really did, but her hand reached out to grasp the table and her knees wobbled beneath her. Lacey blinked back the heat that was suddenly pooling behind her eyes, trying not to think of the dead, but like Graham, they seemed to insist she remember them.

“Did you ever pause to think perhaps they don’t want you back? You did cause quite a bit of mischief, dearie.”

Gepetto’s kind eyes flashed before her, the way he took her hand to assure her it would be okay. Dylan’s mouth moving over hers, his fingers dipping under her skirts as they found release in the gardens. Oh, and the Duke, his dry voice and knowing smile as he leaned down to whisper in her ear on the ballroom terrace. Those were just the faces she had known. Were Charlotte and Priscilla safe? Had Grimsby faced punishment before Eric could return to the castle?

The Imp continued on, ignorant or unheeding of her struggle to stay composed.

“Last but not least! There’s the little matter of the magical assistance in slaying the Sea Witch.” He
tapped his three fingers against his chin, musing, “Now, it seems to me that you are very much in debt. Going around demanding further favors seems a bit presumptuous.”

Lacey shook her head, trying to get out the ghosts. It was hopeless though; they seemed as much a part of her now as her own voice. “Fine,” she muttered. “You win.”

“Oh, goodie,” he deadpanned. “Now, I have some business to attend to. Off you go.”

He returned his attention to the task before him, effectively dismissing her. For a moment, she remained, trying to find the words to argue with him but none came to her.

Instead, Lacey found herself shuffling from the room. She emerged back into the room with the tapestry, as confused and lost as she had been the first few nights in this horrible place.

--

The castle seemed as fed up with the Imp as Lacey was.

Walking along the kitchen hallway, she heard muttered curses, the sound of pots and pans falling and then a distinct crashing noise. Curious, she rounded the corner to find the Imp glowering at a mountain of dirty pots and pans, which had obviously just avalanched to his feet.

“Everything okay in here?” Lacey asked innocently, brushing past the mess to open the ice chest where a perfectly chilled glass of milk and a peach were waiting for her. Using her hip to shut the door, she took her snack over to the table where she pulled up a chair.

The Imp stared at her in annoyance, either at being caught yelling at inanimate objects or the castle’s catering to her whims, Lacey couldn’t quite tell.

“What are you doing?” he asked, sliding up next to the table.

“Eating,” Lacey said succinctly, holding up the half-eaten peach to his view. “That’s still allowed isn’t it?”

“You’ve grown rather bold from your little adventure,” he snipped at her. “I don’t like it.”

“Tough,” Lacey said under her breath as her teeth dug into the ripe flesh of the peach. Juice began to drip down her wrist and she lifted her hand to lick at the sticky juices before it reached her cuff. When she glanced back up at him, he was gone.

The pots and pans remained.

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Little over a week after her return, Lacey weighed her options. She owed two favors to the Imp, and instead of waiting for him to ask for the favors, she figured perhaps she could be proactive.

This led her to standing in front of his wheel, arms behind her back as she waited for him to look up from his spinning. As he continued to push the wheel, straw threads pooling on the floor into long stands of gold, she finally spoke. “Why do you do that?” she asked, nudging at the massive golden pile.

“To forget,” he told her, his voice pitched low as if he was somewhere far away.

“Forget what?” Lacey replied, sitting down beside his pile so she could run her fingers through it. He did not look up from his spinning, but she knew his eyes followed her down.
“What do you want?” he demanded, sidestepping the question entirely. “If it has anything to do with your little plan-?”

“What about the favors I owe,” Lacey began. “I’d like to clean my slate.”

He stilled for a moment, obviously confused before he began again. The wheel creaked back to life, protesting at first before falling back into its smooth rhythm. Encouraged by this, Lacey began to speak in earnest. “I figure you have something I can help with, something maybe like I did with Ariel? I’m guessing most people are hesitant to do business with you.”

He was watching her now, golden eyes narrowed as he listened closely.

“I figure, a mere mortal like me?” Lacey was idly running golden threads through her fingers, finding her hands remembered games from her childhood as they did cat in the cradle, the Eiffel tower and other yarn tricks. “Who would bat an eye owing a favor to someone like me?”

“How,” he asked her, drawing out the words, “do you think this will repay your debt?”

“Easy,” Lacey said, smiling up at him. “I’ll make deals that you would otherwise not have made.”

He snickered at that, shaking his head as he returned to his wheel. “I have no need in deals that I have not already foreseen,” he told her.

Lacey went to argue but he was again far away from her, lost in the rotating of the wheel. “Fine,” she said to herself as she clambered to her feet. “Be that way.”

When the Imp joined her for tea one evening, Lacey almost spilled hers down her front. He settled himself into the chair at the head of the table adjacent to hers.

“May I?” he asked, lifting the teapot over her half-filled cup.

She nodded hesitantly, watching as he poured hers adroitly before moving to the cup that had appeared in front of him. “That’s the damaged one,” Lacey pointed out without thinking.

“Nonsense,” he waved his hand as he put down the teapot. “It’s just chipped.”

He picked up the cup without milk or sugar and took a long sip from the rim. When he placed it back in its saucer with a loud clink, he grinned at her.

“What?” she demanded, reaching out for the sugar dish to sweeten her beverage.

“I believe you owe me a favor?” he asked innocently, steepling his hands in front of him.

“You know perfectly well-!” Lacey started, brandishing a tea spoon at him before she stilled.

This wasn’t going to get her anywhere. Arguing and fighting would just make him return in kind. She was tired of their little games anyways, it was time to try a different tactic. Lacey exhaled slowly. Sitting back, she lowered the spoon down gently, before turning back to him with a soft smile on her face. “I do,” she agreed. “What’ll it be?”

If he was at all disturbed by her abrupt change of heart, he did not show it.

“There’s a tiny matter of a deal I need made in the Second Kingdom,” he said with a touch of theatrical weariness to his tone. “However, there’s also a time sensitive situation brewing just over
the border in the First Kingdom.”

“I fit in how?” Lacey asked him, raising her cup to take a small sip as she waited for his reply.

“You,” he said, lifting his own cup to his mouth in imitation of her. “Will be handling the situation in the Second Kingdom in my stead.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “Can’t be too hard,” he said as an afterthought. “Child’s play really.”

“What will I be doing?” Lacey asked, already thinking of the mystical creatures she would probably have to deal with this time. Dragons, trolls, or ogres were all very real possibilities. She wished she had paid closer attention to the maps of the Kingdoms the other day. “Bargaining for jewels? Seducing some poor sap?”

“Nothing like that,” he assured her with a devilish grin. “More like babysitting.”

Lacey shook her head sharply. “Absolutely not,” she said. “No, no way. I already had to take care of a sixteen year old mermaid who thought she knew best. No way in hell am I taking care of actual children!”

“Now, now,” he chided her, amusement gleaming in his buggy little eyes. “I’m collecting on one of those little favors you owe me. All you have to do is make sure this brother and sister don’t get lost in the forest.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” Lacey asked him in frustration. “It’s not like you have GPS here.”

He wrinkled his nose at the reference, but he didn’t comment on it. “I’ve found,” he said vaguely, “bread crumbs usually do the job quite nicely.”

Chapter End Notes

Well gang, I hope everyone enjoyed this quiet little romp back in the Dark Castle. Lacey and the Imp still getting to know each other as well as some Dark Castle shenanigans.

Over on Tumblr, I let drop a hint of Lacey's next adventure and I'll share it here too. Please don't hesitate to let me know what you thought of this chapter, Lacey and the Imp's growing rapport or if you like Lacey are missing Ariel.

Hints for Lacey's next adventure:
A. Gingerbread
B. Glass
C. Gold

Oooh, what could it be?
Chapter 19

I'm incredibly lucky to have a wonderful beta, ramloth, who despite her busy schedule is always extremely wonderful in wrangling this story into cohesion.

Stumbling over an unearthed tree root, Lacey took a moment to mentally curse her quick temper, the Imp’s humor, and the general topography of the Second Kingdom. The twin moons’ light dappled through the thick foliage, but the light was so faint Lacey could barely see her own hand, much less the path.

As the sounds of the night hummed in the background, Lacey’s steps crunched and crackled as she stepped on fallen leaves, broken twigs and God knew what else. Taking a moment to remember to breathe, she stopped just long enough to hear a howl, off in the distance and she quickly began to move again.

“No creature in the forest will harm you as long as you have this,” the Imp had assured her, handing over a small piece of bone. Instinctively, out here in the darkness, Lacey’s hand went to the leather chord around her neck that held the small piece nestled under her dress. “Careful though,” he had sniggered, stepping back to admire his handiwork. “Doesn’t work too well against two legged variety.”

Another owl hooted overhead as she passed beneath another tree. “Yeah, yeah,” Lacey replied grumpily as she moved forward. There was but one or two hours left before dawn. If the Imp was to be believed, that meant she had only until then to reach the woodcutter’s cottage.

“Simple sort of man,” the Imp had explained to her a few nights ago. “Dead wife left him two mouths to feed and no money. All you have to do is get his little brats to show you where the Blind Witch lives. It shouldn’t be too hard. Her home is rather hard to miss…”

Another hoot, this one much closer, made her jump. Putting a hand over her racing heart, Lacey cursed herself again for good measure. If she had just kept her temper, she wouldn’t be traipsing about blind in the woods. But no, the Imp had made some damn comment about avoiding a death toll on this trip and she hadn’t been able to keep her mouth shut.

It was, as she had discovered quickly, a bad idea to tell the magical being to go fuck himself. Before she could blink, he had snapped those two damned fingers under her nose and off she had whirled. Arriving in the dead of night, in the middle of a forest, with nothing but a talisman and general sense of direction.

Coming to a clearing, Lacey glanced around warily. The sound of a babbling brook nearby gave her pause, remembering the Imp’s comment about if she hit the stream she had gone too far. The sky above was mercifully starting to lighten and Lacey allowed herself to reach out to touch the nearest tree, feeling the moss under hand.

Free from the thick branches of the forest, the sky’s light revealed a small house just on the other edge of the glen. It looked like an old mill, but the wheel was missing half of its spokes. It was still
and silent in the night air.

Settling down on a nearby patch of leaves, Lacey made herself comfortable. She had slept little since awakening in the early evening and if the Imp was to be believed, she would have very little rest today. The house in the glen seemed welcoming enough, gabled roofs with thatching, multiple chimneys sticking out as if afterthoughts and a soft, faded blue paint adorned the bricks. There were quite a few windows, although all of them were shuttered currently. They had charming white and red pattered blocks around each of them, muted but clean. The front door wasn’t visible, but a trail from the stream led upwards and just out of sight so it must be just around the corner.

A nearby rustle in the brush made Lacey twist her head. Silence followed this small interruption but Lacey clutched for the talisman, taking it out of her neckline to glance at it. A small prong from a deer’s antlers, it had some carvings along one side and the other had a droplet of gold pressed to it. Her fingers wrapped around it as the cool night air reminded her it was almost autumn here.

Back home it would be late March, still winter in the North East. The Second Kingdom, which she knew little about other than the large forest that took up half of it, seemed to be south of the Dark Castle. Even so, it was cooler out here in the woods than it had been in her tower.

Luckily, she was dressed for it. Her outfit this time was much more practical. A peasant girl to fit in with the family, a wholly different role than Princess Belle. Reaching up to fiddle with the odd bonnet stuck firmly to her head, Lacey wondered, not for the first time, what had happened to Emma’s tiara. It probably laid deep at the bottom of the sea, lost forever unless some mermaid stumbled upon it.

Emma wouldn’t begrudge her for losing it while fighting for her life but still… the golden trinket had been comforting in the oddness of this new world. Even now, sitting on a pile of freshly fallen leaves, Lacey felt oddly incomplete without it.

It had reminded her of those late nights at the sheriff office with Emma and Graham. Smells of coffee and printer toner and that old heater in the back that smelled like a bonfire when it got too hot… a link between worlds. What Emma was doing back in Storybrooke? How she had told the town of Graham’s death and Belle’s disappearance? Did they know where she was? Did they know where Emma was from?

Personally, Lacey thought so. Something about the way they had never warmed to Emma and the way they had been cordial but unwelcoming at first, only counting her as a member of the town on the very night she had disappeared into the woods.

Still, it wasn’t as if she could have worn the tiara for this trip. Dressed demurely in a dark green linen and wool dress, Lacey looked every inch a peasant girl. Her bound hair, so different from the court life where it had been praised and admired along Ariel’s flaming crown, was now completely covered by a bonnet, a few curls escaping flirtatiously around her ears.

A shift in the wind brought the soft noises of rustling from across the glen. Lacey stood, patting her hands off at the black wool apron that hung from her striped cotton belt. Brushing the leaves off the back of the dress, she moved forward across the glen. Showtime.

“Tell them you got lost in the woods,” the Imp had suggested in annoyance when she asked how she was to explain her presence so early in the morning. “Tell them whatever you like, as long as you manage to get the children’s trust!”

Easier said than done, but as she pulled up the odd puffy quarter sleeves of her dress, Lacey squared her shoulders. The scoop neck did show off her cleavage to a decent advantage, perhaps
that would be helpful when she met the father. Widowers as a rule tended to be either extremely susceptible or impossibly frigid.

Lacey barely had made it to the pathway from the stream, when a young boy came around the corner in the gloom just before dawn. He didn’t notice her at once, rubbing his eyes sleepily as he hiked up his pants, way too short for him, as he went barefoot through the grass.

Lacey stilled, waiting for him to notice her, but he continued on his way, a too large pale blue waistcoat nearly falling off him. It wasn’t until a window flapped open and a voice called down in warning, “Hansel! Stay right there!” that the boy realized he was not alone outside.

“Hello,” Lacey said, twisting her fingers in her apron as the boy stared wide-eyed at her. "I didn't meant to startle-

“Who are you?” the man from the window demanded. He was cast in shadows but Lacey could make out dark curls in the early traces of dawn’s light.

“My name is Belle,” Lacey lied smoothly, tilting her head up at him sweetly. She tried to remember the way Ariel had looked at the men of the court, all innocence and naïveté. “I’m sorry to bother you so early.” Here she paused, looking back down at her skirt as if confused to how she had gotten here. “I’m trying to find my way back home.“

“Hansel, get back inside and wake your sister.”

The boy hurried to obey, dropping the water bucket he had been carrying and rushing back around the corner.

Lacey stayed still, regarding the dark window politely. “May I?” she asked, indicating the bucket. “I heard the sound of water and I’m parched.“

“Parched?” came the suspicious retort. “You aren’t dressed like a lady but you speak like one.”

Struggling to keep her face smooth, Lacey shrugged. “I was maid to a noble family,” she fibbed. Mentally, she kicked herself for her slip up. She had barely been able to keep up her Princess act at court. Out here in the country, she could barely remember to act like a peasant. “You pick up a few things.”

No answer from the window, but as dawn started to break the sky with pale blues and pinks, the face of a thirty-year-old man started to appear from the shadows. He had scruff on his face, hair in disarray and a shirt thrown on as if he had been dressing when he had come to the window. He was not handsome. His jaw was too blunt and stuck out oddly from his face. His nose was much too large for his small mouth. His eyes however, gleamed dark from his face, intelligent and shrewd.

“I didn’t mean to bother you,” Lacey said hoarsely. “I just wanted something to drink.“

“Father?” The man in the window turned at this, speaking to someone in hushed whispers as Lacey stood quietly below, straining to hear. “Father, she’s thirsty.”

“Gretel, what have I told you about strangers in the woods?”

“She hardly looks dangerous. She looks exhausted.”

The woodcutter spared a glance back down at Lacey who busied herself looking forlornly at the streaming water beside her. As the conversation went on in muted tones, she began to feel the discomfort of a scratchy throat.
He turned back to her abruptly and Lacey stood up straight, waiting for the verdict. “Bring a bucket of water inside,” he decided before the shutters snapped close behind him.

Thrilled at her little victory, Lacey grasped for the bucket, trudging back down the path to where the water met the shoreline. Wading in, she quickly realized this was more punishment than reward. After a moment, the cold water had frozen her hands and soaked her hem. When she stood, she clutched a nearly full bucket of water.

The walk back up to the house was treacherous, her muddy shoes slipping in the dirt. At one point, she lost her balance and a decent amount of water slopped over the side to soak her entire apron. “Shit, shit, shit,” Lacey grumbled under her breath as she heaved the water pail up the hill. Despite the water sloshing and spilling out as she stumbled up the path, the pail grew increasingly heavier as her arms protested the weight.

When she turned the corner, Hansel was waiting by the door for her. He was dark like his father, brown eyes large in his rounded face that was on the cusp of adolescence, about twelve if she had to guess. He held the door open for her.

“Thank you,” she said, breathing a slight sigh of relief. Twelve was not as bad as the young Pinocchio. She let herself relax slightly. From upstairs came the sound of booted footsteps and then the man of the house appeared, carrying a large ax in one hand.

Taken aback, Lacey couldn’t help herself. “You sleep with your ax?”

Dark eyes met her blue ones in a glower before the tension was broken as the man wielding the weapon threw his head back in laughter. Surprised at this sudden change of heart, Lacey looked down at Hansel in question. The boy had already taken the pail from her sore hand, pouring it out without spilling a drop into cups on a table. He didn’t seem to find it odd that his father had an ax this early in the morning.

“In the Infinite Forest, yes, every man should sleep with an ax under his pillow, especially when one is a woodcutter. You’ve met my son, Hansel. He’s cooked some sausages. Come, sit and eat with us.”

Lacey sat down at the table, watching as the boy hurried over to a fireplace where a black pan was spitting and hissing in the flames. He adroitly grabbed it from the fire with a poker, before spearing five sizzling sausages and dropping them neatly in a bowl.

Watching this, Lacey did not realize someone else had joined them. In the shadows to her right, a young girl stood. She shared the dusky coloring of her father and brother but her hair was jet black, done in two long plaits on either side of her face. She looked about the same age as her brother, possibly twins.

“Hello,” Lacey said with a smile.

The father looked over his shoulder to see his daughter as Hansel hurried back to the table. “Stop staring, Gretel,” Hansel admonished his sister. “You’re the one who wanted to invite her inside.”

The girl smiled gently at Lacey, but did not move. “You’re very pretty,” the girl said candidly. “Are you married?”

Her father, having stuffed a sausage in his mouth, choked at this.

Lacey, quick on the draw, smiled broadly at the young girl. Hansel had stilled, shooting her a suspicious look under his mop of hair. “No,” Lacey said, spearing one of the sausages before the
woodcutter ate them all. “Nor do I plan to be.”

“Why not?” Gretel frowned. “You’re too old to be unwed.”

“That’s enough Gretel,” her father interrupted, indicating for her to join them at the table. Turning back to Lacey, he grimaced. “I’m sorry for the rude welcome. We don’t get many strangers out here.”

“Wonder why,” Lacey replied under her breath as Gretel joined them at the table. Hansel returned to eating, spooning what looked to be honey on his porridge. Lacey hid a yawn behind her hand as she reached for the spoon.

The woodcutter tried to be a better host, clearing his throat with a tentative smile. “You said you were lost? How did you manage to get lost in the Infinite Forest?”

The name gave her some clue that this place was not where most unwed servant girls wound up so Lacey took her time chewing her food, keeping her eyes down as she tried to come up with a decent cover story. “Well,” she finally said, putting her fork down. “I worked for a family and they had a son.”

The father’s eyes lit up with understanding although Hansel and Gretel leaned in excitedly. “I see,” the father said gruffly. “No need to explain.”


“Did he fall in love with you?” Gretel asked, eyes wide.

“Something like that,” Lacey said. Their father was nonverbally trying to silence her with his wide eyes and head shakes. Lacey continued with, enjoying herself tremendously. “I didn’t return his… feelings.” Gretel looked disappointed, going back to her porridge. She had yet to touch the sausages. “You see, his mother wanted him to marry a noble woman,” Lacey continued, pouring some honey on her porridge. “He refused. She thought perhaps if I was gone…”

“She took you to the woods to die!” Hansel cried out excitedly, through a mouthful of food.

“This is why I tell you two to keep your heads down,” he said resignedly. “Belle, you are welcome to stay here as long as you need. I go to the Sun Castle tomorrow for the monthly market. I’ll take you with me and see if we can’t find you a new family.”

Pretending to be overwhelmed by this generosity, Lacey raised her hands to cover her face as she tried to think of some reason to stay. After all if he was going to be away, it was a perfect opportunity for the children to show her the Blind Witch’s cottage.

“Father,” Gretel cleared her throat. Lacey shot a look at her from beneath her fingers, noticing the way the young girl smiled sadly as she nudged her meat around her plate. “Couldn’t Belle stay with us?”

“Gretel,” her father sighed heavily. “We’ve talked about this…”

“Yeah, hush up, Gretel!” Hansel sniped from his seat. “We don’t need a mother!”

“Hansel!” their father roared, slapping a large beefy hand on the table. His ax, which leaned on the table, shook for a moment before crashing down to the floor. Gretel started crying, large crocodile tears, which Lacey watched with some amusement, vividly reminded of herself at that age. Lacey had been an only child, her mother passing shortly after she had been born. Lacey had
learned quickly that her father could not handle his only daughter’s tears. She had gotten anything she wanted with a few sniffles and some fat tears.

At the table, the woodcutter sat, resigned, as Hansel shouted angrily and Gretel wailed as if she had lost her only friend. Finally, taking pity on the man, Lacey cleared her throat, “I’d be happy to stay with the children while you go to town, Mr. uh…”

“Holz,” he supplied guiltily as his children glowered at each other from across the table. “Koby Holz.”

“I have some experience as a governess,” Lacey said, twisting her month of babysitting in college into actual work. “I’m afraid the Sun Castle is where the family I used to work for is vacationing for the winter. I don’t think I would find any work there. More it may not be a good idea for her to know my little trip didn’t work out the way she had planned it.”

Hansel shot her a dark look, Gretel beamed at her and their father swallowed nervously. He had yet to look down her dress. He was more worried about his children than his personal appearance. He was a pining widower, immune to the charms of the flesh. “I was in love once too,” she said quietly. “I don’t intend anything beyond returning the kindness you’ve shown me.”

This earned her a solemn nod. “Then, I would be grateful if you stayed and watched my children in my absence. Their mother passed a few years ago and we’ve been doing our best.” He indicated the meager servings on the table. “I need to go sell wood in the market this year or I’m afraid we won’t last the winter.”

When breakfast was over, Hansel took their plates out to the river to wash and Gretel disappeared with him. Holz watched them from the window as they went. Lacey thought he had forgotten about her when he spoke. “I’m sorry about Gretel. She’s friends with the farmer’s daughter. The girl just turned fifteen and she’s starting to blossom. The girl’s mother keeps putting ideas in Gretel’s head about how nice it would be to have a mother.” He turned with a rueful smile to her. “Not many eligible men in the Forest, you see.”

Lacey, trying not to grimace at the idea of the man before her in his mid-thirties with a girl of barely fifteen, could see why Gretel had been so forward. It would be odd to go from being friends to calling someone nearly her own age ‘mother’ but a stranger who magically appeared in a clearing one morning… Yes, even to Lacey it did seem rather like something a ten year old girl would find romantic. She smiled kindly at Holz. “It must have been very hard, losing your wife with two young children. Was it…?”

He nodded at her unspoken question. “Stillbirth,” he said quietly.

Lacey did not respond to this, her own stomach tightening sickeningly; a land with magic, indeed.

Without another word, the widower grabbed his ax and headed for the door. “I’ll be out today stacking the rest of the wood on the wagon. Tomorrow, I’ll leave for the market.”

He left her alone in the house, the sounds of the brook and children’s voices keeping her company.

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Later that evening, Holz returned, sweaty and tired, just as the sun started to dip below the trees. Lacey herself was barely keeping her eyes open. Hansel and Gretel had wasted no time in using her newness as a distraction, peppering her with a million questions. She had encouraged them to get their chores done, only to be roped into helping them.
Lacey’s hands were greasy with soap, pruned from the cold water and cracked from the sheer amount of washing it took to clean the clothes of three people, mostly all under garments.

Hansel was actually fourteen, but small for his age. Lacey promised him that any day he would shoot upwards like a tree and his voice would deepen and he would sprout hair on his chest and chin.

Gretel, ten and a half, had been less than impressed by this. Lacey had told her that in another few years, she two would shoot up like a beanstalk, filling out with curves and flowering into a young woman.

Gretel’s response had been, “We’ll see about that.”

Despite the hard work and the prattle of the kids, Lacey actually enjoyed her day in the Cottage in the Glen. Gretel had given up on matchmaking when Lacey had dropped a few tragic hints about her lost love and Hansel seemed satisfied that she didn’t intend to come in and take his father or his freedom.

Throughout the day, Lacey had referenced magic, hoping the children would be eager to share their knowledge about the apparently famous Blind Witch. Neither offered any information. Hansel would grow quiet and sullen at the mention of magic and Gretel seemed to have little interest in it.

They settled down to dinner once they had all washed up in the brook. This time Gretel had been the cook, which was reflected in the copious roasted greens filling the table. Only one small chicken had been roasted to split between the four of them. They all eyed it nervously, clearly wondering how they would split it.

Gretel looked miserable. That afternoon when faced with what to eat, the girl’s eyes had been full of tears when she had gone towards the chicken coop at the back of the house. Hansel had followed his sister grimly. When the death squawk came, Gretel had run back out from around the house into Lacey’s arms. Hansel had followed afterwards, a dead chicken hanging loosely from his grip. Lacey was surprised she even had an appetite after that sight.

Holz sighed before scolding, “Gretel, what did I say about the supper meal?”

Gretel kept her eyes downcast as she avoided her father’s gaze.

Hansel chimed in helpfully, “You know how much she hates killing things, Father.”

The boy fell silent when his father turned his disappointed face to him. “Hans...”

Lacey, recognizing this was an old argument between the trio, interrupted. “Gretel was very brave killing that poor thing,” Lacey said with a shudder. “I told her I couldn’t bear to watch her kill another one. I’m afraid I’m rather squeamish. City life and all that.”

Trying to stifle his smile, Holz nodded thoughtfully. He was obviously not fooled by this, but was willing to let it slide tonight. “I see. So Gretel, Belle here pleaded with you to spare the other chickens?”

Gretel nodded, smiling slightly as she peeked at Lacey. Hansel too seemed relieved; he reached for the biggest drumstick before anyone could stop him.

“Since there isn’t much to go around,” her father continued fondly. “Perhaps one of you ladies wouldn’t mind heating up one of the potatoes?”
Gretel looked happily at the fireplace where two potatoes were roasting in the coals and nodded in relief. “I’ll eat the potatoes. Belle can have some chicken if she likes.”

Lacey reached for the meat in relief. Her stomach had been rumbling for hours and there hadn’t been so much as a berry to snack on. Life in the Dark Castle may have had its pitfalls but at least there was always food.

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The next morning unfolded much like the one before. Holz ate breakfast with them, he hugged his children gruffly goodbye and shook Lacey’s hand with gravity. “You’ll take care of them?” he asked her, his hand tightening over hers.

“Like they were my own,” Lacey assured him as her insides squirmed. Sure, she had every intention of using his children to find the Blind Witch’s house, but she didn’t actually intend on bringing them inside with her. Once there, she’d send them home and never see them again. Simple.

As the wagon pulled away, teeming with wood as high as a small building, it rumbled over the smooth dirt path that served as a road for the few inhabitants of the forest. Lacey stood with her hands on the children’s shoulders as they watched it disappear towards the horizon. When they could no longer see him through the trees, Lacey inquired breezily, “So, what shall we do today?”

Both children looked at her quizzically. “We have to do our chores before it gets dark,” Hansel said, shooting a look at where his father had departed.

Lacey bent down so her hands were on her knees as she smiled at the two of them conspiringly. “Come on, you guys telling me you never have any fun?”

They looked at each other, wavering slightly. “Well,” Gretel drew out nervously. “Sometimes I go to the farm in the valley and visit Johanna.”

Lacey twisted her face in thought before shaking her head. “No, no, they might tell your father I let you out to play without doing the chores. Anything else we could do?”

“There’s the waterfall,” Hansel suggested. “It’s two hours by trail but it’s warm enough to go swimming for the day!”

Hoping to encourage him on exploring the forest, Lacey nodded excitedly. “Oh, but you know... maybe something closer?”

Both children continued to suggest things until finally Lacey sighed and decided to hell with it. “The woman I used to work for mentioned there was a witch in these woods. What about if you showed me where she lives?”

Both children immediately froze.

“We can’t go there!” Hansel yelped, taking a step back from Lacey towards the house.

“Belle,” Gretel pulled at her hand. “Belle, no, let’s go to the farm!”

“Guys,” Lacey said, confused by this reaction. The Imp had been very clear that the children would know where to go. “What’s wrong?”
“We can’t go to that place in the pines,” Hansel said miserably.

“Is she really so bad?” Lacey asked, trying for a smile as she remembered the Sea Witch. Ursula had been called goddess by the people of Eric’s kingdom, but the Imp had never meant for Lacey to go up against her. Surely, he wouldn’t have sent her to deal with some witch she couldn’t handle.

Hansel finally said, so quietly that Lacey had to lean closer to hear him, “She eats children.”

Lacey straightened. Gretel still clung to her hand as Lacey stared disbelievingly down the road Holz had gone towards town. Her other hand tightened into a fist in her skirt as she thought about throttling her thrice cursed protector and his damn little games.

Sending kids to show her a cottage where a child-eating witch lived! She ought to skin him alive for it. This was supposed to be an easy little favor. Go to a blind witch’s house and steal a hair, easy as finding a brush while the witch woman slept. He had never even insinuated there was anything remotely dangerous about this little mission. A darker suspicion about the Imp’s eating habits entered her mind but she dismissed it despite the sick feeling welling up in her stomach.

Gretel tugged at her hand imploringly. “Belle,” Gretel pleaded, dark eyes glistening with trepidation. “We can’t go there. Promise us we won’t go there ever!”

Lacey brought the child to her skirts, where Gretel buried her fists and face as she sniffed. Hansel stood still and pale as a statue and she averted her eyes from his accusing gaze. “That’s right,” Lacey said thickly. “We won’t go there.”

She’d find it herself. Imp be damned.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Second Kingdom!

If you are at all interested in the settings and the style of the Second Kingdom, please check out the below link. The Second Kingdom takes it’s fashion inspiration from the European 1820's which you can see below. (Think Regency/Jane Austen simplicity) The Infinite Forest is inspired by where else? The Black Forest of Germany, which is absolutely stunning and I have little doubt if magic exists in this world, it lives there in the trees and waterfalls.

Check the images out here: http://theplasticview.tumblr.com/post/131028503177/as-lacey-explores-the-second-kingdoms-infinite

I know everyone enjoyed seeing the Imp last chapter but I promise you, he'll be back before you know it. Lacey meanwhile is exploring the Infinite Forest of the Second Kingdom while he stirs up some trouble across the border in the First Kingdom.

Next chapter, Lacey goes off to find a witch but best intentions and all that...
Chapter 20

So, y’all. Let me take a minute to brag about Ramloth. She’s having a super busy November, is sick, and dealing with various other balls in the air of work, school, and personal life and she still managed to find the time to edit this. (And as usual there was a lot to edit. Oops)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was dark when Lacey woke. Rolling over, she was careful to not disturb the other inhabitant of the straw and feather mattress. Hansel had moved to his father’s room while Lacey took his usual spot in the children’s room. Gretel slept peacefully beside her, hands curled under her chin as if she was thinking even while she dozed.

Despite the small embers they had left burning, the house was freezing. Fall was well on its way in this world. Lacey moved slowly, but she finally was able to shimmy off the bed without waking the sleeping child. Making quick work of dressing in the darkness, she spared one last look at the girl before she headed down the stairs.

The kitchen, with its window shut, was dark save the few red embers still burning. Lacey took a candle from near the fireplace and lit it. The room illuminated to life in sparks and starts, before the wick caught and the small area around her slowly became visible. Glancing at the small candle collection, Lacey paused. She would need a few candles for the early hours but she had learned how hard won the wax was and how time consuming candle making was for the small family. She worried her lip, before a small silhouette in the corner caught her eye.

A small broom was tucked away. It was old, cobwebs clinging to the bristles and the wood cracked with age. Beside it, hanging on a peg, was a cloak. It was heavy brocade and with a faint floral design in the light colors. It was clearly the mother’s, an obviously expensive luxury that the father had not been able to bring himself to sell.

Hesitating for a moment, Lacey glanced back towards the stairs before she drew both the broom and the cloak from the forgotten corner. In a smooth motion, she drew the cape around her shoulders, flipping the large hood up. She took some of the apples she had helped the children pick and a small flask to fill with water for the journey. Satisfied that she had enough to make it until dawn, Lacey took her supplies to the door. Moments later, she lit the broom with the small candle so it burned into a makeshift torch before quietly closing the cottage door behind her.

Another night out wandering the woods. Lacey filled her flask in the river, barely wetting her cloak or hem of her dress. She turned at the bottom of the hill, looking up at the dark and silent house where the two children slept before she turned back to the task at hand. They were old enough to be left on their own. Perhaps after she finished her task, she might even return in time to say goodbye and return the cloak before the Imp called her back to the castle.

When the sun rose three hours later, Lacey was horribly, terribly lost. She had been following the path since she left the mill but the path had forked more than four times already and she was
increasingly doubtful about her choices. Standing now, at a crossroads, she sighed, tucking a strand of stray hair behind her ear. The forest was awake now, birds chirping in the trees with the occasional branch cracking or leaves rustling just out of sight. Lacey decided it wise to stay to the path, no matter what frightened or intrigued her in the darkness of the surrounding trees.

Ahead of her, the road split again. One path went to the right and the other to the far left. Both curved out of sight, obscuring any sight of what might lie down that way. Lacey, still a few feet away, furrowed her brow as something tugged at her memory. This split looked awfully familiar, but she had been careful. There was no way she was going in a circle.

She stopped short. There, just on the right edge of the left hand fork were the remains of her makeshift broom torch. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” Lacey groaned, turning back the way she came. As she suspected, the trail seemed to curve off around a bend. She had been walking straight for the past hour, how had she gotten back here?

She retraced her steps to the center of the fork, sitting down in the middle of the pathway with a sigh. It was now obvious that the Infinite Forest got its name not only from its sheer size but from its magical tendencies to fuck with anyone wandering around in it. No wonder Koby had been so antagonistic when she had first appeared in his yard. It seemed the forest did its best to keep its secrets.

In her pocket, the small protection amulet was heavy and comforting. She took it out as she gazed first down one path and then the other. She had gone down the left fork last time, ditching the broom as she went. Opting to go to the right this time, she stood and made her way onwards. She only hesitated long enough to rip a small patch off her apron, placing it under a large rock, peeking out ever so slightly in the brown and greens of the earth. Then, she continued forward.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me!” Lacey exclaimed, kicking at a large branch by the side of the pathway. On her left, she could see the small white patch of fabric from her apron, on her right, she could see the broom. The issue was, she was fairly certain, they had been on opposite sides when she had gone her way an hour ago. “Stupid goddamn forest,” she muttered savagely, pushing her hood down as the warmth of the day started to grow uncomfortable.

She was at the end of her rope. Wandering on her own the past couple of hours had gotten her nowhere and possibly into an internal loop that would only end if she stepped off the path or figured out the secret to this magical mayhem.

Trying a third option, she turned around to head back the way she came, only to hear muffled echoes of someone else approaching. Heart quickening in her chest, Lacey looked to her left and right, debating on her course of action when two familiar faces rounded the corner.

“Belle!” Gretel called out in relief, hurtling forward to fling her arms around her. Hansel came up slowly behind his sister, eyes wary as he took in the cloak. His face took on a deeply betrayed look, even as Gretel lifted watery eyes to hers. “We were so worried!”

“What are you two doing here?” Lacey asked, sinking down to her haunches so she could peer up at them. They both looked fine, faces scrubbed and gleaming from the exercise.

“I would ask you the same question,” Hansel said boldly. He thrust his chin out, glaring down at her in a decent imitation of his father. “You left in the middle of the night without a word!” He didn’t add, ‘and you took my mother’s cloak,’ but he didn’t need to. His glare spoke volumes.
Lacey sighed, letting her hands drop from Gretel as she stood back up. “I’m sorry,” she said, truly meaning it. “I wasn’t entirely truthful with you all.”

Gretel, innocent that she was, peered up from under her lashes at her. “What do you mean?”

“She lied,” Hansel snorted, crossing his arms over his skinny chest. “Didn’t Father tell us? Never trust anyone you meet in the forest.”

“But-!” Gretel started, but she fell silent. She took a few steps back to join her brother.

Lacey sighed, dusting her hands off before she unbuckled the clasp at her neck. Drawing the cloak off her, she walked over to the children and laid it in their hands. Gretel looked confused, patting the brocade absently, while Hansel gripped it for dear life.

“I didn’t realize,” Lacey said softly. “I thought I would be back before you woke,” she lied. “There’s something I need to do, but you’re right. I shouldn’t have borrowed it without asking.”

“You’re lost, aren’t you?” the boy said correctly, a hint of a smug smile at his lips.

Lacey sighed, shrugging her now bare shoulders. “Seems so,” she nodded. “I’ve been walking for hours and I feel like I’m getting nowhere…”

“Hours?” Gretel said with a confused look on her face. “Why, we’re only a mile from home! We just left twenty minutes ago!”

“What?” Lacey startled, eyes widening. “You’re telling me I’ve been walking in circles for hours?”

“Breadcrumbs,” Hansel said smugly, holding up a small bag. He twisted and pointed behind him, and Lacey could see the faint trail of breadcrumbs disappearing around the bend. “You have to use something to keep your way or the forest will keep tricking you. Happens all the time.”

“That would have been helpful to know,” Lacey growled, wondering how much joy the Imp would have gotten from having to rescue her from the forest, not a mile from the cottage.

“What are you doing here anyways?” Hansel demanded, growing angry. “Did your employer really send you here?”

“In a matter of speaking,” Lacey hedged. “Yes, but not because of any man. You see, I’m here to get a hair from the blind witch.”

Both children paled, moving closer together as they clutched their mother’s cloak between them. “I didn’t know about her… diet,” she said unevenly. “I was told you children could help me find her.”

“Course kids can find her,” Hansel grumbled at her, eyes averted. “She eats kids. She makes it easy.”

“That’s why you got lost,” Gretel added helpfully. “She doesn’t want you, so she’ll let the forest have you.”

“Is there an option C?” Lacey asked, but the children just frowned back at her. Shaking her head, she grimaced. “Okay, no time for levity apparently.”

“It’s time to go back home,” Hansel decided. Gretel looked torn but she nodded miserably, turning
away with a small quiver of her shoulders.

“Good,” Lacey agreed, although she was tempted to ask if they had brought any more apples or water. “I’ll go with you.”

“No,” Hansel said fiercely. “Go to the left. When you get to the next oak tree, stop and look behind it. The path goes straight on, the oak just grows in the middle of the road. Follow that and you should find the farm in the valley. They can help you get to town.”

Lacey resisted the urge to smile. As mad as he was, the kid was not willing to leave her there to die. He was rather mature for a fourteen year old. “I can’t,” she said simply. “I have to get this hair.”

“Why?” Gretel asked from over her brother’s shoulder. Hansel grumbled something low and angry, but Gretel ignored him. “She’s horrible and wicked! Who could need something from her?”

“It’s for a potion,” Lacey said candidly. However, she did think there were limitations on how much truth she could tell the two of them. The Seventh Kingdom and Ariel had known and lived in great fear of the Imp. Lacey did not want to test his popularity in the Second Kingdom. “It’s a transformation potion to undo a horrible curse on the man I love.”

Lying was easy, Lacey had found in her line of work, as long as there was a kernel of truth to it. As far as creating lies and spinning tales in this new world, Lacey still had some work to do. However, if she couldn’t convince two children she was harmless and in need of help, she didn’t know if she deserved to succeed.

“That,” she finished, with just the slightest waver in her voice, “is why I need the hair from the head of the blind witch.”

Both children exchanged a look, fraught with meaning before Hansel sighed dramatically. Marching up to her, he held the cloak stiffly up at her, refusing to look at her. She took it, rubbing his head fondly as he grumbled and grimaced. “Thank you,” she said with a smile. “Now, I know the way to the farm but how do I get to the witch’s?”

“This way,” Hansel sighed, moving forward.

“Whoa, hold on,” Lacey said, reaching out to catch him by his suspenders. “Who said anything about you two going?”

Gretel made her way to her side, hand finding Lacey’s with ease. “We aren’t going to leave you alone!”

Hansel frowned at her, “You’re not coming,” he told his sister. “You’re going home.”

“You can’t find it without a kid,” she shot back, tongue sticking out. “So, I’m coming.”

Hansel frowned at her but Gretel did have a point. At fourteen, he was on the cusp of adolescence if he wasn’t already there. It was highly possible he was already too old to find his way to the witch’s cottage. His fourteen year old pride was at war with his sense of duty.

“Look,” she tried. “How about we find the witch’s house? I’ll wait long enough for you to get home before I do anything.”

Gretel looked scared but defiant. “We aren’t leaving you,” she said timidly.
“You said the witch doesn’t like adults,” Lacey told them with a smile. “I’m an adult. She won’t eat me.”

“She’ll turn you into a pumpkin and make pie,” Hansel said seriously. “You can’t go by yourself.”

“You, Belle,” Gretel said sincerely. “Maybe we should wait for Father.”

If their father returned to find she had lied or had put his children even in the thought of harm’s way, his ax would become a deal more deadly. “No need for that,” she said brightly, teeth in a grimace of a smile. “Let’s just find the house and then you two will go back home where you’ll be safe and sound when your father gets back.”

She drew the cloak back around her shoulders. Hansel went back and scattered a few breadcrumbs between the path and the fork they had chosen. Gretel had another bag on her hip which probably contained more breadcrumbs. Lacey's stomach twisted painfully and the gurgling noises were loud enough for the children to hear.

“Your father is going to kill me,” Lacey grumbled as they headed down the path, Hansel in the lead.

“Only if we get caught,” Gretel said angelically.

Lacey looked down at the dark haired girl beside her and sighed.

Children.

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“There it is,” Hansel whispered.

Crouching in the brush just off the trail, Lacey barely managed to keep her tone down as she squeaked, “That’s it?”

Just down the hill, there was a small pathway that trailed off the main path. Large pale and smooth cobblestones made their way to a monstrosity of a gingerbread house. It was small and squat, straight out of a holiday how-to guide. Lacey stood slightly, motioning for the children to stay where they were as she moved closer to get a better look.

The roof was icing, honest to god, white-frosted fondue with candy corn sticking out of the alcoves, gummy drops spaced pleasantly between sprinkles and bright hard shining candy. The door was perfectly centered, framed by two large candy canes and swirly gumdrops.

The curtains in the windows were drawn, black spaces in the otherwise colorful riot that was the witch’s house. The build-up of fear and anxiety that had followed her for the past few hours evaporated. By the time Lacey had returned to the children, she was giggling. “Okay, I think I can handle it from here,” Lacey chuckled, removing the cloak and handing it back to a stone-faced Gretel. “You two get back home before it’s dark.”

“What’s so funny?” Hansel grunted.

“It’s a gingerbread house,” Lacey said incredulously. “How is that even remotely scary?”

Gretel gazed down at the house, shuddering slightly. “Look at its eyes…”

“Eyes?” Lacey asked, glancing back down at it. From this angle, there appeared to be two large
marshmallows with black licorice centers over the downstairs windows. From this angle, they did appear to be staring up at the trio, the door now looking more like a mouth, the candy canes yawning wide to frame the cavernous hole.

Before the children’s fear could infect her, Lacey laughed again. “Looks like I’m going to get my sugar fix and get this quest completed all in one swing.”

Gretel whirled about to face her. “You mustn’t eat anything!” she exclaimed. Her eyes were large in her face and her bottom lip was trembling, utterly terrified. Bending down, Lacey helped her stand up, brushing the twigs and dirt from her skirts.

“Honestly, you two,” Lacey murmured. “You’re worried for nothing. She’s a blind witch living in a candy house. I’ll be fine, I’ve gone up against worse than the likes of a diabetic spinster.”

The siblings stared at her in confusion.

“Never mind,” Lacey said. "The point is, I can do this, but I need to know you two are safely back home first.”

Gretel looked over at her brother questioningly. Hansel had his arms crossed, staring down at the house with a frown on his round face. Finally, he nodded. “Come on Gretel,” he sighed, brushing past Lacey without comment.

Gretel swayed unsurely before she gave a small cry as if she had been injured and flung her arms around Lacey’s hips. With one tight squeeze, she released her and flew after her brother, her mother’s cloak flapping behind her. Lacey stood where Gretel left her, hands in mid-motion to wrap around the child’s shoulders.

Hansel turned once they were several yards away and cupped his hands around his mouth. “Don’t eat anything!”

Lacey nodded but the boy had already turned, grabbing his sister’s hand as they followed the breadcrumbs back home.

Swallowing the rather odd lump in her throat, most likely related to thirst or hunger, Lacey settled back down in the brush to wait.

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When the sun began to lower into the horizon of the treetops, Lacey stood and stretched. She had taken a small nap earlier and twigs and berries were tangled in her hair. Brushing herself off, she turned to look behind her. Not a creature stirred on the path, even the birds were silent in this part of the woods.

Glancing down at the house, Lacey was surprised to notice the marshmallow decor was now missing its black licorice decorations. It no longer looked like eyes but two large puffs of clouds. “It’s a witch’s gingerbread house,” she muttered to herself as she rejoined the main trail. “Things are bound to move around a bit.”

She made her way slowly down the hill, the steep incline making it hard for her to keep her footing as her shoes slipped and slid across the loose dirt. Finally, she made it to the bottom of the hill, only to find the house now sat further back in a clearing, almost half hidden by trees and bushes.

“Now, I know you weren’t there before,” she told one tree, frowning up at it. The tree did not respond, but the branches shuddered slightly in the late afternoon wind that rose from the east.
Following the now almost hidden pathway, Lacey finally stood before every child’s dream house. It smelled like freshly baked cookies, newly whipped icing and a sweet fruity smell like warm apple pie. Lacey's mouth watered slightly and her stomach even gurgled a little. Her hand went out towards the small chocolate blocks that were stacked like bricks outlining the windowsills, but Hansel’s warning echoed in her ear. She let her hand drop.

Creeping to a window, Lacey ignored the omnipresent feeling of someone watching her. A blind witch, she reminded herself fiercely, could not watch anyone.

The window was open, the curtain blowing faintly in the breeze. Lacey gently reached for it using a twig from the ground, nudging it ever so slightly. The interior slowly illuminated as the curtain let some light shine through. The gingerbread walls were also lined with icing pipets, sprinkled toppings and candy jutting out at inviting angles. She could make out a fireplace, empty and ashy in the autumn day. It took up the entire back wall, large enough to stand in.

It was a small hut, barely large enough for one person with all the clutter. A substantial farm table took up the entire center of the room, chairs stuffed around it as if waiting for a large party. There was also one wing back chair just in the corner of the room, facing the fireplace. There was nothing indicating anyone was at home.

Careful to not let her arm brush anything, Lacey pulled her hand back. Keeping the slender branch in her hand, she moved toward the front door slowly. She glanced up, just as she went to clasp the handle. The black licorice dots were back on the marshmallows, now both aimed downwards, as if looking right at her.

Ignoring the chill that ran down her spine, she took her apron in her hand, and using it, slowly went to open the door. To her surprise, as soon as her covered hand bumped the wood, it swung quietly open, indicating it had been ajar this entire time. Mouthing a small reassurance to herself, Lacey nudged it further open, sliding into the small opening and into the dark interior of the cottage.

The shadows brought faint reminders of Geppetto's home, but where the woodcutter’s home had been warmly spartan, this was a cornucopia of childish delights. Toys were littered across the floor, candy was gleaming from every surface, and a pitcher of milk sat upon a counter, gleaming pearl white from the light coming in behind her.

Cursing herself for not keeping her candle, Lacey slowly moved closer to the main area, listening carefully for any sign of someone being at home. As cluttered as the house was, there was nothing that signaled a witch lived there. Lacey turned to her left, where the shadows were the darkest and froze.

A gleaming metal cage crouched in the far corner of the room by the fireplace. Its bars were thick and numerous, even though the cage was barely four feet high. Deciding it was a dog cage of some kind, Lacey twisted to look behind her at the quickly disappearing sunlight. A witch was one thing. A loose hellhound was quite another.

Moving quickly towards the wingback chair, Lacey counted to four before she peeked over the edge. She breathed a heavy sigh of relief at the empty seat, heart thumping wildly in her chest. No one was home.

Relieved by her good timing, Lacey hurried around from corner to corner, looking for any small strand of hair. The floors were shiny, as if they had just been mopped. No cobwebs stood in any corner and there was no bed to check for broken strands. “Where’s a bathtub when you need one?” Lacey whispered to herself as she grew more and more frustrated with her search. This homeowner was proving to be one of the cleanest witches of all time.
“Belle?”

Nearly knocking over the pitcher of milk beside her, Lacey spun to find Hansel and Gretel peering over the window sill. Their eyes barely made it over the edge, so just two pairs of eyes and dark heads bobbed nervously beneath the curtain.

“What are you doing here?” Lacey whispered furiously as she hurried over to them. “I told you to go home!”

“The breadcrumbs,” Hansel muttered, cheeks burning red. “The crows ate them and we got lost!”

“We found our way back here,” Gretel whispered. Her voice was thick with tears.

Lacey threw one last look over her shoulder. She needed to find that hair or she would never hear the end of it. “Get in here,” Lacey whispered, jerking her chin toward the door. “Help me look for a hair.”

“Ew,” Gretel complained but she and her brother disappeared from the sill. Moments later, they appeared in the ajar doorway, squeezing in easily. Both looked awed by the collection of toys, Gretel even reaching for one before her brother caught her hand.

“Gretel, you look over by the table,” Lacey directed. “Hansel, over by the chair.” She herself took the corner with the cage, hoping the falling shadows would hide it from the children for a bit longer. Surely, three of them could find a hair before the mistress of the house returned?

Moments passed in quiet work. Lacey scoured the dark corners, using her apron to pat the floorboards and the bringing up nothing as much as a dust speck. She was in the middle of reevaluating the woman’s cleanliness to obsession when her hand hit a small hard object which rolled and clattered in the otherwise silent house.

Both children froze, turning to look at her. Lacey carefully reached out to collect the round object, lifting it up to the light. A grinning skull stared back at her, empty sockets and rotten teeth in a child’s skeleton.

Lacey dropped it. As it cracked against the floorboard, she grabbed Hansel’s arm, dragging him from the fireplace. Gretel hurried forward, meeting them by the door and slipping out first. Pushing Hansel in front of her, Lacey cleared the door, hyperventilating as she burst back out into the night. Gretel hadn’t paused, already almost back to the main pathway.

“Fuck this,” Lacey grumbled, barely audible over the pounding in her ears. Her hand flexed and spasmed as she tried to remove the memory of the weight of the child’s skull. Hansel barely broke a sweat but when she glanced down at him, she stopped dead.

In his hands, there was a large slab of chocolate, hastily broken off with jagged edges. Hansel’s fingers had already dented it, melted chocolate staining his fingernails. “I didn’t mean to!” he exclaimed, looking guilt-stricken. “It just smelled so good!”

“Hansel-!” Lacey started but before she could finish, a high-pitched cackle came from up ahead.

Before them, Gretel was wrapped in the clutches of a woman. Tall and pale, she had no color to her skin or hair. She almost glowed in the setting sun. The hand wrapped around Gretel’s neck was covered in blue veins. No, not veins, but stylized branches over a translucent fabric reached up to claw at her shoulders. The full skirts of the witch’s gown twisted around her and Gretel’s small form.
The witch smiled, each tooth sharpened into a pointed incisor. Alabaster hair twisted into dreadlocks swooped over her forehead and then fell around her shoulders and draped down her back. It explained why they hadn’t found any strands of hair in the cottage. Her eyes were milky white, pale orbs in the already pale face.

“Why,” the albino witch cooed, voice sweet as honey. “Isn’t this a sweet surprise?”

Chapter End Notes

And there we are! Chapter 20!

Mood Board for this chapter can be found here: http://theplasticview.tumblr.com/post/133875511142/mood-board-for-chapter-20-of-the-gate

Please as always feel free to let me know your thoughts on this chapter. Some of you guys are always SPOT on in your guesses! Plus, as a writer, it is always incredibly helpful, motivating, inspiring to know people are enjoying the work.

Thanks as always guys for reading!
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Thank you as always to ramloth, my hero, for beating this chapter and catching my usual grammar issues, punctuation mishaps and the odd plot hole.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inside the sugar high hut, Gretel tended to the fire on her knees. Behind her, the giant wingback chair hid the Blind Witch from sight, but she was sitting there, watching. Pulling and tugging at her bindings, Lacey grumbled and growled under her breath as she struggled to free herself.

The children had been right. The Blind Witch had shown little interest in Lacey. First, the witch had locked Hansel in the cage, the poor boy nearly bent in two unless he crouched down, before having Gretel help tie Lacey up outside. Despite her disability, Lacey was confident that the witch had enjoyed the sound of a wretched Gretel sobbing as she bound her only chance of rescue to a tree. It did seem a bit simple for a witch’s way of dispatching an adult. Lacey had half expected to be magicked to dust or turned into a bug.

But no, she was tied up outside, no less deadly. If animals didn’t get to her in the night, hypothermia, thirst or hunger should do the trick eventually. Lacey warranted the small talisman tucked away in her bodice would continue to protect her against animals, but the elements were another matter.

The witch’s modus operandi was simple. Lacey was bound to a tree strategically placed so she had a clear view of the fireplace. Gretel occasionally could look out the window and see Lacey yards away in the darkness, powerless, unable to help them or herself. This particular punishment was perfect to inspire fear and dread. The witch obviously enjoyed playing with her food before she ate it. Gretel’s terror and Hansel’s hopelessness as they awaited their deaths were merely appetizers prior to the main course. And as for Lacey, she had a sinking suspicion that she was meant to watch.

Her fingers, nearly numb from lack of circulation, were raw from her attempts to free herself, but Lacey gritted her teeth against the pain. This might not be entirely her fault, but there was no way in hell she was going to stand idly by while this fruitcake ate the Holz children. “Now would be a really good time to pop in,” Lacey mumbled to the non-present Imp. “Feel free. Anytime now.”

He did not appear. No stirrings of magic whispered against her skin or made the hairs on the back of her neck rise up. No, it seemed whatever deal he was facilitating elsewhere was taking up his time from rescue missions.

From inside, there were faint sounds of talking. Lacey jerked her head back up as the back door swung open and Gretel hurried out. Her shoulders hunched and shaking as she kept her eyes on her feet. The door hung ajar behind her. Hansel sat crouched in his cage, face hidden in his knees.

“Gretel,” Lacey whispered. “What’s happening?”

“She wants to talk to you,” Gretel said miserably, tear tracks down her round cheeks. As she leaned into undo the ties, she began to whisper. “Maybe she’ll let you go and you can get father.”
The girl’s optimism was ill-fated. Lacey stood still to allow the girl to unknot the bindings. As they fell away, Lacey collapsed forward, shrugging her shoulders to get circulation back into her arms as she massaged her bruised wrists. Gretel turned to head back inside but Lacey caught her. “Go back to the trail,” Lacey whispered, eyes locked on the door. “Try and get home.”

Gretel was crying again. Huge tears leaked out of her big brown eyes as she shook her head. “I won’t leave Hansel,” she said fiercely. “He wouldn’t leave me.”

As an only child, Lacey had never quite understood sibling loyalty. Plenty of people hated their family, including their brothers and sisters, others who were merely apathetic to their blood relations, and sure, there were the odd one or two who were a little too attached to their siblings, but Lacey had somehow grown used to the two Holz children being at each other’s side constantly. It was not weird, it simply was.

“Okay,” Lacey grumbled as they began to move towards the ajar door. A plan was beginning to occur to Lacey but if it was to work, she would risk losing the children’s trust. “When we get inside-”

“What’s taking so long?” came a sugary sweet voice from inside. “You wouldn’t want to catch a cold, would you?”

The witch could clearly hear them perfectly. With one last pointed look at Gretel, Lacey straightened and made her way purposefully into the cottage. Hansel did not stir. He kept his head down, so Lacey ignored him too. She had once been his age, embarrassed, lost and scared. Sometimes she had needed someone to be there, and sometimes she had needed someone to look the other way while she cried. She could at least do that much for him.

Marching directly in front of the wingback chair, Lacey glared down at the Blind Witch, hands on her hips and fire in her eyes. “So, what’s your excuse then?” Lacey demanded.

The Blind Witch blinked, a small smile curving her lips as she peered up unseeingly in Lacey’s general direction. Gretel had moved quietly to the cage, kneeling down to hold her brother’s hands through the bars. “I beg your pardon?” The witch said softly, a hint of steel lacing her amused tone.

“I said,” Lacey repeated, eyes flickering to the frightened children in the corner. “What is your excuse for detaining me in such a manner?”

A peal of laughter issued from the razor sharp mouth, a pale hand fluttering towards her. Lacey flinched but no magic issued forth. “Why,” the pale witch drawled. “You’re rather spicy, aren’t you?”

“You ask a lot of questions,” Lacey responded curtly. “How about you try and answer one?”

The witch stood without warning. Lacey took a quick half step backwards, the heat of the fire on her back. Blank white eyes shone yellow and red from the flames as shadows licked at Lacey’s heels.

“Do you dare to speak to me in such a manner? Do you not know who I am?”

Lacey stepped towards the side, away from the fire’s greedy fingers as she tried to avoid any involuntary noises that would give her up. “No one of importance,” Lacey bluffed. She cast about for inspiration and found it in the very walls of their prison. “Just some sightless hack who lures children in with a cavity of a house. If you hadn’t magicked the trail to confuse and maroon anyone over the age of puberty, I doubt you’d still be alive.”
“An attempt to rouse me?” The Blind Witch moved closer, head cocked at an impossible angle as she stared through her.

Lacey stood her ground despite every nerve ending screaming at her to run. The children were watching. Their lives were dependent on her. So, Lacey waited. The witch had a reason for bringing her inside, for sparing her life in the first place even for just a little while.

After a moment, the witch showed her hand. “Tell me, who do you work for?”

The witch must have kept her alive while she tried to find out from the children why they were here. Failing that, the witch had decided to try another tactic, bringing Lacey in for questioning. Lacey’s plan could still work, just as long as the Imp was notorious in all realms and not just certain ones.

“You really don’t know?” Lacey asked, stalling.

The witch stood waiting, hands curled out as if she was about to take something. A life or a hand, Lacey couldn’t be sure. The witch had yet to perform any magic. Perhaps her magic differed from the powers Lacey had encountered so far. It would explain why this witch had a gingerbread house in the forest instead of a dark castle or a sea kingdom under her thrall.

“My master,” Lacey started, allowing herself a slight shudder of distaste at the word, “is lord of the Dark Castle.”

A hiss issued from the witch at those words, her hands twisting into claws. “Lešak? He dares and send a mortal to parlay with me?”

The Imp had as many names as realms, apparently. Lacey tried to catch the children’s eyes, but they were too far in shadow to see.

Here was the rub, if Lacey convinced the witch she worked for someone more powerful and evil, she would probably never gain the trust of the children back. Still, far better for them to hate her for the rest of their lives than die in the middle of the woods, eaten alive.

“Wonder how he’ll take your plans to eat the virgins he sent me out to collect?” Lacey asked pointedly. “You know how he is when he doesn’t get his way.”

Apparently, she did. “His?” She turned her head towards the cage, inhaling deeply. Gretel had stood at Lacey’s words and was slowly approaching behind them. At the witch’s focus, she had frozen. There was hurt and betrayal evident in the tightness of her mouth. So, it was not just sounds that alerted the witch, it was also smell.

“I was sent to bring them to him,” Lacey said quickly, diverting the witch’s attention from the girl. Lacey silently motioned for Gretel to return to the corner where she would be out of the way. “He mentioned you might be still lurking around but not to worry,” Lacey continued as she watched the clawed nails. “He said you weren’t much of a threat.”

“How dare he?”

Lacey winced but the Blind Witch did not lash out. No magic or claws touched her.

Growing confident, Lacey leaned in until she was cheek to cheek with the cannibal. “You’re scared,” Lacey whispered. “Let us go and he might find it within himself to be merciful.”

Laughter followed this. A wild grin stretched across the witch's face, the razor sharp teeth
gnashing as she clapped her hands together, whirling away from Lacey. “Do I look a fool?” she asked mockingly. “Lešak does not eat, he does not sleep, he does not have these needs, but surely you knew that?”

The witch seemed to know the cottage as if it was part of her. She sidestepped every obstacle with ease, her full skirt whispering over the floor. Lacey began to back up, eyes glancing between the Blind Witch and the minefield that was her cottage.

“Now, the question is, shall you die before or after the children?”

Hansel’s face framed by bars triggered a memory. A man had rescued her once from behind bars. He had overcome all the odds and she had made it out alive. He had not.

The table’s edge dug into her hip and Lacey faltered. The witch, cackled as if she had been anticipating this. Lacey glanced down at the table to get her bearing and noticed a wicked looking boning knife buried in the wood. It was halfway down the table, just out of reach.

“Now what, hmm? Tell me… will there be anyone to mourn you?”

“God, you’re annoying,” Lacey muttered through her teeth, edging towards the other side of the table. “What is with you and twenty fucking questions?”

Snarling, the witch lunged, slashing her claws across Lacey’s flesh. As the long sharp nails ripped down Lacey’s arm, they caught her bodice and ripped it into shreds. In the commotion, something metallic hit the floor. Whirling, the witch loomed over Gretel, who stood in the center of the room, clutching a long poker.

The girl froze under the force of the witch. “Where do you think you’re going, child?” the witch asked, forgetting Lacey for a moment. The witch sniffed the air, trying to find exactly what the little girl had been up to. Gretel looked guiltily over to the fireplace where a small bundle of keys above the mantle. They dangled just out of reach for a child, but not if she used something to knock them free.

The witch’s face darkened, her jaw gaping wide open as she prepared to strike. The girl shrank, growing as pale as she had when it had been her time to slaughter the chickens. Gretel would not raise the weapon in her own defense.

Without thinking it through, Lacey lunged on the witch’s back to wrestle her to the floor. The spell broken, Gretel darted out of the way as Lacey fought to keep a hold on the infuriated witch. Reeling backwards and flinging her elbows out, the witch threw Lacey off her.

Lacey wound up flat on her back on the table, stunned and wheezing for air. A moment later, a milky white hand, traced with faint blue veins clasped around Lacey’s neck. With an ease that betrayed the small figure, the witch bodily lifted her off the table. Lacey dug her own hands into the witch’s grip, as she fought for breath, but her feet could not get traction.

“Die,” the witch hissed. Her face darkened and her jaws gaped open like a snake’s as she moved her face to Lacey’s.

With her vision starting to blacken, Lacey barely saw the whirl of silver descending from just over the witch’s shoulder. As it hit the side of the witch's head, the creature staggered, dropping Lacey into a heap on the floor. Gasping, Lacey sucked as much air as she could into her abused lungs as she struggled to raise herself up. Gretel stood behind the witch, between them and her brother. The child struggled against the witch’s thrall, panting as she tried to hold the poker up in defense as the
The Blind Witch rushed at Gretel in a whirl of skirts and fury. Hansel cried out a warning, but it was too late. As the witch pounced, Gretel only barely managed to raise her weapon in defense. Misjudging the girls’ determination, the witch did not alter her momentum and a sickening squish emanated from between them.

For a moment, no one made a sound. Then, Gretel whimpered and dropped the poker, stepping backwards as if to turn and run. Wheezing, the Blind Witch swayed on her heels and turned sideways. Lacey struggled to her knees as the witch clutched at the steel rod buried in her stomach. Unseeing eyes blinked as if dazed, and the witch’s pale hands came away from her center, dark with black blood.

Lacey stood, hand rubbing at her raw throat. “Gretel,” Lacey wheezed, moving to the side of the shell shocked girl.

The girl winced, moving away as if Lacey had burned her. There was no warmth or trust in the child’s eyes. She was no longer the same little girl who cried when she had to kill a chicken for dinner.

“Can you get home?” Lacey asked softly. Gretel did not answer, she was watching the Blind Witch. Her eyes were glassy, but no tears trickled down her cheeks. Lacey knew that look. She had seen it often enough in the mirror. Kindness and soft words were not going to break through.

Steeling herself, she barked, “Gretel!” The kid jumped, eyes finding hers even though they were narrowed in distrust. “As soon as Hansel’s free, can you get home?”

For a moment, Lacey doubted if the girl would answer her. Finally, Gretel nodded.

Lacey moved around the edges of the cottage, keeping her distance from the moaning witch bleeding out in the center of the room. Careful of the heat of the flames, hot enough to cause sweat to break out across her temples, Lacey plucked the keys from their place on the wall. The Blind Witch still stood in the center of the room, pulling at the poker stick. In the cage, Hansel had been sick. He was wiping his mouth with the back of his hand as silent tears rolled down his face.

Lacey gave Gretel the keys, nudging her to her brother. “Get him out,” she instructed. When the girl didn’t move, Lacey bent down, careful to keep an eye on the injured witch. “It’s over,” Lacey assured her. “Go take care of your brother.”

Gretel wrenched her eyes free as she moved jerkily towards the far wall. Lacey turned back to the issue at hand. The witch had managed to remove the poker stick, dropping it on the floor as she staggered closer to the flames. Lacey followed her, eyes focused on the long dreads, the ends splattered with black blood.

Nearby, the knife was still stabbed into the table, blood rusted on the handle. It would be used for something else now, something other than death. Lacey pulled it free, moving forward until she was just out of reach of the witch's razor sharp nails.

“Bested by a kid,” Lacey whispered down to her. “Have you magical assholes ever heard of karma?” The witch cocked her head, her face a mask of pain and confusion. Lacey continued forward, grim amusement coloring her tone. “They say it’s a real bitch.”

“Laughing already?” the witch coughed. Blood mixed with her spit, coating her white chin with a pink froth. “Do you have any idea who you’re dealing with? Do you think a mere flesh wound will
kill me?"

Lacey didn’t actually. She didn’t know much of the way witches or magic worked in this land. If
impaling wouldn’t do the trick…

“Gretel,” Hansel called from behind her. “Let’s go!”

Lacey turned to find the girl holding the bloody poker in her hands as if she meant to finish the job.
At the wild look in Gretel’s eyes, Lacey was not sure if she had meant to attack the witch or her.

“You two go,” Lacey said. “I’ll finish it.”

Gretel did not say anything but the poker hit the floor as she joined her brother to make their
escape. The witch groaned, taking a shaky step forward as if to reclaim them. Lacey blocked her
way, reaching up and grabbing one of her dreadlocks. Her other hand came up, knife in hand, to
slice it free.

A scream and a wretched snarl followed this as the witch’s hands flew to her hacked hair. Wailing,
her nails reached out to tear at Lacey’s face. Twisting away, Lacey lashed out, elbowing the
witch’s bloody torso. The witch immediately recoiled, clutching at her gut. She moaned as she
struggled back upright, but she did not seem as fatally wounded as Lacey would have thought. “A
hair?” the witch groaned, backing away from her. “He sent you for a hair?”

“I wanted to do this the easy way,” Lacey reminded her as she pocketed the hair and the knife. “But
you magical bastards have to make everything so goddamn dramatic.”

“Do you think he won’t betray you?” the Blind Witch asked, trying a new tactic. Her words
gurgled as blood came to her lips. “How long before he sends someone to dispatch of you?”

A cold chill ran up Lacey’s neck. It must have been from the recently opened door, the warmth of
the fire at her front making the outside air feel cooler, but the warning was well warranted. The
Imp might need her for his own needs, but he had shown little interest in helping keep her alive. It
had been up to her to survive. It had always been up to her.

Taking advantage of the silence, the witch staggered closer to her, a hand reaching out to her as
blood dripped to stain the straw on the floor. “Together, we could defeat him, don’t you think?
Imagine all of his power at our command, can you imagine it?”

Lacey shook her head. “I just want to go home,” she replied. “I want to be back in the city with cars
and cell phones and internet... and where monsters aren’t real things lurking in the woods.”

At these unfamiliar words, the witch cocked her head to hear better. Her eyes shone bright with
panicked determination. Blood bubbled on her lips as she tried to bargain back her life. “There’s
always monsters in the world, girl. Lešak, me, the world is full of monsters, and you… you’re one
of us.”

They stood in the center of the hut, bathed in equal shadow and light.

All her life, Lacey had lied. Sometimes, she had cheated. She had manipulated, bribed, and seduced
in another lifetime without any hint of guilt or concerns of morality. Here, in this nightmare, she
had gotten people killed. She had never said she was anything less than who she was, but in this
place, in this upside down world, she didn’t even know who that was anymore. All she knew was
she wanted to see tomorrow badly enough to kill to ensure it. If that made her a monster, so be it.

“Maybe,” Lacey whispered, “but I’m not like you.” Then, in a move her kick boxing instructor
would have been proud of, Lacey drew her elbows to her chest and lashed out her right leg, catching the witch right below her stomach.

The witch instinctively reached out, hands entangling in the long dirty fabric of Lacey’s dress. Collapsing, the witch shrieked and tightened her grip, pulling Lacey down with her. Lacey grasped for the mantle, catching it just as the witch tumbled backwards into the flames.

At the first scream, the hands entangling her skirts freed themselves as they waved frantically in agony. Lacey pushed herself away from the fire, falling onto her ass as she scurried away from the sparks and screams. Toys bumped and rolled as she crawled backwards until her hand hit something hard and metallic. She grasped the forgotten poker stick like an anchor as the figure burned. The witch’s white skin bubbled and cracked as the fire she had built to feed her, instead consumed her.

“See you in hell,” Lacey murmured, wiping the black blood off her hands and onto her skirts. She glanced around, at the toys littering the floors and the bones hiding in the nooks and corners, and shuddered. She hoped the whole place burned.

Dropping the poker on her way to the door, she double checked to make sure the hard won lock of hair was still in her pocket. Her clothes smelled of fire, her throat was raw and she was covered in blood. Lacey hoped the Imp was waiting to take her home because she was ready for a bath. A real one with magical hot water, never ending tea and a pillow. Perhaps some of those biscuits... Nothing sweet though. Chocolate was no longer as comforting as it had once been.

The children were gone. Nor was there a magical lizard waiting for her. Sighing, Lacey moved towards the main path. He’d show eventually. After all, she did have the spell ingredient he had requested. No deals had been made pertaining to her time or energy.

Pausing, Lacey frowned. She looked back at the gingerbread cottage. She was still on the property, but the house already looked darker, smaller as if it was shrinking in on itself. She wondered if she should stay here. Surely it would be the first place he would look for her?

Or he might assume she would return to the mill with the children.

Lacey groaned, turning back to the main path. She doubted Hansel or Gretel would take kindly to her following them, but they had enough of a head start. She would simply follow the trail back and then hide out in the woods of the glen.

That was the plan at least, until Lacey heard the quiet whisperings from just off the path.

“Kids?” she called out, moving towards the sound. “What are you two doing?”

“Don’t hurt us!” Hansel wailed, popping up from behind a bush. “We just want to go home!”

Lacey sighed, motioning him over. “I’m not going to hurt you two,” she assured them.

“You’re lying,” Gretel said, appearing beside her brother. “We heard you-!”

“Lying to save your lives?” Lacey finished for her, crossing her arms. The children did not move from the bushes. If Lacey took so much as a step forward, they would flee into the forest and she did not trust their safety in the darkness.

“Look,” she said, motioning at herself. “I’m covered in blood, bruised and beaten and I want nothing more than to go home.”
“Then go,” Gretel said hotly. Lacey was taken aback at the vehemence. “We don’t need you.”

“Fine,” Lacey grumbled. She had done her part. If they got killed out here in the woods, it was not her fault. Not if they refused her help. Her conscience was clear. “Get eaten by wild bears, see if I care.”

They began to murmur between them as she turned away. She walked slowly, straining to hear. Gretel’s high pitched arguments were angry and short while Hansel spoke softly, his voice questioning. Just as Lacey reached the first bend, branches rustled as the siblings came onto the path.

Lacey did not pause, but kept walking. As dark as it was, the twin moons illuminated the path decently in this area. Here and there, a faint breadcrumb from their earlier trip to the witch’s house could be seen.

Lacey did not comment when they came up behind her. She simply walked on, as if nothing was wrong. They went this way for a while, the trio half dead from exhaustion, but too wound up to sleep. Near death experiences were something Lacey was growing familiar with, but the children, young as they were, seemed to be dealing with their first brush with death as best as could be expected.

Unbidden, Lacey thought their father would be proud of them and then brushed the thought away. When they were reunited with their father, she would have to be long gone or Koby would show her the business end of his ax.

The crumbs slowly vanished away just as Hansel had told her. The children were half asleep on their feet, clutching each other’s arms to stay upright.

Gretel, too tired to remember she wasn’t speaking to Lacey, blinked up at her. “What?” she slurred as a yawn cracked her jaw.

“That’s the border marker,” Gretel said, pointing at something off in the trees. “One more step and we’ll be in the First Kingdom.”

“Okay, so what does that mean?”

“It means,” came an amused voice from behind them, “you’re in violation of the Two Kings’ Decree.”

Emerging from the darkness of the forest, shadowy figures surrounded them. The figure who had
spoken stepped forward, his poncho hood pulled low over his face so his mouth was the only thing visible in the darkness. He held a bow and arrow loosely at his side, non-threateningly but a warning all the same.

The children moved closer to Lacey. Better the enemy they knew. Lacey put her arms around them. “We’re lost,” Lacey confessed, keeping an eye on a huge figure lurking to her right. It held a tree limb as a staff and stood well within striking distance. “Obviously, we took the wrong turn. Sorry for the confusion, if you could just-?”

“Oh no,” the hooded figure laughed, stepping towards her. “You’re coming with us.”

“Who exactly are you?” Hansel demanded from under Lacey’s right arm.

Hushing him with a firm squeeze of his shoulder, Lacey nodded. “Kid’s got a point,” she said with a shrug of her shoulders.

A second later, every figure had their weapons aimed at them. There were clubs, bows and even an ax. The staff-wielding mountain had stepped a half inch closer, and his shoulders were tensed as if simply awaiting a signal.

The hooded figure simply laughed again. “Where are my manners?” he asked himself. He bowed low, sweeping his arm out underneath him. When he straightened, he tugged the hood off his head, revealing a man with piercing brown eyes, a roguish grin and prominent cheekbones.

He was a complete fox.

“They call me Robin Hood,” he said jocularly. “These ruffians make up my merry men.” The group slowly lowered their weapons, a few even stepping out of the shadows to get a better look at the three of them. Their skin was darkened by sun, long dark hair hanging about their long faces as they glared at them from the safety of the tree lines. “We should get going before the sun rises. We have to be well away before the patrol comes.”

“We’ll just go back,” Lacey offered. She leaned towards him invitingly as she smiled over the children’s heads. “I just need to get these two back home.”

“Robin!” someone called out from the treetops above them. “Patrol is coming!”

Robin nodded, turning apologetically. “Afraid I can’t leave you here for the patrol to find. The Sheriff of Nottingham is not a man you want to find you in the woods alone. There’s a home just on the edge of the woods, a place to sleep and eat.”

“Food?” Hansel piped up, looking hopeful. At his side, Gretel yawned, her jaw stretching wide.

Robin smiled down at her. “Little John?”

The mountain to their right stepped forward revealing a pleasant looking man with gray shaggy hair with feathers woven throughout smiling down at them like Father Christmas. “Hello,” he greeted Gretel, bending down to her level. “Care for a ride?”

Despite the trauma from earlier, the little girl lifted her hands to be picked up and was swung into the waiting arms of the giant. The innate judge of character that children possessed convinced Lacey to trust this group, odd as they were.

Lacey turned back to Robin with a nod. “Let’s get going,” she said.
Robin glanced down at the boy beside her, taking in the tired slump of his shoulders and red eyes. Hansel straightened, shooting daggers at Robin Hood in case he dared suggest he wasn’t man enough to walk. “Very well,” Robin laughed. “Follow me.”

Chapter End Notes

And with that folks, we are in the First Kingdom!

I've hope you enjoyed Lacey's little adventure in the Second Kingdom and her triumph over the Blind Witch. Next chapter, we'll meet another new face. Any guesses?

On a small side note, thank you to anyone who takes the time to review. This story is such a huge undertaking that is very easy for me to get discouraged and want to give up on it. Sadly for me, it's my favorite project, and I find myself unable to do so. If you enjoy The Gate, please, please leave me a review and let me know. I appreciate every single one.

As far as updates, I have the next 9 chapters written, just waiting to be beta edited. I will hopefully be able to post weekly for the next few months depending on my lovely beta's schedule which due to the holidays is a bit busy at the moment. She does such a great job though, don't you agree?

Mood board for this chapter can be found here: http://theplasticview.tumblr.com/post/134352225432/mood-board-for-the-gate-chapter-21
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

The ever sunny Snafu had a birthday this week and I promised an update on this.

Thanks as always to Ramloth for her beta reading wizardry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When they finally stumbled out of the woods, the sunrise had already begun to color the sky with soft pinks and pale oranges. A murder of crows called out in the early light, drifting and rising with the currents as they swooped in lazy arcs to the ground. The smell of fall was heavy in the air, accented by the morning dampness. Across these flat grounds, there was a house hidden in the morning fog, slowly revealing itself as the sun rose higher and higher.

Robin stood just to their left, whispering to one of his men. The conversation ended with a nod and the other melted back into the forest, joining the rest of the Merry Men. The night’s walk had been rougher than Lacey had anticipated. As she and Hansel had stumbled through the forest, the Merry Men had been silent shadows. She had barely noticed that all but a few had disappeared until an hour ago. Now, it was just Robin and the quiet giant, still cradling Gretel in his arms.

As the day brightened, Lacey could see she was a mess. The wounds along her bare arms ached and were inflamed. Her bodice, torn half open, revealed the shift beneath it while her skirt lay in tatters from the witch’s claws and the various roots, twigs and branches that had snagged the ragged fabric throughout the night. Adding to all this, Lacey's feet felt as if they were ten times their normal size and she wanted nothing more than to collapse into the dewy grass. Practical as her cloth slippers were, they had not been designed for hiking. Next to her, Hansel swayed where he stood as Little John loomed just behind them, Gretel fast asleep in his arms.

Pushing her hair back behind her ear, Lacey openly gazed at Robin as he approached. His lips quirked in a roguish smile but his eyes were harder to read. “Now, then, this is the Lady Tremaine’s estate,” he told her, nodding towards the house in the distance. The fog had lifted slightly to reveal a simple looking brick structure with dormer windows and chimneys at each end. The front was dominated by elaborate elongated arches and columns already gleamed bright white in the sunlight. “If you go to the back door, Ella will take care of you.”

“Ella?” Lacey repeated. “Who exactly is Ella?”

“She’s the maid,” Robin replied, glancing over his shoulder. He seemed to be considering the sky and when he turned, his face had grown thoughtful. “Little John, we will need to hurry if we’re going to get back to the camp without running into the patrol.”

The giant nodded but glanced pointedly at his cargo. “Shouldn't I just bring her up to the door? No need to wake her.”

“She can walk,” Robin said firmly. “If Lady Tremaine sees us, it’s our heads.”

Reluctantly, Little John bent down for Hansel to shake his sister awake. Lacey, sensing her opportunity was nearly gone, caught Robin’s elbow. “Thank you,” she said, her hand lingering
on his arm.

Robin glanced down at it, another knowing smile playing at his lips as her hand traced the rough deerskin of his tunic sleeve. “My lady,” he bowed. It was artfully done, Lacey had to admit. With a dashing gesture, he both complimented her and discreetly removed his arm from her promising touch. “I wish you luck on finding your way back home.”

“You too,” Lacey murmured, batting her eyes. His gaze, observant as ever, dropped to the ripped and torn bodice and scratched flesh before he looked past her to the children. Duly reminded she had other things to attend to, Lacey sighed. “I doubt we’ll ever meet again.”

Robin grinned, lifting his bow over his shoulder. “A woman such as yourself is not someone one easily forgets.”

Before Lacey could respond in kind, Hansel and Gretel had tumbled over to them, rubbing sleep out of their eyes. Sometime in the night, Hansel had opted to tolerate Lacey, comforted by the Merry Men’s company. That truce had seemingly ended judging by his suspicious glare and crossed arms.

“We want to go with you,” Hansel informed Robin.

Robin looked amused as Gretel reached out to take Little John’s large hand in her own. “What’s this now?” Robin asked in amusement, eyes flickering to Lacey. “A mutiny?”

“She’s not who she says she is,” Gretel replied archly. Little John looked torn, his hand trapped in the little girl’s insistent grip. The exhaustion of the night was catching up with Lacey and she couldn’t bite back her groan, lifting a still blood stained hand to her temple in frustration.

Robin, however, threw his head back and laughed. “Why, of course she’s not,” he told the children. “No one ever is.”

“But-!” Hansel and Gretel started, trying to speak over the other.

“But-!” Hansel and Gretel started, trying to speak over the other.

“From the looks of it,” Robin continued, his tone brokering no argument. “She’s had a rough go of it tonight. All of you have. Still, black blood can only mean one thing. I’ve heard the whispers about the witch who lives deep in the Second Kingdom but I’ve never heard of anyone who has made it out alive to tell the truth of it.”

In the dawn’s light, large black splotches of blood were also becoming evident on Gretel’s clothing and smeared across her face and hair. Her hands were stained with it, and Hansel’s clothes had splatter and spots of blood as well. Robin had probably noted all of this before he had even stepped onto the trail last night. Lacey was amazed he had even bothered to help them at all. They looked straight out of a campy horror movie.

“Now,” Robin continued. “If you come with me, you’ll be outlaws. You’ll never see your home again and every day runs the risk the good Sheriff of Nottingham will find and hang you for your crimes.”

“Crimes?” Hansel asked in confusion. “I thought you were the good guys?”

“Now, Hansel, while we may help children and lost women find their way out of the forest, we also rob, steal and kill if the situation calls for it,” Robin said candidly. Lacey had been on blind dates with accountants who had explained their job roles with equal matter of factness. “Now, tell me, is that the life for your sister? For you?”
“But she-!” Gretel started but Robin stepped around them as if they hadn't been in the middle of a very serious conversation. A figure hurried towards them from the house, a shawl flapping around narrow shoulders. With the sun rising behind the house, the figure was draped in shadow, but Little John smiled, shoulders relaxing.

When the figure drew near, it was revealed to be an tall woman, slightly older than Lacey. Her dark hair was pulled back at the sides, curling around her shoulders as bangs framed her face. She had alert but warm brown eyes, taking in the sight of them all with careful note. Her height was her most striking feature, nearly coming to Little John's shoulders. She was a hard woman to miss but the most prominent thing about her was the soot streaking her clothes, hair and skin.

“Robin,” she greeted, pulling her long shawl tighter around her. As she did so, the too short hem of her dress hiked up to her ankles. Her feet were long and elegant and nearly double Lacey's own shoe size. “Who are they this time?”

“Ella,” Robin greeted. “We found you some new mice to feed. Found them lost at the border of the Second Kingdom. They triggered the boundary spells where we were hunting. The patrol would have been on us all so we brought them here.”

Ella sighed, crossing her arms as she regarded the rag tag trio. “You poor things,” she eventually sighed. “Let’s get you up to the house before anybody wakes up. Oh, and Robin,” she added. “You should have an easy time of it for the next few nights. The Royal Ball should tie up the patrol nicely .”

“What would we do without you?” he murmured. He took her hand in between his to deposit a kiss chastely on the back of it.

“You’d be just fine, I imagine,” Ella said with a sigh, but her lips pulled back just the slightest at the corners. “Now, go before someone sees you.”

Ella took the two children firmly in hand, and marched them up the hill. Both went willingly, the thought of rest and food and the new kindly face winning out over a life of banditry in the forest.

Lacey lingered at the edge of the woods with the two men. “Thank you all again.”

Robin stared up after the children. “My lady, a quick word. You can trust Ella, but do as she says. If her stepmother finds you three, she’ll call the Sheriff and he won’t hesitate to throw the children into the dungeons. He might even keep you as a toy. If he happens to find out you met us, he’ll torture all three of you for information you don’t possess.”

The trees around them swayed in the early morning breeze, which lifted the ends of the men’s hair, and tugged at her ripped skirts. Growing entirely sick of being threatened, Lacey crossed her arms over her stomach. “Whatever you say,” she responded gruffly. The trio of Ella and the children disappeared around the edge of the house. “Guess this is just a usual day for you guys, huh?”

There was no response. Robin and Little John had gone, leaving Lacey standing at the edge of the property talking to herself. With a last glance into the trees, Lacey turned and followed Ella’s path, careful to hurry in case unfriendly eyes appeared at the windows.

The kitchen was through the back door. Ella was lighting the morning fire in the massive fireplace, as Hansel and Gretel sat at a nearby table, devouring a platter of bread and cheese. They both looked up when Lacey entered but quickly returned to their food.

“Now then,” Ella said, straightening and dusting her hands and knees off. It did little. The soot
streaked Ella's clothes so thoroughly already, she had just rubbed it into a dull gray. "The children were telling me their father is at the Sun Court Market?"

Confirming this, Lacey snagged a piece of crust that the children had left untouched. Hansel nudged a glass of milk towards her but Gretel kept her eyes pointedly averted.

Ella watched, picking up on all this. "Good news is," she continued brightly, moving to the panty to collect breakfast for the household. "We have a supplier dropping off some meats this morning before he heads there himself. He's an old friend and I know he wouldn't mind the company."

Hansel grinned at Ella through a mouthful of cheese. "Father will be so surprised!"

Gretel said nothing, but continued to pick at her bread like a bird.

"I suppose he will," Ella said, glancing at Lacey out of the corner of her eye. "But the issue is- I doubt he'll have room for all three of you."

Understanding Ella's point, Lacey asked, "You're sure he's trustworthy?"

Ella nodded, making quick work of preparing what looked like sausage and bacon in a black pan. "He's a honest man," she said confidently. "Bit gruff but has a soft spot for kids." Ella moved to hang the pan over the fireplace, picking up the nearby poker to stir the embers red hot.

That was when Gretel began to scream.

Alarmed, Ella dropped the poker, causing an even louder racket as it clattered against the stones of the fireplace. Hansel froze, staring at his sister as if he had never seen her before. Only Lacey realized what was happening. She hurried to Gretel's side to try and calm her down. Unfortunately, this had the opposite effect. At the sight of the blood still covering Lacey, the child pushed back from the table and launched herself into Ella's arms.

"What in the world-?" Ella asked, stroking the sobbing child's hair. Hansel swallowed, looking to Lacey in question.

Before she could speak, they heard a thin cold voice call out, "Cinderella? What is that dreadful racket?"

"Shush, shush," Ella crooned, glancing anxiously at the door. Footsteps approached, the swishing of skirts growing louder and louder. Gretel had finally stopped sobbing and was now hiccuping into Ella's chest. Ella looked to Lacey with a panicked look in her eye. "If she finds out, I'm feeding them-!" she began but Lacey didn’t give her the chance to finish.

"Get inside there," Lacey ordered Hansel, plucking him out of his seat. "Keep your sister calm and quiet, do you understand? Everything's going to be all right but you have to do what I say."

Nodding, the boy collected his sister into his own arms, disappearing into the pantry. The heavy door covered the sound of quiet sobs but only barely.

Ella motioned for her to join them but Lacey shook her head. "She heard the screaming," Ella fretted. "I doubt she'll believe it was you."

The door swung open. A woman nearly six feet tall swooped into the kitchen and peered through crow-lined grey blue eyes in distaste at the two of them. "Who is this?" she demanded of Ella. "Why is she here?"

"My apologies, Stepmother," Ella said softly. "You had asked me to find a girl to help out
during the festivities, remember?"

The cold eyes swung to Lacey, narrowed in distaste. “She’s filthy,” the lady drawled.

“Bandits,” Lacey coughed, sinking into a curtsy like the maids from Eric’s castle had done. “I got away.”

“What of the screaming?”

Lacey blinked at the floor. For a moment, her mouth hung open as her brain went blank but then it came to her. “There was a mouse,” she said, straightening. “I saw a mouse…”

“Oh,” the woman sighed, glancing at her stepdaughter. “Cinderella’s little pets. I’ll send Lucifer in here this afternoon to go hunting.”

“Yes, Stepmother,” Ella responded dutifully, eyes flickering to the half eaten cheese and bread on the table. Lacey caught the motion and stepped in front of the table, blocking it from the mistress’s view.

“Hmm.” The woman considered them for a moment. “Bring breakfast to the morning room,” she ordered. “Make sure she’s washed and trained before supper. I wouldn’t want to upset the girls.”

“Of course, Stepmother,” Ella replied. “Thank you.”

The woman left, sparing one last searching look at Lacey. "Do try and keep it down," she advised before she disappeared.

“Oh thank goodness,” Ella sighed, collapsing against the wall. She lifted a shaking hand to her forehead. “I’m sorry, I was just so worried…Oh,” she paused, blinking as if something had just occurred to her. “I don’t even know your name.”

“Belle,” Lacey supplied. The name was familiar on her tongue now. She went to the pantry, pulling it open to find the children had somehow fallen asleep, curled around each other. “I think they’re good for a while,” she said, closing the door. “Now, about that bath?”

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“Belle?”

Lacey paused in her sweeping, as Ella returned from outside. “Everything work out?” Lacey asked, returning to her work. “Did you give them the amulet?

Ella moved to the countertops, starting to go through the various cheeses and wines the children had helped unload from the wagon. “They’ve just gone,” Ella told her. “Should be at the market by end of the week. And yes, I made sure Hansel had the amulet, told him to keep it close at all times.”

“Good,” Lacey said stiffly. At least the kids would be safe from any animals in the woods, if nothing else. “By the way, those horrible bells were jingling like they were possessed a few minutes ago.”

“They’ll must be finished with tea,” Ella explained. “I’ll go get the cart shortly.”

“I can put that away,” Lacey offered, moving her pile of dirt closer to the back door. “I saw the wine cellar when I arrived.”
“You know much about wine?” Ella asked inquisitively.

Lacey smiled. She picked up a large bottle, dark red and thick liquid moving slowly inside. “A bit,” she said, fingers tracing another bottle of light white, sparking in the afternoon sun.

The children had slept all through the morning. Long enough for Ella to serve and clean up breakfast and get Lacey something to wear. Ella's few outfits had all been covered in ash and had stains or burns on the sleeves. More importantly, they were all much too large for Lacey's petite frame. Finally, Ella had unearthed a printed bodice and a matching skirt. An old dress of her mother’s, Ella had explained. It fit fine. It was just a little long, but the four or five petticoats Ella had forced on her took care of that.

“You know,” Ella started but Lacey shook her head.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Lacey said curtly. “They’re on their way back to their father and that’s all that matters.”

Ella nodded. For a moment, the two of them stood side by side, their skirts rustling against each other. Ella had been able to salvage Lacey’s slippers. They were drying by the fireplace next to Ella’s, which were permanently black with soot like the rest of her things.

One of the various bells over the fireplace began to ring frantically and Ella cleared her throat, pushing away from the counter. “If you don’t mind putting the wine up, the cheese can go in the larder.”

Relieved to be alone for a moment, Lacey gathered the wine bottles into a basket and headed back outside. The autumn afternoon was beautiful but crisp, and her borrowed gown was thin cotton. Hurrying, she found the small storm cellar, a cluster of grapes painted whimsically on the wood doors.

The stores were low. It took Lacey barely any time to put the wine up, before browsing the rest of the shelves curiously. Her eyes lingered on some opaque bottles, tucked away in the back near what looked like champagne before she headed back to the kitchen. Ella had not returned so she put the cheese away. The shelves of the larder were almost as bare as the wine cellar.

Ella had returned with the tea tray by the time Lacey returned to the main kitchen area, cheeks flushed. When she caught Lacey’s eye, Ella turned hurriedly back to the sink where her elbows were in sudsy water. Nearby, a pail from the well outside was still half full with water. “All done?” Ella asked, a forced note of brightness in her voice.

“Yes,” Lacey said slowly. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!” Ella chirped, brushing her face with her forearm. “I just-”

Lacey moved to her other side, catching her tear filled eyes before Ella could blink them away. Momentarily stunned, Lacey simply stood beside the sink, watching the other woman as she continued to scrub the tea things.

Without a word, Lacey held out her hand for the next clean cup, pulling the towel from Ella’s arm. Lacey continued to scrub the tea things.

The time passed in silence and before long, they were done. Ella smiled weakly over at Lacey, shaking her head as she began to clean up the Suds in the sink.
“Want to talk about it?” Lacey asked finally. “Or?”

Ella shrugged one shoulder, shaking her head. “It’s silly,” she said faintly. “I don’t know why I’m even upset.”

Lacey didn’t press. She simply stood there, waiting. Ella had other chores to attend to, but something in the way the other woman lingered suggested she wanted to talk. The bells hung silently but they added a feeling of anticipation to the air.

“The Royal Ball starts tonight,” Ella finally said. Lacey nodded, remembering that from earlier. “All eligible women in the kingdom are invited,” Ella continued, standing over the sink. Her hands, pink from the harsh soap and cold water, flexed at the edges as if holding herself up. “I thought if I got all my chores done…”

Lacey began to ask how Ella would be considered eligible, being a kitchenmaid but fell silent. From everything so far, Ella seemed a smart and capable woman, hardworking if not annoyingly optimistic. Plus, she did keep referring to the mistress of the estate as stepmother, which Lacey had thought a rather odd title. Maybe it was not a title, but her relation to the woman.

“I can help with that,” Lacey offered quickly. She wasn’t much for housework but she owed this woman and they both knew it. Hansel and Gretel were on their way back to their father and Lacey had a safe place to wait until the Imp decided to show up when he felt like it. A few days of playing maid were not going to hurt anything other than her pride and perhaps her knees.

Ella shook her head. “Stepmother wants me to clean out the barn, wash the windows and polish all the silverware as well as serve dinner and help the three of them get ready.” Ella sighed, pushing herself from the counter as she turned back to the kitchen, preparing to get to work. “I couldn’t do half of that before tomorrow night, much less tonight.”

Flashes of candlelit ballrooms and a prince in search of a bride made Lacey smile. “So, three nights for the prince to find a bride is it?”

“Exactly,” Ella confirmed, grabbing the water pail. “I’ve been working on my dress for weeks…”

Lacey had never been one of the girls. She had never enjoyed sleepovers. She preferred to order things online rather than go to the mall in a gaggle. She had never accepted a brunch request or done a girl’s night out but she knew exactly what someone was supposed to say in this instance.

“Can I see it?”

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Standing in front of the ancient dress form, Lacey tried to find the right words.

“It’s uh...lovely,” she finally said. Beside her, Ella was beaming, scrubbed pink hands reaching out to delicately touch the white lace that scooped across the shoulders and dangled like half sleeves.

“Maybe I’ll get to wear it on the last night,” Ella said hopefully, stepping back. “I finished it just this morning. I noticed you all from the window.”

Standing in the airless attic, which seemed to serve as a hideaway for Ella when the kitchen became too much, Lacey privately thought perhaps it was for the best her stepmother had managed to prevent Ella from attending the ball.

The cream blue fabric was obviously hand sewn, a large white panel that looked like a white
braided tablecloth went down the middle like an apron with blue ruffles framing it. The bodice ended in a sharp point as if the fabric had run out, and a lopsided blue rose dangled from the middle of the lace.

Despite not knowing much about the First Kingdom, Lacey felt fairly certain that this getup would not have been well tolerated at any court. Still, she had seen how crestfallen Ella had been and she was rather punchy with lack of sleep. “Okay,” Lacey said, clapping her hands together. “I have no idea how to clean out a barn but I can polish silver and possibly even learn how to wash windows. Let’s see between us what we can do.”

Ella opened her mouth to argue but then a small smile began to creep across her face. “Okay,” she agreed, fingers reaching out to trace her hard work one last time. “Let’s get to work.”

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“I’m dying,” Lacey moaned, sinking her head onto the counter. “If I ever see another piece of silverware again-!”

Ella laughed, cheeks bright with exertion as she rushed to finish preparing the ham. “I can’t believe we did it!” she laughed as she whirled around the kitchen, skirts twirling around her. “You’re a blessing, Belle!

“Yes, well,” Lacey groaned, shifting her aching muscles. Ella had helped clean out her cuts earlier that morning, bandaging them gently but all the activity of the day meant her entire body now ached like one giant nerve. “I try.”

“Oh, I almost forgot your hair,” Ella exclaimed, hurrying over.

“What’s wrong with my hair?” Lacey demanded, reaching up to touch it. “It’s a little dirty but-”

Ella laughed, tugging at her own hair which still had soot clinging to the black curls. “We need to put it down,” she explained, tugging at the few remaining bindings that had kept it pinned to her head. “Only noble ladies wear their hair up.”

“You’re kidding,” Lacey said, combing her hair with her fingers as Ella moved back to the dinner cart.

“Stepmother is very particular about that sort of thing,” Ella said knowingly, toying with her own hair.

The bells over the mantle had been silent during the afternoon as the ladies of the house had slept. Ella cast a glance at them before she began to prepare the vegetables, slicing them as she hummed a small tune under her breath. Lacey watched, having already been told to sit and rest. Growing emboldened by her exhaustion and her curiosity, Lacey decided to speak her mind.

“So, Ella,” Lacey asked. “What’s the deal with you and your stepmother, anyway?”

Ella didn’t pause in her chopping. She simply let a small sigh escape her as if she was used to this. “My mother died when I was very young,” she shared. “My father remarried right away, so I would have a mother, you see,” Ella said quickly. Lacey nodded approvingly, it was obvious that is was very important for Lacey to think highly of Ella’s father. She could understand that need. “He married Stepmother and she and her daughters came to live with us. Then…”

“I’m sorry,” Lacey mumbled, realizing too late what she just drudged up from the past. “I thought maybe it was just what she asked you to call her.”
Ella moved the vegetables expertly to a pan, adding butter and some spices and moving it to the fire. “She let me stay,” Ella explained. “I don’t know what I would have done if she hadn’t.”

Lacey wondered if Ella realized how much bullshit that actually was. It was glaringly obvious that the estate was broke, barely hanging on to the luxury it had once enjoyed and the true daughter of the household was down in the kitchen, cooking and cleaning.

By the time dinner was served, Lacey was incredibly interested to see the other women of the house so she followed Ella into the dining hall.

The tall woman from earlier sat at the head of the table, cool eyes watching them as they wheeled in the cart. “You’re late,” Lady Tremaine said dismissively. “I was about to ring for you for the third time today.”

“Sorry, Stepmother,” Ella said calmly, starting to move dishes to the table. Two women older than Ella stared at Lacey in frank amusement. Once Ella had finished, she moved back to Lacey’s side. “Stepmother,” she said politely. “I would like to introduce Belle. She’ll be helping out during the ball.”

“Charmed,” Lacey intoned, sinking into a half curtsy.

The two spinsters cackled. “Why, Cinderella,” the dark-haired one laughed. “She’s even more bedraggled than you are!”

“Yes,” the red-headed one giggled. “Where did you find her? The bottom of the well?”

Lacey’s hands clenched into fists at her side and she almost moved forward when Ella clasped her right hand in hers and squeezed a silent warning.

“Drizella, Anastasia,” their mother snapped. “Manners. Not everyone is as fortunate as we are.”

“Yes, Mother,” they chimed but they still smirked smugly at the two maids.

Dinner went quickly after that. The three ladies more interested in getting back upstairs to get ready than to actually eat. When they left the table, half the food was still sitting there, untouched.

“Now, then,” Ella said, sweeping everything back onto the cart. “Breakfast will be a breeze tomorrow.”

“Why do you let them call you that?” Lacey demanded, grabbing plates off the table. “Cinder Ella? That’s not even clever!”

Ella ignored her, pushing the cart quickly back to the kitchen, a song already back on her lips.

“Better clean these in case she double-checks the kitchens before we leave.”

“I can do that,” Lacey sighed, pushing the long sleeves of her top back.

Ella shook her head. “No, I’ve done them all my life, it’ll take me half a minute. Oh, I wish you knew how to do up corsets.”

It had been rather embarrassing earlier, having to ask Ella to help her with the lacings and bindings that made up the increasingly complicated undergarments of this kingdom. Lacey desperately missed bras. She had been able to play it off as being unused to that certain style of corsets but she doubted Ella had been convinced. Ella, for her sweetness and seemingly meek obedience routine, didn't miss much.
The bells over the fireplace began to chime, and Ella looked distressed. “That’ll be to do their hair,” she explained, taking her apron off and hurrying towards the door. “Stepmother does her own but-!”

“I can do hair,” Lacey offered quickly. “I’ve done mine all my life. How hard can it be?”

Chapter End Notes

And just like that we are in the First Kingdom. I hope everyone enjoyed Hansel & Gretel’s storyline and is excited about the upcoming arc with Miss Ella. Don't fret, we may have said goodbye to the siblings but Robin will be back shortly. As will another certain face that's been out of the picture for a few chapters now.

Thank you to everyone who reviewed last update. It meant the world to see people so intrigued by this story and I'm grateful to each and every one of you. Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays.

The mood board for this chapter can be found as always here: http://theplasticview.tumblr.com/post/135815757177/a-modern-portrait-of-sally-hemings-ellas
Two hours past dinner, and all Ella’s stepsisters had discussed so far was the ball, who was wearing what, and the crown prince. They completely ignored Ella or Lacey and their attempts to beautify them. Attempts being the key word. Twisting another curl into place while juggling pins, Lacey resisted a very real urge to stab the pin straight into the red-headed twit’s scalp as she twisted her head to talk to her sister.

“Do you think he’ll will be very handsome?” Anastasia asked in her nasally voice. Wearing a silk green nightmare with pleated sleeves and a five tier frilled skirt, Anastasia looked like someone’s drapes.

“Duh, stupid,” Drizella retorted in her high-pitched whine. Ella stood silently over her, placing a green headband perfectly into place. It did little to accentuate the matching tiered dress her sister also wore. The only difference was Drizella’s dress was red instead of green. “He’s the prince. There’s no such thing as an ugly prince.”

Picturing some of the less than appealing noble men she had seen at the Seventh Kingdom ball, Lacey struggled to keep her mouth wisely closed.

Ella meanwhile had a faraway look in her eyes as she thoughtfully added, “I wonder if he’s kind…”

“Kind?” Anastasia brayed, pitching forward in a peal of laughter. Lacey gasped in outrage as the ringlet of curls she had been placing at the crown of Anastasia’s head bounced apart and separated. The pin in her hand started to look increasingly deadly. “He’s rich! Who cares if he’s kind?”

“Honestly, Cinderella,” Drizella snorted. “What are you thinking?”

Ella chuckled weakly, catching Lacey’s eyes before looking back down. Lacey shook her own head, returning to teasing out Anastasia’s crown, all the while entertaining the idea of taking out the scissors and giving the idiot a haircut. Ella seemed unfazed by all the chatter. After a moment of rearranging Drizella’s curls, she stepped back from her stepsister. “There you are. All finished,” she said warmly. “You look lovely.”

Drizella bounced up, hurrying over to the mirror in the corner and admiring herself. “I do, don’t I,” she said to her own reflection. She was so taken by her appearance, she completely forgot to insult Ella’s handiwork. She plopped down and began to rub lotions and rouges onto her skin, although Lacey doubted anything would make the snout-nosed and lantern jaw face look anything more than interesting.

Anastasia grew restless underneath Lacey, twisting around to demand, “What’s taking so long?”

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Chapter Notes

Huge thanks to Ramloth who knocked out all my nanowrimo progress edits this past week. We should be able to enjoy weekly Gate updates for at least five weeks thanks to her hard work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
"You keep moving!" Lacey shot back, only to find Ella inserting herself smoothly between them.

"I’ll finish here," Ella said, shooting Lacey a warning glance over Anastasia’s head. “Drizella is nearly done. Perhaps you could check on Lady Tremaine?"

"Mother said she isn’t to be bothered,” Drizella said, pouting at herself as she applied a heavy rouge to her lips and cheeks. “We helped her get dressed after dinner.”

Sensing her chance to escape from primping hell, Lacey chimed in, “I’ll just go start cleaning the kitchen then.”

She left the three stepsisters, breathing a sigh of relief when she closed the door behind her. Dim-witted and cruelty were a terrible combination but the two in there had them both in spades. Nearing the staircase, Lacey passed the large master suite where the lady of the house slept. Lacey paused, turning back towards the daughters’ room and wondering how Ella had let herself be bullied and forced into a life of servitude, grinning and bearing it.

“I would have poisoned the food by now,” Lacey murmured to herself as she went down the stairs. “Done the whole world a favor.”

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“How do I look?”

Beaming, Ella twirled, the full skirts of her creation drifting out and floating back down like clouds. A small choker of double stranded pearls sat on the her neck, showing off her exposed shoulders beautifully. The blue and white color palette accentuated Ella’s tawny skin beautifully. She positively glowed.

“Lovely,” Lacey assured her. Despite the obviously homemade gown, Ella’s natural elegance outshone the cheap fabrics. There was one small issue though, Ella’s black stained slippers peeked ever so slightly from under the hem. “Don’t you have any other shoes?” Lacey asked, pointing at them.

“No,” Ella frowned down at her feet. “Mother had smaller feet than mine.” Lacey pulled at the hem to see better. Ella obliged, helpfully kicking out a foot which, while delicately boned, was impressively large.

“Ella,” Lacey laughed, catching it with her free hand. “This has got to be a size eleven!”

Ella giggling, took her foot back. “What’s a size eleven mean?”

“Nothing,” Lacey said, dropping her dress hem back into place. “Just something we say back in the good ole Fourth Kingdom.”

“Father was tall. I remember mother and I were both able to stand in his footprint,” Ella said with a self-aware smile. It faded slightly as she added, “Stepmother always said I’m much too large for a proper lady.”

Lacey disagreed. Lady Tremaine was tall but there was definitely some assistance from heels. Ella stood nearly five foot eleven with just her stocking feet, a good nine inches taller than Lacey. In the living room, the large grandfather clock struck seven and the doors upstairs swung open, giddy laughter and heels spilling down the staircase. Ella’s smile did not falter but she looked slightly less sure of herself, fingers toying with the pearls at her neck as if to find courage there.
“Go have fun,” Lacey encouraged. Not entirely altruistically, Lacey eagerly looked forward to taking a well deserved nap after the rigors of the day. Her body still ached and a headache had formed after dressing the ugly stepsisters. Ella smiled, reaching out to touch Lacey's shoulder in silent thanks before disappearing into the foyer. Lacey lingered for a moment in the open archway, expecting some kind of surprised reactions and hoping to catch just a glimpse of the ladies of the house when confronted with their failure to keep Ella home.

“Cinderella,” Lady Tremaine’s steady voice greeted in amused surprise. “Whatever are you doing, child?”

Lacey peered around the corner. Ella stood in the center of the foyer, her stepsisters behind their mother as the three of them blocked the doorway. Ella faced away from Lacey but her shoulders were tense and she had her hands clasped in front of her. “I finished all the chores, Stepmother,” Ella explained hopefully. “I thought-?”

“Oh?” Lady Tremaine responded. “Why, I couldn’t begin to fathom allowing you to go to the ball dressed like that. The other guests would ridicule you. People can be so cruel. Honestly, dear, what kind of mother would I be if I let you out of the house in that?”

“But-!” Ella began as Anastasia and Drizella exchanged looks.

Then, Drizella strode forward so suddenly, she nearly knocked her own mother over. “This my old lace shawl!” she accused, taking a handful of the delicate material and tearing it off the dress. Lacey had already stepped out around the arch, heading towards the trio before she caught herself and ducked behind a large cabinet. Ella would not thank her for intervening.

“It was ripped,” Ella reminded Drizella, voice wavering. “You...you told me to get rid of it. I didn’t think you’d mind.”

Ella was barely holding the remaining lace up, as Drizella stood before her, trophy in hand. Anastasia hurried to join her, declaring, “Why, this is my old nightgown!” She tore at the skirt’s white counterpart. “You said you couldn’t get the stains out!”

“Girls,” Lady Tremaine said authoritatively and both of them moved aside. With slow, decisive steps, Lady Tremaine came to stand before Ella, their eyes level with each other. “You wouldn’t begrudge your step-sister your hand me downs, would you?”

The daughters looked at each other, uncertainly. Lady Tremaine tsked at them before turning back to Ella. For a moment, she considered her step-daughter, then she let out an exaggerated sound of distress. “My dear Ella,” Lady Tremaine murmured. “Surely those aren’t the family pearls?”

“They were my mother’s,” Ella confirmed, so softly that Lacey had to strain to hear her.

It was the wrong thing to admit. Lady Tremaine’s entire face lit up as she moved in for the kill. “They were given to me by your father,” Lady Tremaine declared. “I had thought them stolen by one of the old staff members. I never considered you could have done such a thing.”

Ella tried to speak, but Lady Tremaine continued over her. “You are lucky I don’t call the Sheriff this instant and report you for theft.”

Lacey’s hands curled into fists, the scratches on her arms aching as her entire body vibrated in rage. Ella had kept those pearls in her small hope chest in the attic, carefully wrapped in ribbon until the day she could wear them. Lady Tremaine had probably never even seen them before now.

“Return them to my rooms. I’ll look the other way, this once. I expect you to clean my and the girls
rooms and have breakfast awaiting us upon our return in the morning,” Lady Tremaine decided, the threat evident despite her casual tone. “I will not tolerate any more nonsense about attending balls, Cinderella.”

“Yes, Stepmother,” Ella whispered. Lacey closed her eyes as she leaned her head against the wall behind her. She stayed there until the door closed, and the sounds of horses trotting off into the night signaled the step-monsters had left.

Moments later, Ella, barely managing to hold her ripped dress together, sank heartbroken onto the floor. She tried and failed to hold back her sobs. Lacey stepped out of the shadows, uncertain. When Ella looked up and saw Lacey there, she tried to silence herself, even attempting to stand up but Lacey didn’t allow it. Sinking down beside her, Lacey wrapped her own arms around the other woman as best she could and silently willed her to know it would be okay.

At the awkward embrace, Ella sobbed harder, reaching out to wrap her own arms around Lacey to bury her head in her mother’s old dress. Ella had not cried for years, she had lived in the fire and she did know she could. Now, after years of dry eyes, she loosened a flood from behind a great dam. Lacey let her, patting her hair as reassuringly as she could and while it was somewhat stilted, perhaps it might be of some comfort.

Lacey had seen a father’s love often in this world. Fierce and devoted, slightly unsure but desperate to do their best. Lacey only remembered her own mother faintly. So, despite not knowing Ella for longer than a few hours, she held her and hoped that would be enough.

“I’m sorry,” Ella hiccuped after a moment. “Oh, Belle, what an idiot you must think I am.”

“Stop it,” Lacey ordered, helping the other woman stand. “If you apologize after what they just did, I’ll smack you.” Ella, taken aback, mumbled something incoherent but Lacey didn’t back down. “Honestly, Ella,” Lacey continued in disbelief. “How could you stay here and let them treat you like this?”

Ella flushed. “I’m not like you, Belle,” she shot back. “I can’t just run out into the world on my own. This is my family’s home. My parents are buried by the forest, I have a responsibility here.”

“You’re being abused and mistreated,” Lacey pointed out, “and you’re allowing it!”

“I’m surviving it,” Ella yelled back, eyes wide. “Every hour that goes by on my hands and knees, every time they call me Cinderella, every day I wake up in the ashes of the fireplace, I keep living. I’m defying them, I’m surviving them! When you’re gone, I’ll keep on surviving them. So, don’t tell me how to live my life, Belle. Don’t you dare.” Ella breathing heavy, turned away from her. “I’m going to go clean up.”

“Fine,” Lacey replied, her mouth dry. Determined to hide her stunned expression, she turned on her own heel and marched out the front door. She’d go to the wine cellar, find the most expensive thing she could find and drink until the Imp got around to collecting her. If Ella wanted to live her life like this, fine by her.

As soon as the cool night air greeted her, Lacey’s anger evaporated. She collapsed onto the stairs of the porch, fuming as she tried to think of a way to convince Ella to come with her. Perhaps the Imp needed a maid, Lacey mused. Anything was better than this place.

“Oh, you poor dear…” Looking up from her knees, Lacey found a very plump, white haired fairy floating directly in front of her. Eyes wide, Lacey opened her mouth to reply when the fairy squeaked and fluttered backwards. “You’re not Ella!” she chirped in alarm, and a moment later, a
full-sized short and squat little woman stared up at her from the drive.

“‘You’re a fairy,’” Lacey realized, standing up and moving down the stairs. “I’ve met one of your kind in the Seventh Kingdom.”

“That’s nice, dear,” the fairy said, not paying any attention to Lacey at all. Her eyes were on the door. “I was looking for Ella Tremaine.”

“She’s inside,” Lacey said, crossing her arms. The fairy did not look terribly threatening but Lacey had grown wary of magical creatures in particular. “What exactly do you want with her?”

“Oh, my,” the grandmotherly fairy uttered, hand fluttering at her breast. “Who are you then?”

“Name’s Belle,” Lacey lied smoothly. “I’m a friend of Ella’s.”

“Oh, no one told me about you,” the fairy worried, peering up at her. “I’m here to send Ella to the ball and this is not at all how things are supposed to go. She was supposed to be out here waiting for me. You know, her mother and father were one of my better happily ever afters.”

“You’re a fairy godmother?” Lacey said, remembering the ridiculous term from one of the Dark Castle books. “Ella’s fairy godmother?”

“Why, yes!” the fairy exclaimed cheerfully, beaming. “Now, if you could just—!”

Lacey did not get to find out what she needed to do before she could finish, the fairy exploded into a thousand different pieces of light and magic, blasting Lacey backwards onto the steps. An object fell on her and she reached up to find the fairy’s magic wand.

“My, my, this is unexpected!”

Lacey used her elbows to push herself off the stairs, finding herself staring slack-jawed at the Imp. “You!” Lacey exploded, struggling to her feet. “It’s about goddamn time!”

“Me!” the Imp huffed, motioning to her in an overly flamboyant series of gestures. “What are you doing here?”

Lacey paused, staring at him in confusion. “I’ve been waiting for you,” she told him briskly. “Aren’t you here for me?”

“Mm,” the Imp murmured, cocking his head at her. “As it happens, no.” He frowned at her, moving his head back and forth as if in the middle of an internal debate. “This is rather awkward.”

“What are you doing here then?” Lacey demanded. “I thought—?”

“Belle?” came Ella’s voice from inside. “Are you out there?”

“Never mind,” Lacey swore, turning back to the Imp who looked curiously up at the closed door. “You just blew away Ella’s fairy godmother!”

“I’m aware,” the Imp snickered. Wriggling his shoulders proudly as he glanced about at the last few floating light particles. “I did tell you I had some business to attend to in the First Kingdom.”

“Unbelievable,” Lacey groaned. “You would ruin her one shot at getting out of this hellhole.”

“I don’t know what you’re referring to,” the Imp grumbled, scrunching his nose up at her. “Now, if you could just give me the wand…?”
The rod in Lacey's hand had a pleasant warmth radiating from it. A smile curved on her face as footsteps from the house approached the door. “You want this?” Lacey rather enjoyed the dawning look of horror on the Imp’s face. “Then, let’s make a deal.”

Before he could respond, Ella joined them outside, pausing in the doorway as she stared down at the odd pair facing off in her drive. Her dress hung off her in tatters and at the sight of the odd creature in her front yard, her hands fluttered back to hold the rags up. “Belle?” Ella asked nervously, lingering in the doorway. “What’s going on?”

“Ella! This,” Lacey said with relish, holding the wand jauntily in her hand, “is your fairy godmother.”

“Charmed,” the Imp growled, eyes flashing at Lacey. He neither disappeared nor tried to magically or physically strip the wand from her. She had won this round. He was awaiting the deal’s requirements, seemingly willing to pay the price for the trinket for which he had just killed.

“I thought all fairies were...” Ella’s sentence drifted off as she moved down the stairs to join them. The fact of his gender and overall wicked appearance were left unspoken.

Lacey moved to the Imp’s side, digging the magic wand into his ribs. “She’ll go to the ball for three nights as befits her birthright,” she whispered. “Also her stepmother is atrocious, how about-?”

“Careful,” the Imp snapped.

Ella paused in coming down the stairs, assuming he was talking to her but Lacey understood him perfectly. “Fine, three nights at the ball as a proper lady,” Lacey whispered, handing the Imp the wand behind his back. “No funny stuff.”

His entire manner switched in an instant as he swept into a deep bow. The wand sparked in his hand, and he shot them both a particular dastardly grin as he straightened. “Ella,” he greeted. “I’m here to send you to the ball!”

“Oh,” Ella managed, gazing in some doubt at the very un-fairy like creature. “But I-!”

“Best be getting on with it,” the Imp declared helpfully. “Time is ticking.”

With glee, he aimed the wand at Ella. With a masterful flourish, he produced a stream of light that enveloped Ella, glowing bright white before fading away into the night. Where home sewn and ripped fabric had once sat oddly on Ella’s tall form, there was now gleaming silk beautifully patterned in creams, pale blues and whites.

Ella clasped her hands to her mouth. Tears filled her eyes as she twirled around, taking in the beauty of the Imp’s creation. The bodice was layers of embroidered lace, tulle and silk ribbons where Drizella’s old lace shawl had been and the full skirt was properly supported by what looked like a proper crinoline frame, similar to the ones her stepsisters had worn underneath their gowns.

“Let’s see the shoes,” Lacey requested, unable to help the smile on her face. The Imp looked askance at her but she ignored him. She was allowed to be pleasant. Just not to him.

Ella pulled up her hem carefully, trying to glance down at her shoes and failing miserably. Lacey however murmured appreciatively as the light caught silver, moving closer to get a better look at them. “Wait, they look like glass,” she exclaimed when she bent down before Ella. She turned to the Imp, incredulous. “Are those glass slippers?”
The Imp shrugged innocently, black teeth exposed as his lips pulled back into a roguish smile. “Needed something memorable,” he remarked boldly. “Also, a reminder to tread carefully.”

“Thank you,” Ella breathed, moving past where Lacey stood to stand before her supposed fairy godmother. She seemed unconcerned that she was walking on extremely breakable and impracticable footwear. “You don’t know what this means to me.”

“I don’t,” he agreed, dwarfed by Ella’s tall frame. Lacey enjoyed the height difference immensely, having not realized how truly short the Imp was. Her grin faded however when he smiled back at her. “Now, let’s see what we can do about a suitable entourage for a lady, hmm?”

Minutes later, a pumpkin had been transformed into a coach, field mice had become a regal but jittery team of horses, a goose stood awkwardly as a coachman on the back of the golden carriage and a lizard was now a green livery driver, tongue darting out occasionally as insects buzzed by. Ella watched all of this in utter delight, while Lacey stood behind her, eyes rolling at the Imp’s ridiculousness. He had a maniacal grin on his sharp features, the use of magic obviously exhilarating to not only Ella but to him as well. It might have been a mistake to give him the wand, but Lacey regretted the thought as Ella bounced towards the carriage, hope and happy disbelief shining from her upturned face.

“No!” the Imp declared, turning to them both. “There are some rules.” Ella stilled, nodding solemnly as she stood beside her pumpkin carriage. “Number one,” the Imp declared. “The spells are just for the night. At midnight, the spell will unravel.”

Unsure if her increasing desire to do bodily harm to people was because she was tired, sore and mentally drained or if it was just her luck to continue running into terrible people, Lacey buried her fists into her skirts. The Imp clearly enjoyed taking advantage of that particular loophole in their deal.

“Number two,” he continued dramatically. “You’ll have to be standing in the drive just as the two moons meet in the sky for the spell to take effect.” Ella nodded, glancing up at the waning and waxing orbs, barely touching as they crossed paths in the sky.

Lacey was too busy staring up at them, still unused to the idea of two moons when a rush of magic swirled around her, tugging insistently. “Hey!” she yelped, twisting and turning as things were pulled, plucked, and pinched.

“Number three is more of a gift than a guideline,” the Imp finished mischievously. “Your friend here will accompany you. After all, how better to learn to be a lady than to accompany a princess?”

“Belle,” Ella exclaimed. “You’re a-?”

“Now, wait just a minute,” Lacey began furiously, fully prepared to demand he send her back to the Dark Castle for some well needed rest and relaxation. She had gotten his vile little Blind Witch hair, helped distract the Fairy Godmother and she hated to admit it, but she wanted to be back in the relative safety of the castle. Deals be damned.

Just before she could incriminate herself in front of Ella, Lacey caught herself. If the children’s reaction when they had learned she worked for Lešak was any indication, she could not afford to alert Ella to the truth of her fairy godmother’s identity. Ella deserved this chance, no matter if it was given to her by a homicidal lunatic or by a fairy. If she suspected his true nature, she’d refuse his gifts.

Ella gaped in shock, as the Imp wiggled his brows in silent invitation for Lacey to continue her
protests. He had just condemned her to three more days as a maid in this crazy house as well as committing her to all nights of the ball. Lacey wanted to rip his horrid little head clean off his shoulders. All hopes of hot tea and warm baths were gone.

Gritting her teeth into a smile, Lacey nodded. Something hard pinched against her temples, a familiar set of grooves and jewels. That was impossible. She had lost the only tiara she had ever known at sea. Forgetting all about her hair, Lacey plucked it off her head.

It was, in fact, Emma’s tiara. The gems and delicate filigrees winked up at her. There was a catch in her throat. Lacey swallowed hard as she gently placed it back in her hair as she willed herself not to cry. Ella still seemed at a loss, while the Imp looked off into the night as if he was terribly bored.

Lacey had no idea what his ploy was but he wanted her out of the way for a bit longer it seemed. The return of Emma’s tiara, unnecessarily thoughtful, almost, almost made her break her vow to never say thank you to the madman that had jailed her for nearly two months. Mercifully, Ella’s ball was waiting so Lacey said nothing at all and joined her at their carriage. “Let’s get going,” she told Ella, seating herself in the carriage.

The goose squawked at her unladylike behavior while Ella lingered outside to thank the Imp once more. “What about my family?” Ella asked. “They’ll be at the castle tonight.”

“It’s taken care of,” the Imp assured her. “If they happen to see you at all, they’ll simply see a princess and a lady enjoying the ball.”

“All right,” Ella murmured. “I suppose…”

“Go on, dearie.” He hurried her back towards the carriage. “Tick Tock! Remember, when the clock strikes midnight, everything will go back to being as it was!”

With the aid of the goose coachman, Ella settled in beside Lacey and the coach jolted off towards the palace. The forests rolled by as they left Ella’s lands. The Imp’s magic had closed the scratches on Lacey’s arms, her fingers no longer smelled of polish or lye and even Ella’s usual soot stained hair had been powdered and cleansed. Lacey hated to admit it, but the Imp had been thorough in his dealings.

The horses’ clipping and clopping and snorts, and the sound of the wheels on the ground were the only noise in the carriage for a while but Ella’s eyes were on her. “Go ahead,” Lacey finally sighed. “Get it out.”

Lacey excepted a million questions, but Ella as usual surprised her. “You look beautiful,” Ella told her, smiling broadly. Lacey personally thought her hunter green off-the-shoulder gown plain, plus the tulle around the sleeves was vastly distracting. “I feel rather stupid. I should have known you were royalty. No farm girl doesn’t know how to polish silverware.”

Shrugging, Lacey gave herself over to once again being Princess Belle. She had enjoyed being just regular Belle but apparently the Imp had other plans. Lacey just wished she knew what they were. He had been as surprised to see her as she was to see him which did not bode well for her safety in general.

“It’s a long story,” Lacey sighed, fingers absentely reaching up to touch Emma’s tiara once more, feeling comforted by it. Ella thankfully dropped the subject. Still, from time to time, Lacey caught her staring at her from the corner of her eye.
In what felt like no time at all, they felt the carriage begin to slow. Ella poked her head out of the window of the carriage, risking her perfectly coiffed hair, but when she ducked back inside, not a dark hair was out of place. Her brown eyes sparkled as her cheeks flushed charmingly, brows lifting as her eyes widened in anticipation. “We’re here!” she whispered, excitement and nervousness at war on her face.

Lacey sighed, sitting back and watching as they passed through the castle gates, lanterns starting to slowly roll by as they neared the castle’ entrance. She wondered briefly how Ariel was faring, and then the carriage door burst open and the sounds of a ball filled the carriage. Ella held out her hand to the liveryman, allowing him to gracefully pull her from the carriage. She did not look back, and as Lacey joined her at the foot of the stairs, she wondered if Ella realized how much of a lady she truly was.

Standing tall, her shoulders gleaming in the candlelight, Ella looked every inch a princess. Lacey felt short and rather awkward beside the dark beauty. She tilted her head up as they began the climb up the stairs of the castle.

Another night without sleep, Lacey thought miserably to herself as the fanfare announced them.

She barely managed to stifle her yawn as they disappeared into the castle proper.

Chapter End Notes

And we're off! Back to a ball, because this is Fae and what fun would it be without a ball? Also, I'm guilty of loving ball scenes. No new characters this week but next week, we'll meet a kindred spirit at the ball.

Hope you all are enjoying Ella's story, I've rather enjoyed fleshing out the Cinderella tale and I hope it shows. Plus, Imp as Fairy Godmother scene is one of my favorite canon moments and I couldn't pass it up here. We haven't seen him in a bit but now everyone knows where he is and what he's up to, and keeping Lacey with Ella is all part of his plan. (The new improved plan, the one had had to improvise when he learned she was with Ella instead of in the Infinite Forest where he left her.)

Inspiration Board for this Chapter:
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Once again and always, thanks to Ramloth for being my Beta Fairy God Mother.

This chapter is also lovingly dedicated to the Gate's biggest fan- Prissy- who started a new job yesterday and I'm very proud of her.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The castle was expansive, nearly spanning the entire landscape of the grounds. It nested perfectly against the mountains looming in the distance. Gazing up at it from the drive, the two women took in all in silently. The projecting wings on either side of the entrance tower were nearly double the size of the main wing itself. The castle had steeply pitched roofs, tall turrets and sculptural ornamentation gaudily perched on every available space of the castle. Everywhere they looked there was an added rose, gargoyle or statue and in the distance, a staircase with a winding balustrade wound around the outside of the east wing. It was a masterpiece of style and size.

Unlike the castle in the Seventh Kingdom, there was no grand staircase at the front to greet them, only a simple arched doorway which led into a marbled entrance hall. Ella reached out to trace her hand across the cool stone, as if making sure it was real.

No one was waiting there to greet them. Ella looked uneasy at the silence of the grand hall. “It’s fine. We’re just late,” Lacey assured her. There were soaring limestone arches in every direction which caused Lacey to pause, uncertain which way to go. From all sides, there was distant music and laughter, the gentle rise and fall of conversation and the rich smells of food and drink.

Ahead of them, the reception hall stretched further but it was empty other than one or two guards standing stoically along the walls. Lacey turned towards a blast of warm air, moving forward confidently as could muster towards the closest arch. Ella carefully followed behind her. The measured click clack of the glass slippers reminded Lacey to walk slowly.

Ella shot her a grateful look as she joined her. Moving together, they entered an indoor garden. With a murmur of wonder, Ella brushed past Lacey who stood perplexed looking around the giant garden. A glass roof illuminated with the twin moons and the night stars glowed down onto a center fountain, bubbling gently in the silence of the room. From the other side of the room, more open arches lining the entire greenhouse, they could hear the now louder sounds of a ball coming from just behind.

Ella, enraptured, knelt beside a large flowering bush, inhaling deeply as she disappeared among the petals and fronds. Lacey kept her distance, gazing around at the peaceful wonderland with a puzzled look on her face. Ella moved from plant to plant, enchanted by the blossoms and buds so out of season. “Oh!” Ella gasped and she reeled back from the plant she had been in the process of examining. A second later, a tousled head appeared from the bushes, blinking owlishly at them. Eyes wide, Ella hurried back to Lacey’s side, slipping her gloved hand in hers. “So sorry,” Ella mumbled apologetically.

“I should say so!” the figure quipped before disappearing back into the dark recess. A high-pitched giggle issued from the bushes and Lacey burst into laughter, tugging Ella after her as they headed
out towards the music.

“They were-!” Ella murmured, scandalized. “In the middle of a ball!”

“It’s called a rendezvous,” Lacey teased Ella. “Surely, a country girl like you knows all about the birds and the bees.”

“There was nothing bird or bee like about their behavior,” Ella replied, turning back to look over her shoulder. “And in public!”

“Welcome to a royal ball,” Lacey laughed. “I highly recommend it, if you have a chance.” Lacey advised, grinning as Ella stumbled to a stop beside her. “Great for the heart.”

“Belle!” Ella said in amazement, before clapping her hands to her mouth. “Oh, I’m sorry, I keep forgetting. Your Royal Highness, I meant no disrespect. I was just-!”

“Belle is fine, Ella,” Lacey sighed, surveying the hallway they had entered. “As a lady, you needn’t use my title, especially when we’re alone.”

Entering into what appeared to be the grand hall, Lacey took in the towering barrel vaulted ceiling overhead before her eyes moved to the triple fireplace that spanned their end of the hall. Between the glittering masses, they could see a hint of a pipe organ, surrounded by the rest of the orchestra.

The entire room was lit by hanging circled candelabra, with taxidermic deer and bear heads blankly staring down at them from overhead. The darkened windows let in some ambient starlight but the hall was lit mainly by the candles burning along the walls intermixed with tapestries. A group of dancers moved in unison on the floor, switching partners and forming lines, circles and reels as they danced a set. Watching the intricate motions, Lacey made a mental note not to accept a dance from anyone. Hopefully her so called home sweet home back in the Fourth Kingdom didn’t have synchronized dancing.

Ella swayed to the music, her eyes closing blissfully as the crescendo rose higher and higher, the dancers spinning faster and faster. Caught up in the moment, Ella stepped out from the archway they stood under, and twirled back to Lacey with a beatific smile. In a perfectly timed moment, the music faded to a stop and just as all the dancers and revelers paused to applaud, Ella proclaimed in wonder, “It’s just like a dream!”

Everyone turned from the maestro and his musicians. Ella, stunned, slowly turned back to face the masses that had accumulated in the room. Lacey took a quick half step to the side where the shadows were thickest in the archway. She winced, silently urging Ella to retreat.

Yet, Ella did not retreat or blush or fidget under the eyes of half the court and royal families of the realm. Instead, she curtseyed perfectly, allowing a moment of rest before straightening. The maestro nodded at her in approval. He lifted his baton to start the music once again, when the crowd began to part.

The music once again delayed, the maestro seemed peeved for a moment before he stilled, turning his attention from the crowd back to Ella. Lacey, confused, moved slightly to the right. A young man was the one responsible for the crowd’s silence. It wasn’t terribly hard to make him out since he towered over most of the crowd. His skin was the color of sand, which was perfectly highlighted by his ebony black tailcoat. His dark hair gleamed blue in the candle light with a crown on his head.

Arriving before Ella, he sank into a practiced bow. Lacey could not hear the words that passed
between them. Yet, when the prince rose, there was a bewildered smile on his face.

He held himself like an officer, confirmed by the militaristic three rows of golden buttons that went down his chest, one straight down the middle and the other two angled to fall in a graceful arc across his chest. His movements were rigid and formal but his hooded eyes were bright and warm as he smiled in a modest self-aware fashion. He held out a gloved hand, and waited as Ella regarded him with equal trepidation and fascination.

The rest of the room grew louder with whispers and buzzing as the crowd began to discuss this unexpected development. As for Lacey, she was growing fidgety in her little corner. She silently implored Ella to take the prince’s hands, wanting the crowd’s attention to return to the dance so she might slip in unseen.

As if she had heard this plea, Ella turned to find Lacey in the shadows, uncertainty painted all over her face. Lacey made a shooing motion, indicating the still-waiting and growingly confused prince before making another impatient motion with her hands. Ella nodded quickly, turning back to take the offered hand, and let the relieved prince draw her onto the dance floor. A few people, still standing awkwardly in their way, moved aside as the maestro hurriedly struck the band back up.

Ella, as if in a daze, held up her arms to be swept into the music. The prince led masterfully, his eyes resting lightly upon Ella’s upturned face. He was just barely as tall as Ella. It had been an unexpected thoughtfulness of the Imp putting her in slippers. If she had worn heels, she would have cleared the prince’s head.

Watching the two sweep around the floor, the other dancers slowly melted off until the entire assembly stood by and watched the crown prince twirl and sweep the newcomer in elegant arcs. His arms framed her majestically as Ella matched his every step, easily following his unspoken direction changes. In his dark jacket and spotless white trousers, the Prince was a study in stark elegance. Ella, in her patterned silk of blues and her tawny skin glistening in the candlelight, glowed as if one of the moons had joined them in the ballroom.

A few people arrived behind Lacey in the doorway, chattering about all the divine food before falling silent in awe at the unexpected scene that was unfolding. “Who is that?” one whispered to her friends, peering over Lacey’s shoulder. “With the prince?”

“No idea!” her companion squeaked, bending down to see if she could see better through the crowds that way. “I’ve never seen her before!”

At the mention of food, Lacey realized she was more hungry than curious, and moved quietly behind them, leaving Ella to her prince. From the looks of the other men in the ballroom, all ignoring their previous partners some of whom were now sulking in the corners, it appeared Ella would have no want of dances tonight.

Following the general line of guards, Lacey arrived in a salon where food was laid out on table after table. Wine was being poured as servants moved around the room, and Lacey quickly found a goblet. Her cup runneth over quickly, and after she had sampled the boar, duck and various roasts, she emerged back into the hallway for some fresh air.

People hurried past her, all discussing the mysterious newcomer that was monopolizing the prince’s dance card. Lacey smiled as she brushed past them, enjoying the time to herself as she sampled the castle’s best wines. As tired as she was, the allure and majesty of the halls were too interesting to ignore. Planning to explore until she found a suitable place of respite, she found herself entering a gallery full of portraits of long dead kings and queens. This room was mostly empty of people, mostly older nobles dozing in the armchairs throughout the hall. Perfectly
suitable for her own needs at the moment.

As she moved down the hall, looking for an unoccupied area, Lacey noticed a peculiarity. At the far end of the gallery under a portrait of a rather fat king whose mouth was twisted in a smile or perhaps in the middle of a bite of the turkey leg he held up, a young woman stood by herself. She was dressed in pink frills that completely washed out her pale, pearly skin. With dark hair curled into an infinite braided bun and ribbons dangling down her back, she looked like an oversized cat toy.

Feeling someone's eyes on her, the woman turned to meet Lacey’s gaze and smiled self-consciously. Lacey smiled back, but before she could look away, the pink and white girl glanced at the tapestry before her and rolled her eyes. Lacey, amused and encouraged by the small gesture, moved to join her before the fat king's painting.

“He certainly didn’t shy away from his hobbies,” the woman said in lieu of a greeting, turning back to the boar king. “Died on a hunt, so they say. However, the amount of wine missing from his personal store may have been a factor in that.”

At the painted king’s feet, there were numerous skins of animals, each one looking up at him as if in reproach for their death. Behind him, a large table was covered in bottles of wine, some empty ones littering the floor. “Perhaps that’s how he wanted to go,” Lacey suggested. “Drunken and disorderly.”

“Or perhaps in the arms of his mistress,” the woman added, indicating a jeweled necklace that draped out of the king’s pocket. “I hear that’s the more pleasant way to go.”

Without comment, they moved to the next painting where a young boy peered mischievously from behind his mother and father. “A legitimized bastard son,” Lacey’s new companion shared conspiratorially. “Queen Anne preferred fairer company than her husband.”

They continued moving from painting to painting, discussing royalty long dead and the secrets that they failed to take to their grave. Enjoying herself tremendously, Lacey lost track of the time as the occasional servant found them, filling up her wine before disappearing. Her new companion did not drink, nor did any servant offer her wine. The pink-clad lady kept her eyes for the most part on the paintings or the intricacies of the hall, pointing out things here and there to Lacey.

After a spell, they arrived in front of the newest addition to the hall, an oil painting of the crown prince, looking majestically off into the distance. Lacey admired the likeness. The painter had captured his angular face and the hooded eyes masterfully, but it was the smile that lingered at the edge of his eyes that caught Lacey’s attention.

“Our good Prince Thomas,” the woman said fondly. “He hates portraits. Took them months to finish, he kept disappearing off to the grounds when he was supposed to be standing for the artist.”

Nearby, a grandfather clock rang out and her companion stilled as she counted the chimes. Lacey noted the eleven chimes, deciding she had time yet to stay and talk. Unfortunately, her companion seemed to have other ideas. “Well, that completes our tour, your Royal Highness,” the other woman said respectfully, sinking into a half-curtsy. “It has been a pleasure to talk with you.”

“No need for all that,” Lacey grumbled, looking around in case someone had overheard. “You can just call me Belle.” The woman smiled and curtsied again, eyes lingering on the clock. “You know, an awful lot about this family,” Lacey commented, not quite ready to let her slip away and leave her on her own. “How is that?”
The woman assumed an enviable poker face as she stared serenely back at her. “Everyone knows everything about everyone in these parts,” she replied matter-of-factly. “Yet, I forget, you’re not from around here.”

“Is it that obvious?” The wine was warming Lacey pleasantly. Her lips were loosened, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks rosy and flushed.

The other woman smiled. “You’re wearing a tiara. The artisan quality of which practically announces your station, birth rank and wealth, your Royal Highness,” her shrewd new friend pointed out. “The real question is why a visiting eligible royal would be touring the tapestry hall instead of seeking out the prince for a dance?”

Lacey laughed, looping her arm through the other women’s and pulling her back down the other length of the hall. “Perhaps I enjoy fairer company as well,” she said with a wink. The woman looked as if she would protest for a moment, but then relaxed into Lacey, obviously used to these kinds of royal whims. “So, what about you, Lady...?” Lacey asked, using her new found advantage to keep the conversation going.

“Marian Richards,” she replied as Lacey continued to pull back to the far end of the hall, far away from princes and dances. “No title.”

“I don’t mean any offense,” Lacey said, “but I thought only eligible women of the land were invited?”

Not that it mattered. She and Ella had crashed the party. Apparently, just like back home, as long as one wore the right outfit, said the right things, and looked up for a good time, a girl could get into anywhere. Despite the courtly balls and magical mayhem, things didn’t seem all that different in this world sometimes.

Marian nodded, stopping before one of the older tapestries, depicting the castle’s facade masterfully. “As well as personal friends of the prince,” Marian clarified, tugging at one of her pink frills with a look of distaste on her face. “My father was gamekeeper for the estate. Thomas and I grew up together and he insisted I attend.” Marian’s tone dared Lacey to comment on her use of the prince’s given name.

“Life long friends?” Lacey asked, her subtext evident without further commentary. Lacey was familiar with male-female friendships. In her experiences, unless there was another party involved such as mutually beloved significant other, they were rarely simply platonic. Marian, while wearing an unfortunate frock, was attractive in a robust way. Her curves filled out her dress nicely and her full pink cheeks and cupid-bowed lips fit her face perfectly. She looked very much like a cherub from the old church scenes, the ever present glimmer of mischief in her eye only heightening the likeness.

Marian nodded, tilting her chin coyly. “We thought we were twins until we turned seven. Then, he was ushered into the palace to learn to be a prince, and I...” Marian smiled, remembering something from long ago. “I was honored to be named a handmaiden to the queen. A very high title for a mere gamekeeper’s daughter.” Lacey made a noise of interest, lingering in front of the prince’s portrait. “It lasted all of a week,” Marian recalled with a laugh. “Thomas kept finding me and ordering me to come outside to play. I’ll never forget the time his mother found us half drowned in the river, pretending to be river spirits. She sent me to my father and told him I would never be a proper lady. The King, however, told my father that with some training, I could perhaps in time make a loyal castellan.”

Lacey, not understanding the word but recognizing it as important, nodded knowingly and
attempted to change the subject. “Why then are you lurking in here instead of spending the evening protecting your dear friend from all the hopeful brides and their mothers?”

Marian flushed, her pale skin betraying her with bright pink staining her ears all the way to her bosom. Lacey thoroughly enjoying the spectacle, pulled her into a nearby doorway which turned out to be a library. Lacey knew that look on a woman’s face. She had seen it often enough in coworkers, classmates and once before on a little mermaid. “Spill,” she demanded.

“Your Royal Highness,” Marian protested.

Placing her now empty goblet on a nearby table, Lacey lowered herself into an arm chair, tugging Marian into the neighboring one. The library smelled of old paper and leather, a fire crackling peacefully. No one lingered in the room; it was a haven for secrets and respite from the gaiety in the halls outside.

“At a ball for your best friend, you’re lingering in the tapestry hall and talking to a complete stranger,” Lacey pointed out. “You’re either jealous and heartbroken, unable to see your best friend find his wife or, and I expect the real reason, you’re waiting for someone.”

Marian’s flush returned, blue eyes fluttering as she opened her mouth to deny it. Lacey settled back into the chair’s cushions, a knowing smile on her lips. Finally, Marian huffed and shot her a displeased look across the space between them. “I chose poorly in a form of distraction,” Marian complained, although the compliment was evident. “Most princesses are remarkably more self-centered, your Royal Highness.”

Lacey laughed. “Believe me,” she said earnestly. “I’m one of the most selfish people you’ll meet. The thing is I don’t pretend otherwise.”

“Apologies, your Royal Highness,” Marian replied, settling back into her own chair. “I don’t believe that for a moment.”

“Oh?” Lacey asked, growing comfortable in the plush armchair.

Marian nodded, eyes still alert on Lacey’s face. “You’re tucked away in a library with a non-titled lady of no fortune, discussing my secrets and refraining from snagging a prince out from every single noble woman of this land. If the King knew a princess was here, he would not hesitate for an instant to ink a betrothal.”

“So, why didn’t he just do that?” Lacey murmured, waving a hand. “Just marry his son off to the highest bidder?”

Marian snorted. “After all the wars these past years? Not likely any princess in any realm would risk her pretty head.”

“Wars?” Lacey asked, straightening. “What wars?”

A clock chimed nearby, eleven dings again followed by two short clangs. Marian glanced at it and sighed. “I’m sorry, Belle,” she apologized, taking her hand in hers. “I have to go. It’s almost midnight.”

Lacey jumped to her feet. “What?”

Marian blinked up at her. “In twenty minutes, it’ll be midnight,” Marian repeated. “I have to go.”
“I’ve got to go,” Lacey declared breathlessly. Ignoring Marian’s questions of concern, she headed towards the door back to the gallery hall.

“Belle, wait!” Marian exclaimed, catching her arm. Lacey groaned, stamping her foot impatiently as her eye found the clock over the mantle. “What’s going on?”

“I can’t explain,” Lacey said lamely. “I need to find the lady I came with before midnight and I can’t tell you why.”

Marian stared at her for a moment, pink glove clutching the bare skin of Lacey’s upper arm before she stepped back and nodded. “Where did you last see her?” she asked.

“The dancing hall,” Lacey told her. “She was dancing with the prince.”

“Follow me,” Marian ordered, disappearing further down into the library. Lacey protested, standing uncertainly in the doorway as Marian moved further and further in the opposite direction of the hall. Torn between trusting the woman and the certainty Marian was going the wrong way, Lacey threw her head back in a groan before setting out to follow her.

Marian bent before the mantle, scowling as she pressed here and there.

“Uh...Marian?”

The mantle swung open and revealed a hidden passage, heading in the direction of the banquet hall. Marian straightened with a triumphant grin. "Knew that switch was there somewhere."

Staring down the dark but probably very quick route, Lacey let out a small sound of relief. “Marian, title or not, I could kiss you.”

Marian raised her brows for a moment. “Well, that’s certainly a new proposition,” she remarked. “Now, hurry. I can take you halfway but then I have to leave.”

“After you,” Lacey indicated. Marian grabbed a torch from the library’s halls before disappearing down the dark tunnel, Lacey following quickly behind her. The dark and narrow passageway, only illuminated by the small torch Marian held out in front of her was cramped and smelled of mildew. All they could hear was their breathing and the sound of their own hurried footsteps echoing around them in their ears.

Marian came to a halt by a small door. “This is me,” she whispered, handing over the torch. She opened the door and cold wind from outside whipped into the passage, the torch glowing bright as oxygen fed the small flame. Lacey moved beyond the reach of the wind, as Marian bent down to exit. “Keep going straight,” she advised. “You’ll find a door, it leads right into the banquet hall in the far corner behind the orchestra. There’s a place for the torch on the far wall when you exit, no one should see you if you’re discreet.”

“Thank you,” Lacey whispered. “Will you be here tomorrow?”

“As long as I don’t get caught tonight,” Marian said with a grin before the door closed shut behind her. Despite her curiosity about Marian’s destination, Lacey hurried on, lest Ella turn back into a servant girl covered in soot in the arms of a prince. She would have to ask Ella about the wars, wondering how much the other woman knew about them or if she knew at all. The lands hadn’t looked ravaged by war and famine but perhaps in this world wars were fought differently. It did explain why a group of good men were hiding in the forest, although it didn’t do much to explain why the castle was hosting such a grand event for its own nobles.
Lacey reached the hidden door within minutes, opening it easily and finding herself behind the pipe organ. There was just enough room for a small person to slip comfortably out, tuck the torch in a small empty holder and slip around the organ, looking as though they were just examining the great thing.

In all the commotion of the late hour, no one noticed her, not even the tired musicians. Dusting her hands off, the imaginary feel of spiderwebs in her mind, Lacey glanced through the crowd and easily was able to see the tall, grand couple in the center of the dance floor, lost in each other’s eyes.

“Good god,” Lacey grumbled, moving to the edge of the floor. “Not another love story.”

As she moved forward, a young buck with a gray uniform materialized before her, bowing low as he offered her his hand. “May I have this dance?” he inquired formally, staring down at her shoes as he awaited an answer.

The band had just started another set, a few couples still joining the others as the dance began. Lacey had no other way to get closer to Ella without drawing suspicion so Lacey grabbed his arm and hauled him behind her.

“Your Royal Highness,” he gasped, nearly tripping over his own feet as he hurried to keep up.

Lacey ignored him, arriving as close as possible to Ella and the Prince as the music swelled to a start. Only when the couple next to them turned to exchange hands, did Lacey remember she had no idea how to dance.

“Your Royal Highness,” her partner whispered, nodding his head in the general direction of the other man now opposite her. Lacey glared back at him, eyes wide and shoulders hunched forward in the universal ‘What?’ sign.

Thankfully universal also extended to this realm. Eyes widening, the other man caught the eye of her dance partner who mercifully was also quick on the draw. Within a second, the other man took Lacey’s hand to mirror his in an upright position, forearms touching. He began to gently spin them into a small circle. Feeling ten times a fool as she awkwardly bobbed up and down, Lacey tried to catch Ella’s eye. However, Ella’s eyes were locked on the prince, a secret smile on both their lips as their disappointed and disgruntled current dance partners resigned themselves to being props.

“Ella!” Lacey hissed, ignoring the traumatized young man that collected her back from the other dancer. He glanced over at the prince and the stranger that had so besotted him, quickly realizing Lacey’s ulterior motives in accepting this dance. Not one to shrink from royal duty, the young man took in a deep breath. “Hold on,” he whispered to her and Lacey glanced back at him, just as the music soared, the bass coming in to join the winds, taking the dance from sensual to exuberant. Before she could catch her balance, her dance partner whirled her out of their set, bumping them ungracefully straight in the crown prince and his dance partner.

The crown prince managed to catch Ella before she fell, but Lacey’s partner, beet red with humiliation, was unable to catch Lacey as he tried to bow and apologize profusely to the crown prince. “My apologies, your Royal Highness,” he mumbled feverishly. “New shoes. Very slippery.”

Lacey had fallen on her ass. Trying to get back to her feet in a hooped skirt proved to be near impossible. “Belle!” Ella cried, lurching forward to help her up. Prince Thomas looked down, seeing her for the first time and beat Ella to the punch, swooping down and righting Lacey.
Lacey’s poor unlikely hero of a dance partner was trembling, armed guards starting to edge in on the dance floor. Lacey grabbed Ella, whispering, “It’s nearly midnight!”

The reaction was instantaneous. Ella gave a small cry, and flew around to gather the prince’s hands in her. “This has been lovely,” she told him, squeezing his hands in hers. “You’ve been lovely, but I-!”

“Ella!” Lacey growled, trying to see the clock over the masses of people. “Tick tock!”

Ella moaned, shook her head and dropped the prince’s hands. “Tomorrow,” she promised as she backed away towards Lacey.

“Your Royal Highness!” Lacey’s partner squeaked, before he was cut off by the prince who strode before him after Ella.

“Ella,” Thomas called, his voice deep and baffled. “Wait!”

“I’m sorry!” Ella called back to him as Lacey shot through a nearby gap, effectively cutting the prince off as the new set started. He called them back, but the guards were still too focused on the man who had run into the prince to notice the two women running out of the ballroom.

“Too close!” Lacey complained. Beside her, long legs keeping pace easily, Ella made an inarticulate sound of apology, hopping as she pulled one glass slipper off her foot and then the other. Barefoot, Ella soon overtook Lacey, bursting outside to find their pumpkin coach waiting at the foot of the stairs. Their goose coachman squawked in outrage as the lizard driver twisted round in his seat, eyes wide. Behind them, there was a giant clang as every clock in the castle struck the first chime of midnight.

“Go, go!” Lacey yelled, swinging her hands at them as Ella hit the carriage door. The horses that had once been mice reared and then took off, Lacey barely catching the open door and swinging herself in behind Ella. Her hoop skirt caught on the edges of the door, but Ella grabbed her and hauled her on top of her, both breathless as the door flapped behind them.

Well aware of their time limit, their magical team crashed through the lawns. Some footmen yelled, the guards at the gate were nearly run over as they came out of their stupor to see what the clatter was all about. Lacey, struggling to her elbows, managed to roll off Ella as the woods rushed past them in a blur.

Bouncing wildly about the carriage, Ella clutched her glass slippers for dear life as the team of horses raced through the night. With no clock to tell the time, Lacey tried to count, barely getting to nine before the carriage abruptly stopped, the whinny of horses turning into squeaks. “Out!” Lacey ordered, grabbing Ella’s hand and pulling her out of the carriage through the rapidly shrinking door.

In a moment, Ella lay on top of her in the dirt, her sooty dress staining the dress Lacey had borrowed from her. They blinked at each other, the sound of an outraged goose honking at them from feet away. Rolling off her, Ella looked out over the hills where a bunch of mice were eating away at a pumpkin, a lizard frozen by their feet, tongue lashing out at them before disappearing into the darkness. A goose flapped his wings as if personally affronted by the entire business.

Within moments, Ella and Lacey burst into laughter. They clutched their stomachs as they lay back in the dirt, occasionally catching each other’s eyes and laughing harder. Finally, after they were both shaking, their stomachs cramping, they made it to their feet. “Well,” Lacey sighed, brushing her hands off. “I guess we get to walk back.” She did not relish the idea, knowing dawn was only
hours away with plenty to do before the stepmonsters arrived back at the manor.

“Sorry, Belle,” Ella sighed, linking her arm through hers as she led them back to the main path. “We’re about a mile from the manor.”

“Hey,” Lacey said, stopping. “Your shoes.”

Ella looked down to find her sooty shoes back on her feet. Lacey shook her head, pointing back to where they had fallen. Almost forgotten were the glass slippers, shining in the moonlight. Ella retrieved them, tucking them into her apron pocket. “How odd,” Ella mused. “I thought everything would have disappeared.” Her eyes glanced up to Lacey’s hair and she pointed. “You still have your tiara. Maybe it’s something to do with the magic?”

Lacey lifted her hand to her head, and sure enough, Emma’s tiara was still tangled in her hair. She took it down, placing it in her own large pocket for safekeeping. “Yeah,” Lacey echoed, brow furrowed. “Maybe.”

She would have to talk to the Imp on the morrow. Something was going on here, and she intended to find out what. But first…

Lacey yawned as Ella returned back to her. First, she was going to find somewhere to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

And First Night is down!

I hope you all enjoyed Marian- I thought her and Lacey would get along splendidly and sure enough they did. Her backstory is a bit different than canon/Ouat/Disney but I hope you'll forgive me.

Mood Board: http://theplasticview.tumblr.com/post/136689301487/the-gate-chapter-24-mood-board

I want to address a few concerns about readers missing The Imp. I know this is a particularly odd story when it comes to Rumbelle as Lacey is/is not Belle and doesn't spend a whole lot of time with "Rumple". I promise. I promise. I promise that this story is endgame for these two- but it's an epic journey through Fae and Lacey has been growing past the woman she was when she came over to Fae and I think it vitally important that she does so on her own terms. I can let you know that I think everyone will particularly enjoy an upcoming chapter as it will drop a particularly fun bombshell that I've been working towards all this time. But I hope in the interim, you enjoy Ella/Marian/Robin.

I wanted to thank you all for sticking through 24 (!!!) chapters of my little story thus far.

<3
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Love as always to Ramloth, for her beta ninja skills.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Collapsing on a stool, Lacey blinked at the mound of laundry still left and tried to decide if God was punishing her. Nearby, Ella was humming to herself. She picked up a long sleeved nightgown, and without warning, began to waltz around in small circles with it. At this sickening display, Lacey sank over onto the table before her, buried her face in her arms and groaned.

Four hours. Four measly hours of sleep in over forty eight hours. Lacey’s entire body was sluggish, her mind barely functional and her mood dismal. And here was Ella, dancing around the room with a piece of laundry.

“I despise you,” Lacey said without lifting her head. “Stop being perky.”

The humming paused as a guilty giggle came from the usually mature Ella. “Sorry, Belle,” Ella murmured, sounding appropriately guilty. “Why don’t you go lay back down for a bit? I can finish the rest.”

Lacey sighed, pushing herself back up to stare at the large mounds of laundry surrounding them. Chemises, slips, ball gowns, day dresses, cloaks, stockings and God knew what else were strewn around the room, organized into piles depending on how to best wash them. Upstairs, the step-monsters were fast asleep, not having arrived home until sunrise. They had stumbled into the house, yawning and calling for the maids to help them undress for bed.

Ella had to shake Lacey for almost a minute before she had consented to getting up this morning. Half asleep, Lacey had managed to help undo the stays and loops of the corsets and hoops of the stepsisters, thankfully having learned earlier when Ella helped Lacey undo her own when they had gotten home from from the ball. It hadn’t taken long, but there was no time to go back to bed. There was too much to be done before the ladies woke up, demanding food and attention and providing even more chores.

“No,” Lacey decided, pushing herself back on her feet. “Let’s get it done. Maybe I’ll get to sleep when I’m dead.”

Ella didn’t reply to this dramatic statement, but aimed a balled up shirt that hit Lacey square in the face, causing them both to burst into laughter.

“Having fun, are we?” Lady Tremaine stood in the doorway, blocking the afternoon light as she stared down at them from the top of the stairs. She wore a rich brocade dressing gown, hair immaculate. They had not heard her in their moment of light-hearted levity.

“Stepmother,” Ella greeted, giving a small courtesy. “I didn’t know you were awake.”

“Apparently.”

Ella moved towards the doorway. “Can I get you something to eat?”
Lady Tremaine held up her hand, shaking her head as she motioned for Ella to return to the laundry pile. “That won’t be necessary. I simply wanted to tell you dinner will be at five tonight.”

“So early?” Ella asked.

“The girls were quite a sensation at the ball last night,” Lady Tremaine lied smoothly. It was masterfully done. If Lacey hadn’t already known the girls were unattractive in both looks and personality, and that Ella had captivated the prince’s attention all night, she would have almost believed her. “We will be leaving early this evening, to ensure more time socializing.”

Lacey turned to her pile of clothes to hide her expression. More likely, the girls had stood to the sides all night, and hoped to get there earlier in an attempt to have a better opportunity to dance with the prince. Ella continued to speak with her stepmother, finalizing the dinner menu.

“You, there,” Lady Tremaine called out.

Lacey turned to find her peering down at her. “Yes, my lady?” Lacey replied innocently.

“Anastasia informs me that you were quite proficient if somewhat slow with helping her get ready last night. Ella is more than capable of handling the girls. Tonight, you’ll assist me.”

“As you wish, my lady,” Lacey curtsied, waiting until the footsteps receded away before straightening. She rolled her eyes at the lady’s retreating back.

“Belle, I’m so sorry,” Ella whispered as she moved back to the clothes. A tub of warm water stood by, waiting for them to start. “You’re a princess and here we are making you wash clothes!”

“You aren’t making me do anything, Ella,” Lacey assured her. The Imp on the other hand... “I’m more than happy to help you after what you did for us. Hansel and Gretel are safely headed to their father. I have a place to sleep and food to eat.”

“Why not just stay at the palace?” Ella pointed out in a rush. Clearly, she had been thinking about this all morning. “As a princess, you’d be treated as a visiting dignitary.”

“Ella, drop it,” Lacey stressed. “I’m staying here with you, all right?”

Ella nodded morosely. For the rest of the early morning, Ella shot her curious glances. Scrubbing harder, her fingers already prunes, Lacey ignored it. She focused on the one thing that was getting her through this.

She was going to kill the Imp when she got her hands on him.

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With dinner done and the last few rays of daylight disappearing from the sky, Lacey stood at the top of the stairs, staring at the imposing master bedroom. Ella, in her sooty shoes and wrinkled dress, stood beside her, one hand resting encouragingly on Lacey’s shoulder. “Remember,” Ella whispered. “Don’t speak unless spoken to, don’t touch anything and keep your eyes down.”

“Why do I have to-?”

“Just trust me,” Ella replied with a shudder. “I have to go if we’re going to get them out of the house on time.”

Lacey nodded as Ella moved off down the hall. Shooting her one more sympathetic glance, Ella
opened her stepsister’s door to a loud burst of annoyed voices before it clicked shut behind her. 
Downstairs, the grandfather clock in the hall, rang out the time and Lacey knocked, right on cue.

“Enter.”

Turning the knob gently, Lacey entered the master suite. Dark oaks, deep reds and heavy wooden accents made the room feel significantly smaller than Lacey had anticipated. At the far end, Lady Tremaine was sitting in her dressing robe, eyes cutting to Lacey’s in the vanity mirror. “Come here, girl,” she ordered, returning to her own reflection. Lacey made her way through the maze of settees and end tables. Not a single personal item was on display in this room. When Lacey arrived at the vanity, Lady Tremaine wordlessly handed her a brush, and a small ornate box full of pins.

Taking the offered objects, Lacey tucked the pins in her pocket. The Blind Witch’s dreadlock still lay at the bottom of her pocket, as she was unwilling to risk losing it. Her other secrets, Emma’s tiara and Ella’s glass slippers were carefully hidden in a tightly wrapped sack buried in the soot of the fireplace. Lacey took down the elder woman’s ornate braid, combing out the snags gently. She was no stranger to long hair and its twists and tangles.

Enjoying the silence, Lacey had nearly finished when Lady Tremaine spoke. “How do you like it here so far?” she inquired pointedly, shrewd eyes staring back at Lacey in the mirror.

“Quite well, thank you,” Lacey responded neutrally. She moved the brush to her other pocket, starting to gather Lady Tremaine’s hair in sections. She had seen a hairstyle the night before that had appeared easy, mostly fishtail braiding which Lacey had done often when she was younger.

Careful not to tug on the woman’s scalp, Lacey made quick work of the hair, checking for loose strands or uneven lumps before she swept the entire braid into a knot at the base of Lady Tremaine’s skull, pinning it neatly before covering it with what Ella called a snood, but looked more like a cafeteria lady’s hair net.

“Suitable,” Lady Tremaine declared as she admired the handiwork with the use of a hand mirror. Lacey nodded, taking the mirror away as Lady Tremaine stood and moved towards the bed. A huge four poster with heavy velvet curtains, it had a masculine energy, too large for the tall but slight woman of the house. A fat gray cat lay in the shadows there, blank eyes staring at Lacey as she approached.

“Shoo, Lucifer,” Lady Tremaine ordered. The cat stretched out languidly, turning on his heel and disappearing onto the floor as if it was his idea. Before Lacey could watch where he disappeared to, Lady Tremaine had shed her dressing gown and stood stoically before her in nothing but her chemise and calf length drawers underneath.

Locating the corset on the bed, Lacey placed it on Lady Tremaine, careful to bring it down as low as possible before hooking the last hook. Inhaling deeply, Lady Tremaine tugged it down lower as Lacey quickly moved to fasten the front elastics. Within moments, she had managed to expertly pull the strings downwards and began the laborious process of lacing it up.

“Where were you before here?” Lady Tremaine asked her, face turned away from her.

Having prepared this with Ella earlier just in case, Lacey was ready with a reply. “The Strong family in the next land. Master Strong died in the war and his wife moved in with their eldest daughter. I was left to the new owners but when they lost the funding, the house was empty. I had to find a new position and happened to meet one of your family’s merchants. He advised me that your household was inquiring for a new maid.”
“Hmm,” Lady Tremaine replied thoughtfully. Lacey, careful not to jerk her as she finished lacing, tied the excess lace in the back of the corset and twisted them loosely as she tucked them into the corset. She was getting rather good at this. Lacey gathered the under petticoat, plain and stiffened. She drew it over Lady Tremaine, careful not to disturb her hair before tying it neatly around her narrow waist.

Nearby on the floor, lay the hoop skirt and Lady Tremaine moved over to it without prompting. Lacey drew it up, mentally cursing her own hoop skirt, which made the process of putting on someone else’s fairly difficult. With a single drawstring at the back, it was quickly tied before the over petticoat was put on, the embroidered hem stark white. The small clock on the mantle showed it was almost time for the ladies to be leaving. Lacey caught Lady Tremaine glancing at it and hurried to gather the dress laying neatly across the bed.

“Belle,” Lady Tremaine started warmly, causing Lacey to pause. The use of her given name was startling, most likely intended to make her feel comfortable. Instead, it made all of Lacey’s warning bells go off in quick succession. “How would you like a permanent position here?”

‘I’d rather die’ did not seem like a suitable answer so Lacey smiled in polite confusion. “To help Ella?”

“To replace Ella,” Lady Tremaine said neutrally. “You see, I’m afraid my late husband’s income had been rather stretched with three daughters to raise. My two girls are bound to find themselves suitable husbands, if not during the royal ball, shortly after.”

Lacey, gathering the silk gauze dress with its full skirt, barely resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “An offer however was recently made on Ella, my late husband’s daughter,” the older woman informed her, standing perfectly still as Lacey helped dress her in the cream cloth, black and red stripes elongating the already tall woman. Arranging the square neck on the woman’s flat chest and fluffing out the pagoda style sleeves, Lacey remained quiet. From what Ella had told her, she had not given the Prince her name, too wary of the nobility’s taste for gossip.

“Considering her unavoidable flaws,” Lady Tremaine continued, unaware of Lacey’s growing disgust. “I found it odd and possibly even a foolish alliance on the suitor’s part. However, the Sheriff is very interested in attaining a wife of nobility and I found it a perfectly suitable arrangement in that regard.”

Robin had mentioned a sheriff, Lacey dimly recalled. Was it the same one he had warned her about?

“Done, my lady,” Lacey finished, stepping back as she handed over matching shoes. “Will you be needing anything else?”

“An answer,” Lady Tremaine replied smoothly back. “You’ve done admirable work since you’ve arrived. The girls find you adequate for their needs and I find no reason to disagree. You would have the kitchen as your quarters, one quarter of every meal’s remains, meaning food would not come out of your pay, and holidays off depending on our social calendars.”

Lacey bit her cheek at this ‘offer’. She would be a slave, treated possibly worse than Ella for the rest of her life in a house that was selling off the only decent person there to pay the bills. “I’m very grateful,” Lacey managed, using her astonished disbelief to her advantage. “I had another offer from another family, I was writing them to accept but perhaps-?”

“Take the night to think about it then,” Lady Tremaine negotiated masterfully. “We’ll discuss it
further tomorrow.”

Lacey curtsied, turning to go when she heard. “Oh, and Belle?”

“Yes?” Lacey asked, hand on the doorknob, desperate to escape so she could bury her fist into something repeatedly.

“Don’t say anything to Ella,” Lady Tremaine murmured without looking back at her. “I wouldn’t want to get her hopes up in case the Sheriff changes his mind.”

Lacey nodded stiffly before turning the knob and fleeing from the room.

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“Do you think he’ll come back?” Ella asked, breaking the silence as they stood outside under the moonlight. Ella had her glass slippers on, her sooty ones sitting on the stairs for their return. Lacey had her tiara perched in her hair, loose curls sooty from rooting around the fireplace to find these hidden treasures. “Or-?”

As the moons overheard touched, a blinding whiteness made both women raise their arms to cover their eyes, effectively answering the question. When Lacey lowered her arm, Ella wore an even more elaborate short sleeved gown with full skirts. The short sleeves had lace and trimmings that accentuated Ella’s toned arms, while the cream fabric and accentuating light blue stripes brought out the undertones of Ella’s skin. Small floral patterns of different colors and shapes floated down the skirts which Ella held out, her small white kid gloves glowing in the darkness.

“Fancy,” Lacey said approvingly. It was not as eye catching as the dress Ella had worn the night before, this one however was more regal. Lacey’s in comparison was as simple as the one she had worn last night, pale champagne and off the shoulder. The only additional details were small tassels descending from the layered fabric that accentuated her breasts. The Imp’s fashion sense was, while practical, not as aspiring as gowns the Queen had provided for her and Ariel in the Seventh Kingdom’s. “I look like a potato,” Lacey grumbled, plucking at the silk skirt.

“You look lovely,” Ella corrected. “I particularly like your hair.”

Lacey instinctively reached up to touch her hair, finding it had been braided back on the sides and then pinned in two spirals on the base of her neck. Her tiara sat quaintly in the style as if it had been placed there by her own hand. “Least there’s not a snood,” Lacey joked. Ella, touching her own hair curled into rolls and laced with flowers, smiled back at her as the coach rolled to a stop before them.

The angry squawk of their goose-man hurried them both inside, moving off towards the castle as the night darkened around them. Ella practically vibrated as they bounced over the rough roads, sighing occasionally before fidgeting to glance back out the window. After a few minutes, Lacey laughed. “Calm down. We’ll be there any minute. Magic carriages have quite the advantage.”

“I know,” Ella replied, sitting back and folding her hands in her lap. “It’s just...what if Thomas doesn’t remember me?”

Lacey smiled. “Considering he danced with you for over an hour last night, and you ran off without giving him so much as your name, I doubt he’s done anything but think about you all day.”

“That’s true,” Lacey corrected, glancing up from her lap. “Do you really think so, Belle?”

If there was one thing in this world that Lacey knew, it was men. The men in this world didn’t
seem too terribly different from the ones back home. With a wink, she assured Ella that Prince Thomas, the first of his name, was probably waiting at the door for her.

As it turns out, she wasn’t half wrong. The second their carriage rolled to a stop at the foot of the gate, standing in a long line of other carriages, the guard at the gate came up and exchanged a few words with the lizard coachman. “Everything all right?” Lacey asked, leaning out the window.

The guard tilted his cap at her, slightly startled at being addressed by a royal. “Perfectly fine, your Royal Highness,” he assured her as he came to the side of the carriage. Ella joined Lacey at the window and the guard’s eyes grew wide. “My apologies, I didn’t realize-!” he stammered. He turned to the lizard posing as their driver and urged him to go up the lawn. “Please go straight ahead,” he directed as he waved a fellow guard over.

In quick succession, the coach arrived just beside the front stairs, a few scandalized nobles chattering about the rude behavior, even as the guard rushed alongside them on foot, disappearing into the castle. Lacey could barely contain her laughter as Ella looked about in confusion. “He had the guards looking for you,” Lacey exclaimed. “My, Ella, you certainly know how to make an impression!”

“It’s not funny!” Ella hissed, looking traumatized. “What if they found out I’m not a real lady?”

Before Lacey could point out that Ella was in fact a real lady, the carriage door swung open. One of the royal footman helped put the steps down, holding out a hand for Lacey to take. His eyes however flicked over to Ella, taking her in with a curious glance. Lacey let him help her out, brushing the wrinkles in her dress out as she stood in the night air. The carriage between them and the castle rolled off, the next one being detained by another member of the guard.

Just as Ella emerged from the carriage, lifting her head from thanking the guard, a silhouette appeared at the top of the castle stairs. Barely pausing, Prince Thomas came down the short stairs, meeting them just at the edge of the drive. He sank into a deep bow, which Lacey and Ella returned with respective curtseys. Behind him, two shorter figures appeared in the light of the hall, staring down at them.

“I wasn’t sure you’d come back,” Thomas whispered to Ella, taking her gloved hand in his own. He was wearing his same uniform, but his hair had been carefully brushed back. Lacey stood awkwardly to the side of them, highly aware that everyone was watching this little scene unfold on the lawn.

“I wouldn’t have missed this for the world,” Ella breathed back, squeezing his hand in hers. Neither spoke for a moment, content to gaze into each other’s eyes as if the secret of life was buried there.

Growing fidgety, Lacey coughed, drawing the prince’s attention. “Shall we?”

“Ah, Princess Belle,” Thomas greeted, sinking into another respective bow. Lacey rolled her eyes over his head but followed suit as Ella stood demurely to the side. “It’s my pleasure to formally make your acquaintance.”

“As it is mine,” Lacey acknowledged, eyes flickering back to the figures at the top of the stairs. “I presume Marian was forthcoming on my behalf?”

Thomas looked slightly abashed as Ella glanced curiously between them. “She may have mentioned she met you while I was busy bemoaning the princess who stole away my lovely dance partner.”
Lacey laughed, offering her hand for Thomas to take. She knew one or two things about royal protocol from her days in the Seventh Kingdom, and sure enough, Thomas took it, shooting a warm smile at Ella as she fell in line behind them. “May I ask where you dwell, your Royal Highness?”

“I hail from the Fourth Kingdom,” Lacey supplied, mentally crossing her fingers that he wasn't as well travelled as Eric had been.

Luckily for her that seemed to be the case; Thomas nodded solemnly. “I’ve heard great things about your land,” he said wistfully. “I had planned to travel to the different kingdoms when I came of age but with the war…”

Lacey nodded thoughtfully, making another mental note to ask Marian about this war everybody kept mentioning. The lands did not look as if they had been at war, but it seemed a prickly subject, one that people did not hesitate to mention but did not elaborate upon. Marian waited for them at the top of the stairs, standing behind an older man who wore a crown on his balding head.

“Your Majesty,” Lacey greeted, sinking into a half curtesy. Behind her, Ella’s gown rustled as she too dipped down. Marian cast Lacey a sharp look, and Lacey gave a barely perceptible nod back. She had to tread carefully around the King. A royal alliance was something he would not hesitate to secure.

“Welcome to the First Kingdom,” the King said jovially, taking her hand from his son to rest on his own pudgy arm. “I apologize for not meeting you last night, my son tells me you were late arriving and I must have missed your entrance.”

Behind them, Thomas took Ella’s arm, and they moved off swiftly towards a different archway. Marian watched them off before she fell in step behind the King and Lacey. “Your castle is lovely, Your Majesty,” Lacey said earnestly, buying the young couple some time. “I would love a tour.”

The King chuckled in amusement. “Now, I’m sure that’s not true, but Thomas would be happy to show you if you would like.” Here, he turned, frowning as he saw Thomas had vanished. Sighing, the King glanced at Marian. “Really, my dear?” he asked her with a shake of his thin white mustache. Lacey smiled at him, almost taller than him in her slightly heeled slippers. “I apologize for my son, Princess. He’s rather stubborn.”

“Yes, you and that dratted ambassador were most articulate in Thomas’s defense this afternoon. At least one of you bothered to show up this evening,” the King recalled with a quiver of his thin white mustache. Lacey smiled at him, almost taller than him in her slightly heeled slippers. “I apologize for my son, Princess. He’s rather stubborn.”

“I suppose he gets that from his father?” Lacey teased, rewarded with the King’s pinking cheeks. “Hmph,” he coughed, squaring his shoulders. “Marian did warn me you were a flirt,” he grumbled good-naturedly. “I suppose there isn’t much I can do to convince you to marry my son and save him from himself?”

“I’m afraid not,” Lacey said with a grin. “I doubt he could do much better than Lady Ella.”

“Lady Ella? Never heard of her,” he mused. “Fourth Kingdom as well?”

“First,” Lacey replied, as they arrived back at the salon. The King made an interested noise, as if making a mental note to check on noble women of age named Ella. Servants hurried over with full goblets of wine. The King glowed as he held his up to Lacey's in a toast. They made short work of
their first glass after that, moving the talk to Thomas as a leader and heir before his childhood.

“No,” Lacey laughed, glancing over at a blushing Marian. “They did what with the honey?”

“Thought themselves clever,” the king chuckled. “Though I couldn’t tell who was more embarrassed, Thomas’ mother, rest her soul, or Marian’s poor father.”

At this point, a noble sidled up to them and began to hover, looking harried. The King sighed. “I should be attending to matters of state,” he said sadly. “Instead of charming young women of eligible age.”

“Your Majesty,” Marian offered. “Perhaps I could escort Princess Belle in your absence?”

“You’d like that wouldn’t you?” the King said gruffly to her, a smile in his eyes. “Avoid the second sons lurking around here wanting to make a wife out of you.”

“They’d have to catch me first,” Marian whispered to Lacey as the King lumbered away to his business. “Now, shall we go check on the happy couple or-?”

“I,” Lacey interrupted, “want to know about your secret rendezvous, after I get another glass of wine.”

“Food first,” Marian suggested, walking her over to the buffet style table. “That’s your fourth glass in under an hour.”

“Touche,” Lacey conceded, helping herself to a large slice of ham. Marian found them a quiet nook to eat in the hall, continuing to bring Lacey plates until she was stuffed and her bodice uncomfortably tight. “Enough,” Lacey groaned. “I’m beginning to see why the King made you whatever it was.”

“Castellan,” Marian said, looking at her curiously. “Doesn’t your family have one?”

“Honestly?” Lacey sighed, holding her side where a sharp pain had started. “I haven’t a clue.”

“Excuse me for saying this,” Marian said with amusement, “but you’re a rather odd princess.”

Lacey grinned at her, standing up as another server appeared by her side with a fresh cup of wine. “You know,” Lacey told Marian, joining her to move to the door. “You shouldn’t say such things after your King just told me such wonderful stories about what you and Thomas thought acceptable behavior concerning livestock.”

“We set them free,” Marian snorted. “How were we to know you aren’t supposed to ride pigs into battle?”

A nearby noble woman looked scandalized and Lacey had to bite her tongue to keep from laughing out loud. Marian seamlessly escorted them into the main hallway, still rather crowded as people continued to arrive. “Where to?” Marian asked.

Lacey deciding, didn’t see them at first. However, it was hard not to. With their giant puffy fringe dresses, one in pink and one in green, it was almost impossible to miss the Stepdaughters Tremaine or their imposing mother, who stood nearly a foot taller than most of the other women.

“Oh, them,” Marian sighed, noticing Lacey’s gaze. “They were the reason I was hiding in the tapestry hall last night. The mother is a ghoul, got one of the weakling lords from up north to introduce her to me. She hoped to get the prince’s attention through his dearest friend, and instead
ended up insulting me for a quarter of an hour before I gave her the slip.”

“Befriend the prince’s best friend, win his heart?” Lacey asked, and Marian nodded sorely.

“It’s as if they don’t think every other woman has tried that in the history of our lives,” Marian grumbled. “Let’s go this way. I don't care much to listen to their prattling on for an hour.”

Lacey allowed her to lead the way, but the memory of Lady Tremaine’s job offer stayed in her head. She’d have to ask Marian about Thomas’s intentions tonight, or risk Ella losing her one chance at happiness.

Chapter End Notes

Inspiration Board: http://theplasticview.tumblr.com/post/137107390012/the-gate-chapter-25-inspiration-board (Does anyone look at this? Just curious cause it takes a fair amount of time and I could always just skip it.)

Well, some interesting plot developments in this chapter namely of Lady Tremaine’s plans for Ella. This chapter was me getting to exercise some muscles in the ‘game of thrones’ intrigue department, although I had more fun with Lacey and Marian being sassy because those two are a joy to write together.

I also want to thank everyone who has commented about how much they have been enjoying Ella. When I set out to write this, I wanted to make sure that Lacey would encounter all kinds of women. Young women like Ariel and Gretel, women her own age like Ella and Marian and even older women that we have not met yet. It’s an absolute joy to to see you guys loving her relationships and enjoying how different they are. It was very important to be that we see all kinds of people in the journey, and you all have been supportive every step of the way.

We will meet the Sheriff next chapter as the second night comes to a close. We'll also finally learn more about this war about which everyone keeps referring.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

First of all, thanks to Ramloth for beta-ing.

Second, I would like to warn readers that this next chapter has an attempted rape. There is a struggle, words are exchanged and please feel free to skip if this is at all triggering.

Last, I want to announce The Gate was nominated in the annual Rumbelle T.E.A. Awards as Best Adventure, and I had the pleasure and privilege of being nominated as Best Author. To celebrate, I am going to update all my WiPs as a huge thank you and thought what better than to start with then The Gate.

Everywhere they went, they were approached by curious nobles, matrimonial-bent mothers and the occasional drunken idiot. Marian handled them all with grace and ease, deflecting, confounding and sometimes simply eluding them. Lacey, going on four hours of sleep and more than four glasses of wine, followed along, enjoying herself immensely.

It was only when they managed to make it back to the library, closing the door shut firmly behind them, that they were able to relax. “Honestly,” Marian scoffed. “You think they’d never seen a princess before!”

“Are they really so rare here?” Lacey asked, sinking down into the closest cushioned seat. “The one fellow practically proposed marriage on the spot.”

“We have one or two princesses here,” Marian said thoughtfully. “You know the various realms in our kingdom, I presume?”

Lacey shot her an incredulous look and Marian laughed. “You must have been the scourge of your tutors, Belle,” Marian chuckled. “The First Kingdom has three realms. Here in the southernmost realm, Thomas is the only heir.”

“So, why host a ball?” Lacey asked. Eric’s ball had only been announced when the prince had absolutely refused every princess he had met in his travels. It had been clear even to Lacey that the whole affair was not the proper way for a prince to find a wife. “Shouldn’t he have princesses lining up to marry him?”

Marian sighed, playing with one of the pink frills layering her dress. “Before the war, he was betrothed,” Marian said quietly. “Then, the great divide came over the land to the west and before we knew it, we were at war.”

Lacey made a small noise of sympathetic interest, curious to hear more. “No one thought it would come to that, but one thing led to another and the next thing we knew, we were fighting for the unknown lands past the horizon,” Marian explained quietly, her voice low and wavering slightly as if the memories were still too fresh to discuss.
“Thomas was betrothed to the princess from the northernmost lands but her father broke off the engagement when the war came. She married the Middle Realm’s second son to cement some treaty between their two lands. At that point, no one expected Thomas to even survive the war, himself especially.”

“But he did,” Lacey pointed out.

Marian nodded, but she did not look reassured. “So, he did. Now, here we are a year later, with nothing to show except our pride.”

“So, it was an internal war?” Lacey asked, remembering her own world’s history well enough to guess the consequences for the losing side.

“That’s a way of putting it I suppose,” Marian shrugged. “For ten years, there were skirmishes and battles in the western lands of the First Kingdom. Too many men died in the war, leaving their women behind penniless. Although we were fortunate, the Middle Realm’s economy is desolated and the Northern Realm lost their king. The royal family there is still in chaos; too many heirs fighting for the throne.”

“All that over some land?” Lacey shook her head and let out a low whistle of disbelief. “No offense, but that’s seems foolish. It’s not even as if it’s near here. What would you all have done with it?”

Marian quirked an eyebrow at her. “Princess Belle,” she said quietly but firmly. “Despite my lowly station, I am well aware of the other kingdoms, including your own home’s major histories and family rivalries. Simply because you are in the middle of a great peace brought about by the house of Snow does not mean you can judge others.” Marian was like a statue there in the firelight. Her usual rosy cheeks were unsmiling, eyes blank in the dark shadows encroaching around her.

In the silence, it clicked why so many women of this kingdom, near Lacey's own age, were unmarried still. Why Lady Tremaine hoped to sell her stepdaughter off to someone willing to take her, and why Thomas could not believe Ella would return to the castle. They had all lost hope, and were now simply clinging to practicality.

“I’m sorry,” Lacey mumbled, flicking some nonexistent lint off her skirts. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have said that. It wasn’t fair.”

“No,” Marian sighed into the space between them. She looked empty and unsure of herself, a private moment that Lacey was intruding upon. “Nothing about any of this is fair.”

“Hey,” Lacey nudged, trying to change the subject. “What about your secret meeting last night? You promised to tell me all about it.”

“I don’t believe ‘promised’ is the right word,” Marian corrected gently. This new subject did not seem to distract Marian, instead her eyes grew sadder and her hands clenched tighter around each other in her lap.

“Marian,” Lacey needled gently. “What is it? I can’t understand unless you tell me.”

For a moment, Marian wavered. Lacey sat silently, watching the other woman in the firelight. “There were people who lived in the west lands,” Marian said finally. “Our three realms lied to them. Cheated them. Then they began to steal from them, killing them when that failed. We went to war with each other over their lands, and innocent people were caught in the middle of it.”

Lacey, at a loss, nodded hesitantly. This had seemingly nothing to do with Marian’s midnight
visitor. Marian glanced over at her, as if she had forgotten she was there and exhaled deeply. Her bosom swelled and fell, neatly on display in her same pink monstrosity of a dress. “If Thomas knew-!” Marian began, before clenching her skirts tighter in her white knuckled fists. “If the King knew!”

Bewildered, Lacey watched in silence as two large tears began to roll down Marian’s full cheeks, collecting at her rounded jaw. “There’s still pockets of resistance in the west,” she shared through sniffles. “But they need help…”

“Marian,” Lacey whispered, realizing what the woman could not manage to say out loud. “Are you helping them?”

A short jerky nod was her response before Marian jumped to her feet and stormed about the room. “They’re dying,” she cried out. Lacey shrank back into her chair, careful to lift her feet out of the way as Marian stomped by. “Because of us! If Thomas knew, if he realized-!”

“Stop,” Lacey urged Marian. Standing, Lacey caught hold of Marian's hands in her own. “It’s alright, I’m not going to say anything. I swear.” Marian’s eyes were bright from tears and her lips trembled with emotion. It was an equally beautiful and pitiful sight. Lacey turned away, releasing Marian’s hands as the other woman exhaled in an effort to calm down. “You’re risk a great deal,” Lacey told her. “Is it worth it?”

Marian simply nodded. “Yes,” she said with absolute conviction.

“You love one of them,” Lacey realized. It made sense. A woman as loyal as Marian would not have risked a lifelong friendship, her family name or her own ideals for much less.

Marian turned away, but she nodded. “Yes,” she repeated, “but it doesn’t matter. Even if I manage to make Castellan, if the King knew… if Thomas found out, I’d be sentenced to death for my crimes.”

“Your crimes?” Lacey blurted. “Good God, what are you doing? Selling them trade secrets?”

Marian glanced back at her, confusion on her face. Lacey groaned, lifting a hand to her forehead as the beginnings of a headache began to form. Whether it was from lack of sleep, the wine or stress, Lacey couldn’t say.

“I’m feeding them,” Marian confessed. “Not reporting their activities in the forest, lying to the Sheriff-”

“The Sheriff,” Lacey interrupted. "That's the third time I’ve heard of him. Who is he?”

“The Sheriff of Nottingham is the law in our realm,” Marian explained with a shudder. “It’s a family position, passed down from father to son. He’s not to be trifled with.”

“But that’s who-!” Lacey began before cursing. Marian gasped at the language but Lacey ignored her. Turning and heading back towards the door, she called out, “Come on, I have to find Ella.”

“Belle!” Marian called out, hurrying to catch up with her. A few startled people in the tapestry hall scolded them as they burst out into the hall, Lacey practically sprinting as the still emotional Marian scrambled after her. “Belle, what’s wrong?”

Sliding to a stop, Lacey turned around to clutch Marian’s shoulders. “Her stepmother is going to marry her off to the Sheriff,” Lacey told the other woman. Marian’s eyes went wide but she did not look surprised. “So, I’m asking you, is your friend a good man?”
“T-Thomas?” Marian rasped as she sucked air into her lungs. “Yes but-!”

“Ella’s a nobleman’s daughter,” Lacey recalled. “So, she’s eligible, correcte?”

Marian nodded in bewilderment. “The court will have to research her family claim before they can ratify it,” she began. “But-!”

“No time for that,” Lacey told her, releasing her to head back towards the banquet hall. A nearby clock showed there was little time left in the evening. As they burst into the hall, Lacey, nearly out of breath, grasped the archway as Marian fell into her, clinging onto her for support. Lacey scanned the crowd, looking for a recognizable face.

Lady Tremaine stood off in the shadows, alone as she watched her two daughters on the dance floor. The stepsisters were garishly bright, two tall feathers in their hair, marking them clearly. Nowhere however were the tall figures of Prince Thomas or Ella among the crowd.

“Do you see them?” Lacey asked Marian, who shook her head.

“Maybe they went to the garden?” Marian suggested. “Thomas is fond of them.”

“I don’t think Ella is the garden type,” Lacey said, remembering Ella’s embarrassment the previous night.

Marian blushed too, realizing what she had just inferred. “No, I mean- he would want to go somewhere so they could be alone.”

“Well, the garden is full of lovers, they aren’t dancing and the library was empty when we left. Where else could they be?”

Marian huffed at her. “It’s a castle, Belle,” she reminded her. “Full of secret passageways that Thomas knows like the back of his own hand.”

“Aha! There you are!”

The King approached them, a small cloud of annoyed looking nobles hurrying after him. He clasped Lacey's hand tightly before bringing it to his lips. “A sight for sore eyes,” he said with a wink. “Marian, my dear. Would you see that the lords here find the wine cellar without me?”

He seemed oblivious to their anxiety but his words gave Lacey an idea. Perhaps Thomas had taken Ella down to show her the wine collection. She caught Marian’s eyes, mouthing, ‘The wine cellar?’

Marian nodded back before smoothly answering the king. “Of course, Your Majesty. Gentleman,” Marian said, turning to the pack of disappointed men. “If you’d follow me.”

“Finally,” the King sighed as they departed. “I thought I would have to die of boredom to get rid of them. Although,” he mused in resignation, “they’d probably keep on talking over me regardless.”

“Your Majesty,” Lacey said, hoping to distract him from his current thoughts. “You haven’t seen your son or the Lady Ella, by chance?”

He thought for a moment before shaking his head. “Can’t say that I have;” he answered. The music changed from a waltz to a more uptempo choice and the King brightened. “Now, how about a dance?”

“Your Majesty,” came a low pitched voice from behind Lacey’s left shoulder. The King sighed
unpleasantly, twisting her around so Lacey came to face the man who had been behind her. He was huge, towering broadly over Lacey and the King as he looked down upon them.

“Nottingham,” the King greeted tensely. “Enjoying the festivities?”

“Quite,” the man replied with a crooked smile. He raked his gaze over Lacey, holding brashly on her bosom before sliding smartly back to the King. “Although up to now, the decorations were lacking. I don't believe the lady and I have been introduced,” he said.

“Ah, yes” the King cleared his throat. “This is Princess Belle. She’s visiting from the Fourth Kingdom.”

Nottingham peered down at her with interest and Lacey found herself growing uncomfortable under his gaze. “Nottingham, at your service, Your Royal Highness.”

“Your Majesty!” came a harried gasp beside them, as an older thin man appeared at their side. “The ambassador- he’s not in his rooms, sir!”

The King’s entire demeanor changed within seconds. Lacey blinked as the jovial butterball of a charmer turned into a head of state. “Damn him,” the King growled. “Find him immediately. I will not have a spy roaming the halls!” Catching himself, he nodded curtly to the man before him, before turning to Lacey with an apologetic frown. “My dear, I’m afraid I must attend to this matter.”

“I’ll be happy to take her off your hands,” Nottingham replied, bowing.

That was how Lacey found herself being swept on to the dance floor with the noxious Sheriff of Nottingham. “Watch it,” she snarled as he moved closer to her than necessary. He smiled but there was no warmth or humor in it. It was more of a calculated response, meant for those around them and not for her.

“Your Royal Highness,” Nottingham murmured as he tightened his hands around her, hard enough to bruise. “This is how we dance here in the Southern Realm.”

Lacey bit back a gasp, wrenching his hand off her and shooting him a death-defying look of vitriol. “I’m afraid I’m feeling faint,” Lacey hissed, massaging her hand. “Excuse me.”

Making her way off the dance floor, she tried to remember which way Marian had gone, only to find Nottingham following her. She twisted on her heel, staring up at his too close-set eyes. “Leave me alone,” she told him.

“A princess without a chaperone?” he murmured. “What would the King say?”

Lacey opened her mouth to tell him exactly what she thought, when she spotted Lady Tremaine from the corner of her eye, watching them. “Shit,” Lacey murmured to herself, just low enough that the Sheriff, puzzled, leaned down closer to her.

If Lady Tremaine hoped to marry Ella off to this charlatan, she would not take kindly to anyone else paying him attention. The last thing Lacey needed to do was draw Lady Tremaine’s attention to herself. She did not know how strong the Imp’s charms would work when faced with direct scrutiny. “Fine,” Lacey decided, not wanting to draw any further attention to herself. “I’m in need of some air.”

“This way,” Nottingham said gamely, taking her arm in his despite her resistance. He made quick work exiting the dance hall, barely pausing as he continued to guide her.
“If you see the Prince,” Lacey managed to get out. “I need to speak to him.”

Nottingham laughed, another reaction completely lacking warmth or humor. “I’m sure you do,” he agreed. “However, I believe he’s rather occupied at the moment.”

“Ugh,” Lacey grumbled, tugging at her arm. “You can let go now.”

“I would never risk losing you in such a press,” Nottingham replied smoothly, pressing her arm closer to his chest and cutting off some circulation. “We’re almost outside.”

“Wait,” Lacey began to dig in her heels, the cloth slippers doing little against Nottingham boldly drag her along the smooth marble surfaces of the hall. A few people noticed them, whispering behind fans but no one dared intervene. Whether it was because she was a princess or if Nottingham inspired that much fear in people, she could not say.

He flung a door open to reveal an outdoor walkway. “Here we are!”

The moons were clouded now, the promise of rain in the air. Lacey shivered, feeling her nipples tighten and the hair along her arms rise.

“Well,” Nottingham whispered, moving closer. “I see the fresh air is doing you some good.”

“Kindly fuck off,” Lacey hissed up at him, forgoing her manners. She knew men like this. They did not listen to reason or politeness. She sorely missed her can of mace and a good stiletto.

Nottingham caught her upper arm in one of his meaty fists, nearly hauling her off the ground as he wrenched her towards him. “What a mouth,” he teased, one hand coming up to trace the outlines of it. Lacey tried to wrench her arm out of his grasp, but he tightened it.

“Get your hands off me,” Lacey demanded, wriggling in a very un-princess-like manner. Her tiara caught him in the chin, and he recoiled, blinking down at her as he rubbed his jaw. A droplet of blood welled up from the small cut. Lacey grinned at it.

“Feisty,” Nottingham noted. “Good. That’s my favorite kind to break.”

Staring at him in utter bewilderment, Lacey found herself saying, “I am a princess, you-!”

Nottingham did not let her finish. He wrenched her tiara from her head and flung it off into the darkness. It clattered to the ground and rolled, its metallic echoing loud against her own hard breathing before it fell silent.

“There,” Nottingham whispered, into the curve of her neck. “Now, you’re just another woman. Tell me, pet,” he panted as his hands started to twist her bare skin, burning her. “Are you a screamer?”

“I’m not giving you the pleasure of finding out,” Lacey assured him, as she lifted her knee straight up into his groin. The large man grunted, his hands relaxing just enough for her to push backwards, falling down in an ungraceful heap on her ass. Staring up at the purple-faced caveman, Lacey began to back up on her hands and knees, crab-crawling backwards away from the castle and him.

“You little bitch,” Nottingham said darkly, straightening. Lacey realized too late she had just poked a bear. “You’ll pay for that one.”

Not trusting herself to get to her feet, knowing the time it took for her to straighten would mean he could be upon her, Lacey stayed crouched, ready to roll away or kick if he tried to grab her again. “I’m going to have your head,” Lacey promised him. “Attacking a princess of the royal blood!”
“You’re no princess,” Nottingham laughed. “You might have them fooled, but I know better.”

Lacey froze.

“Oh, yes. At the edge of the forest, a little birdie saw you cross the border with two brats. Imagine my surprise when the same little birdie told me you were dancing in the King’s halls, wearing a tiara and pretending to be a royal. I must say, I was rather intrigued. Besides, I’ve checked with some of my contacts. There’s no Princess Belle in the Fourth Kingdom or any other.

’Soo tell me,” Nottingham asked, moving closer to her. “Are you going to behave or am I going to have to arrest you for impersonating a royal?”

“Fuck you,” Lacey spat, muscles tense as she prepared to fight or flee.

“Thought you’d never ask,” Nottingham chuckled. In the next second, he pounced, reaching down to grab her ankles through her skirts. Lacey was ready for him, with a fierce kick, she caught him in the jaw with her right foot, before rolling over and lashing out with her left foot, catching him in the shoulder and unbalancing him.

Scrambling to her knees, Lacey attempted to stand, only to find her curls being yanked as Nottingham seized her from behind. One meaty paw, wrapped around her stomach, groping her as Lacey gagged at the feel of him surrounding her. Her eyes teared up as he pulled her head back, smiling down at her as her neck bent nearly in two even as he held her back straight.

“I’ll enjoy this,” Nottingham told her, tracing the tendons of her neck with his eyes.

“Not as much as I’m going to enjoy watching you die,” Lacey assured him, wincing as he tugged her hair tighter, his hand twisting her right breast violently, the fabric shifting to reveal her corset. Nottingham merely chuckled, bending down to bite her lips, swallowing the cry she made as her neck began to strain at the unnatural angle.

“You may be laughing now,” Lacey growled, fighting to keep fear off her face and out of her voice. Defiance was all she had now, and she intended to use it. “You wouldn’t if you knew what I was capable of. What you’ll be when I’m through with you.”

“Scary,” Nottingham laughed, the first trace of actual amusement he had shown so far.

A memory stirred. ‘You’re like us. A monster…’

She held it close to her, letting it warm her shaking hands and frozen limbs as she tried to be brave. She had to keep her head. Regardless of Nottingham’s position of power, if she could get an audience, she could prevent this. Just long enough for-

Nottingham spun her around, slamming her against one of the arches, facing away from the castle. With the air knocked out of her, Lacey could not find the breath to call for help, instead struggling as Nottingham attempted to manhandle her dress off her shoulders. Her legs were flailing but he had her hips pinned with his own, his breath rotten in her nose.

“Come on then,” he panted. Lacey hissed, trying to twist her hands into claws to tear against him. He however was too large, using his body weight to keep her immobile against the cold stone. “Show me how a royal whore fucks.”

This wasn’t happening. Panic began to color her vision. She was not about to be raped at a ball. This was not happening. This was not happening. Lacey tried to draw breath to scream again, even realizing that if the clock struck midnight in the moments between now and then, if she was found
to be nothing more than a magically assisted maid, Nottingham would be able to arrest her and possibly even Ella too.

“Hands off the lady, Nottingham.”

Nottingham twisted away from her, and Lacey used his distraction to her advantage. Going boneless, she collapsed to the side, and he was unable to hold on to her from his current twisted position. She slammed against the ground, just at Nottingham bent to grab her again.

“Not so fast,” the newcomer ordered. The clouds had parted, and standing in the moonlight was Robin Hood, his bow and arrow carefully aimed at Nottingham. “Back up.”

Nottingham growled, but complied, moving until his back was against the arch. Lacey rolled to her feet, clutching her torn gown as she spat blood and saliva at Nottingham’s face in the darkness. “Bastard,” she snarled as she moved over to Robin. “Are you alone?”

Her rescuer nodded, eyes dark, his usual amusement gone, as he stared down the Sheriff.

“Ha!” Nottingham barked. “You’re trespassing, halfbreed. I’ll have your hide for this.”

“I’d be quiet if I were you,” Robin warned, not moving a muscle. Lacey glanced up at the moon, wishing to hell she could tell time by the sky. It would come in handy right about now. “Are you alright?” Robin asked her, oblivious to her private concerns.

“I will be when you put that arrow in between his eyes,” Lacey replied.

“Tell Marian I’m sorry,” Robin whispered back, answering her question neatly. In a moment, everything from earlier clicked into place. So, Robin Hood was Marian’s secret. Lacey realized not for the first time, how little she knew about everything around her.

Taking advantage of this momentary confusion, Nottingham shifted. Robin’s whole stance stiffened, taking a step forward. “You know I won’t miss from this distance, Nottingham,” Robin reminded him.

From the distance, there was a clatter of footsteps. “That’d be the hourly guard,” Nottingham said, relaxing a fraction of an inch. “And here’s the most wanted outlaw in the lands, with a bow and arrow to the Sheriff.”

“You need to go, Belle,” Robin told her. “If someone finds you out here like this, you’ll be ruined.”

“He-!” Lacey started.

Robin’s temper frayed and snapped. “He’ll tell them I attacked you,” he ground out. “They’ll believe him over you or me, trust me on this. You need to get out of here.”

“I’m going to get help,” Lacey decided, moving towards the entrance of the castle. “The King won’t stand for this.”
“Run along, pet,” Nottingham hissed as she passed him. She ignored him, quickening her pace. “Just you and me then,” Nottingham growled as she disappeared past him towards the door. Just as she made it inside, Lacey ran straight into someone in pink frills.

“Belle!” Marian grunted, even as someone else caught Lacey and hauled her back upright.

“Ella!” Lacey said in relief, grasping her gloved hands in her. “There you are!”

“It’s almost midnight!” Ella whispered to her, under the guise of holding her up. “We have to go!”

“What happened to you?” Marian asked, moving between them. Ella gasped, reaching out for the torn tassels, but Lacey brushed her away.

“Nottingham,” Lacey managed with a shudder. Marian opened her mouth to speak but Lacey cut her off. “Robin’s got him outside. I need to get the King!”

“Robin!” Marian repeated, already moving towards the entrance. “No, they’ll kill him!”

Ella caught Marian, holding her back even as the clock began to chime midnight. “Marian!” Lacey exclaimed. “We need a way out!”

Marian, too focused on trying to get outside, barely paid her any heed. Ella fought to hold her back, nearly a foot taller than the short plump woman but struggling to keep her grip. Lacey stepped bodily in front of Marian, and snapped her fingers under the woman’s nose. This at the effect of getting Marian to focus on her long enough for Marian to smack her across the face.

“Okay,” Lacey wheezed, holding her cheek where she was certain a small handprint was now reddening. “Got that out of your system?”

Marian deflated, as the cries of guards from outside alerted the trio to Robin’s current situation. The clock in the distance finished chiming and the familiar white light flared up, leaving both Lacey and Ella back in their soot stained work dresses. Marian’s eyes were full of tears as she stared in disbelief between the two of them.

“Magic?” she asked, hoarse. “You’re-?”

Ella released Marian. “We didn’t mean to hurt anyone,” Ella told her. The Castellan in training turned to them wordlessly. “I just wanted a chance to come to the ball.”

“You?” Marian demanded. Lacey nodded in silent reply. “I can’t believe this. No, I can believe this, I should have known something was wrong. Are your names even Belle and Ella?”

No, Lacey thought to herself.

“Yes,” Ella reassured Marian, trying to calm the other woman down.

“None of that matters right now,” Lacey reminded them. “If someone finds us like this, Nottingham’s going to have three women in the stocks alongside Robin in the morning.”

Marian looked conflicted for a moment, and then a steel-eyed look of determination crossed her face. “This way,” she ordered, heading towards the salon.

Ella slipped off her glass slippers and fell in step beside Lacey, looking at her in silent question as they followed Marian. As they reached an alcove, Marian tugged a piece of armor beside it, and a door swung open, revealing the outside. The woods were just beyond the horizon.
“Go into the woods. There’s a trail that will lead you to the edge of the castle lands. There's a man in at the gate, tell him Marian sent you and he’ll let you pass. Follow the main road back and you should be able to find your way home,” Marian instructed tonelessly. Her eyes flickered to Ella, standing there towering over them in the dark. “Give me your shoes,” she demanded.

Ella clutched them harder to her chest. Marian sighed. “If someone catches you with those, they’ll assume you stole them.”

“But-!” Ella started.

Lacey reached over and plucked them from her hands. She handed them to Marian who nodded.

“Thank you,” Ella breathed, catching Marian's hands in hers.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Marian murmured, shaking the other woman off. “Quick now, before Nottingham sends someone looking for you.”

It was a long night.

By the time Lacey and Ella stumbled into the kitchen, it was just before dawn. Ella’s feet were covered in scratches, bloody and dirty from their night hike. Lacey had encouraged her, unable to do much more than walk ahead of her and try to watch for rocks, twigs, or roots. She remembered all too well her own night walking through the forest barefoot. Ella’s quiet, grim determination to remain silent did not mean she was not in pain.

When they stumbled into the kitchen, the embers were barely lit, the cold of the night creeping through the house proper. Both women had been quiet, barely holding their own heads up whether from exhaustion or despair. Lacey collapsed onto the nearest stool as Ella stood in the doorway, glancing back the way they had come.

“Was it worth it?” Ella asked. Lacey remained silent, knowing Ella was not asking her.

“I rather doubt it.” Lady Tremaine stood in the shadows, eyes cruel and gleaming. In her hands, she held a small crossbow, the arrow aimed directly at Ella’s chest. “Now, I think it’s time for us girls to have a little heart-to-heart, hmm, Cinderella?”

Chapter End Notes

And with that, the second night of the Ball is over.

Marian is still in the castle with Thomas and the King. Robin is at the mercy of the Sheriff and Ella and Lacey are at the mercy of Lady Tremaine. Our beloved Imp is up to his own devices at the moment, but he is closer than you all may think.
Chapter 27

Things could be worse.

Those were the words Lacey repeated to Ella over and over again in the hours they were locked up. After the key slid shut in the door, Lacey held Ella for a bit, combing out the knots in her black hair as Ella cried herself hoarse.

Lacey repeated the words over the other woman’s sobs. She repeated them as they laid down next to each other. Ella’s sniffles soon became the sound of soft breathing as sleep finally took her. Lacey, too tired to stay awake, soon followed after her.

When they woke in the early afternoon, their stomachs cramped with hunger and their throats burned with thirst. Lacey repeated the refrain as they stared out the window, watching autumn take the trees below. When the call of nature became too strong, they used an old chamber pot in the corner. After a bit, they had to break the window open for fresh air.

As the odor lessened, Ella caught Lacey’s eyes. “Don’t even say it.”

So, Lacey didn’t.

In what must be her first day off in years, Ella seemed lost. She did not know what to do with herself. She tried to sweep, to tidy up but she soon finished. She sat back down on the floor beside Lacey and stared out into the afternoon. Below them, the house was silent except the occasional sound of a cat’s calls, curious and close as if watching from just beyond the closed door.

Ella’s hands, cracked and rough, shook slightly in the autumn air. From chill or fear, Lacey wasn’t quite sure. They passed the day in relative silence, the occasional creak of a floorboard causing them both to freeze, to listen to the hall outside for any sound. No mention of the ball, the prince or the future passed between them until the sun began to set. Footsteps on the landing outside caused them both to rise.

As the lock clicked free, Lady Tremaine entered, carrying a tray and wrinkling her nose at the smell in the room. “Why, girls,” she clucked, putting down the tray. There was bread and cheese and what looked like ham on two plates, a pitcher of water and two cups beside them. “It smells dreadful in here. Cinderella, surely you could have emptied the chamber pot? What else could you have been doing up here all day?”

“Let us out,” Lacey demanded, stepping boldly forward.

Without blinking, Lady Tremaine patted her pocket, a cold twisted smile on her sunken cheeks. “Careful,” the older woman warned, staring her down. The handle of a knife peeked out of the fabric of Lady Tremaine’s skirt’s folds.

Lacey took another step forward. “I’m not afraid of you.”

“Belle,” Ella whispered, catching her arm. “Stop. Please.”

“Ella,” Lacey whispered in astonishment. “This is insane. You have every right-!”

“She has no rights in this household,” Lady Tremaine snapped. “Nor do you, wench.”

Bristling, Lacey lifted a warning finger. “Careful, I’m not some abused little girl you can bully
Lady Tremaine’s eyebrows rose just a fraction of an inch, but her cheeks colored slightly as her eyes lit with a cold fury. “Well,” she whispered, nodding solemnly to them both. She remained utterly still other than that small movement, her hands at her sides. “I’m afraid the girls and I must be going. We’re attending dinner at the Reynolds Estate before the royal decree tonight.”

“Royal decree?” Ella asked, stepping just beyond Lacey. Her eyes were bright from tears. Her hair filthy with dust and soot. She was a walking contradiction; beauty in disarray, hope in the darkness, kindness in misery.

Her stepmother barely blinked at her. “Why, yes, Cinderella,” she murmured. “The Prince has chosen his bride. He plans to announce it this eve, at the conclusion of the ball.”

“No,” Ella breathed out, voice breaking ever so slightly.

Lady Tremaine nodded. “Imagine the scandal when his chosen bride not only fails to appear...” Here, the woman paused, a smile cutting across her sharp features like a knife’s blade. “What will they say when not a day later, it’s announced that the long-lost daughter of Baron Tremaine has been found conspiring with the band of thieves and murderers that call themselves the Merry Men? The very ones whose leader is scheduled to be held on trial tomorrow.”

The knife edge gleamed bright now, her pearl white teeth flashing as the sun sliced a single light across Lady Tremaine’s thin figure. “Why, the Prince would be disgraced. No, I’m afraid he’ll be forced to settle for one of the daughters of the lesser nobility. Either that or risk losing the crown to the North Realm’s growing reach.”

Ella took a step forward in her bare feet. “Thomas won’t care.”

Lady Tremaine’s hand plunged into her pocket as she tensed for the attack. It did not come.

Instead, Ella shook her head, tears falling down her cheeks as she said, “He won’t care what they say. He loves me.”

“Love?” Lady Tremaine asked in bewilderment before she began to laugh. Ella’s face crumbled, but she stood her ground. “Why, you poor fool,” her stepmother finally said. “You think love can win over logic? Over the way of things? Love,” she continued derisively, “only exists in stories. There is no room for love in the real world, child. Your prince is no different than any other man in this world. You mistake infatuation for love, lust for passion, and his lies as truth. He does not love you. He loves the idea of you. A meek little wife, a pretty little picture he can take out when he wants to look at it.”

Ella shook her head, turning her head ever so slightly to catch Lacey’s eye. “Belle,” she whispered. “Tell her she’s wrong.”

Lacey bowed her head, avoiding the pleading look in Ella’s eyes. No matter how much she wanted to believe in the prince, she had barely spoken to him. Lacey did not know this Prince Thomas like she had known Eric, who even then had surprised her with his devotion to Ariel. Eric had been a beloved prince of an affluent and prosperous kingdom, not a war-torn country on the brink of collapse. As much as she hated to admit it, Lacey agreed. From everything she had seen and heard, Prince Thomas could not afford to marry for love.

“See?” Lady Tremaine crowed. “Even the little loudmouth agrees with me. You know nothing of the way of the world, Cinderella. You’ll see.”
“Hey,” Lacey protested as Ella dashed away the tears pooling in her eyes. “She may not see things like we do,” Lacey said, “but she’s a better person than you or I will ever be.”

“Enough,” Lady Tremaine sighed. “I simply came to bring you provisions. In the morning, when I return, you’ll be free to go.”

“Go?” Ella squeaked. “Go where?”

Lady Tremaine did not do as anything undignified as shrug, but her small courtesy was as similar to the gesture as it could be. “Wherever it is that thieves and liars go, I suppose,” she said demurely, before she turned to leave.

“Wait a minute,” Lacey demanded, moving to intercept the door. However, the old crone was too fast for her. Within a moment, the large oak door swung shut in Lacey’s face, her fists hitting hard wood even as her hand grasped for the knob. The metallic sound of the key sliding home rang in the silence of the attic as the footsteps started away towards the second floor stairs. “Hey!” Lacey called out, slamming her fists against the door. “You can’t just leave us here!”

“She can,” Ella said behind her. The other woman moved to the window, the darkness beginning to settle even as the moons began to rise over the forests at the edge of the horizon. “She’s won.”

From below, there came the sound of the front door closing and then the sound of a carriage, the hired coach for the ladies, rolling away into the night. Moving to the window, they watched as it disappeared from sight. Ella’s eyes fluttered shut as she pressed her forehead against the window. Lacey however refused to give up. “He’ll come,” she declared, settling down onto the floor, crossing her legs under her to wait.

“Who?” Ella asked, turning to stare down at her.

“Your fairy godfather or whatever he is,” Lacey said. “He’ll come.”

Ella turned back to the window. After a moment, she asked, “Belle, have you ever been in love?”

Lacey opened her mouth to respond, the usual lie when she stopped herself. “No,” she said simply. “I’ve liked some more than others, wanted a few so badly I couldn’t think straight but no. I’ve never loved anyone.”

Ella turned to look down at her, shaking her head. The moons grew brighter in the sky outside, framing her dark hair with silver. “Surely, you’ve loved someone. Your parents at least.”

Lacey began to toy with a splintered floorboard, poking and prodding the sharp edges with the pad of her thumb. The slight pain kept her centered away from the thoughts that tried to reach out and grasp her. She pressed harder. “Yeah,” she murmured. “I guess I loved them.”

“You guess?” Ella asked, moving to sink down beside her. “Don’t you know?”

“I don’t know,” Lacey grumbled. “My mother died when I was young. Dad died a few years ago.”

“But-!”

“Love is weakness,” Lacey said, her voice low. She kept her eyes on her hands, ignoring Ella’s gaze. “I’ve seen what loves does to people, Ella.”

“So have I.”
“Oh, that’s rich,” Lacey laughed, breaking off a splinter in her fingers. “Look, I don’t need your pity.” She flicked her piece of wood over at Ella. The woman flinched slightly as it bounced off her knee. “I don’t need love or companionship. I was doing just fine on my own.”

“And now?” Ella asked her, reaching out to take her hands in her own warm ones. Lacey allowed it, simply because her hands were cold enough to be shaking. The room temperature was dropping rapidly now that the sun had set.

“Now, what?” Lacey snorted.

“How are you doing now?” Ella repeated. “Locked in an attic with someone you barely know.”

“I’ve had better days,” Lacey cracked a smile, shrugging one shoulder as she shifted her weight off her legs. It had the added bonus of forcing Ella to release her hands, leaving the other woman safely a few feet away again.

As the moonlight reached the top of the sky, Ella glanced forlornly back over her shoulder. There would be no transformation in the garden tonight. The moment was gone. Lacey wondered if somewhere, the wasted magic was finding its way back to the Imp, letting him know something was wrong.

“My father loved my mother,” Ella said softly. The other woman seemed intent on ignoring the obvious, dwelling on the past instead of thinking of their future. “He almost died when she did.” Lacey did not respond to this; she simply sat there, waiting for Ella to continue. “When Father brought her home…” Ella did not need to say her name, they both knew who she was referring to. “He told me that love was a choice. That we could open our hearts to others and learn to love them for who they are.”

Lacey couldn’t resist. “Did he honestly believe that?”

Ella did not reply, she simply shook her head. “He loved me. I know that, but I don’t think he could love anyone else, not like mother. And Stepmother...she knew it. Even before he died, I knew she was unhappy. I tried. For him, for her, for my mother…. to love her.”

“Ella,” Lacey said with a sigh. “Sometimes there are people you have to cut loose. Toxic people, no matter what you do, aren’t going to change.”

“She’s my family,” Ella protested. “Father would have wanted me-!”

“Your father,” Lacey interrupted, “would have wanted you to be loved and cared for, not taking care of that heartless bitch and her brainless kids. He would have wanted you to stand up for yourself, not sold off like cattle to the first suitor who’d have you.”

Lacey fell quiet, her words ringing in the air between them. Ella staring down at the floor, stunned. A small streak of ash on her cheek was smudged from tears.

“Jesus, Ella,” Lacey sighed as her words failed her. “I didn’t mean to tell you like that.”

“Who?” Ella asked, eyes locked on a warped board between them. Her voice shook slightly, but her shoulders were straight.

“Ella,” Lacey repeated but Ella shook her head, eyes lifting to hers.

“Who, Belle?” she demanded.

“So, that’s what she meant,” Ella whispered. “He’ll come to collect us in the morning then.”

“Yeah but-!”

Ella stood, moving back towards the window. The cracked pane whistled in the night breeze and Ella’s jagged reflection stared back at them from the moonlight. Her fingers twitched towards the shards, and Lacey tried to get to her feet.

“Hey,” Lacey exclaimed. “What did I say? Your Fairy whatever will come. You’re not going to even have to look at that bastard”

Ella nodded sadly but she didn’t say anything for a moment. “He nearly raped you last night,” Ella said quietly. “If she turns us over to him, I’ll do what I have to do.” She caught Lacey’s eyes in the glass. The tears and fear were gone. Now, there was just a steel determination. “I’ll do what I have to do to survive, Belle. I suggest you do the same.”

Wrapping her hand in her apron, Ella snapped off a piece of glass and tucked it in her pocket before she resumed her vigil at the window. Lacey returned to the floor, confident that any moment, the Imp would appear in his usual shower of smoke and magic to right this.

He didn’t.

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The sound of a key in the lock woke Lacey.

Lady Tremaine waltzed into the room, the sunlight dappling the floor around her. Every bone in Lacey’s body ached from the uncomfortable floor, her neck protesting at the sudden movement.

Ella stood at the window, unmoved from the night before. She nodded to her stepmother. “Morning,” she said politely. “Did you enjoy your ball?”

Lady Tremaine stared back at her, but there was a hint of agitation, a raw nerve behind the calm facade. As if Ella sensed it too, she asked, “Who is to be our new Queen?”

“The Crown Prince,” Lady Tremaine murmured distastefully, “has decreed he will marry the Lady Ella, often seen in the presence of the Fourth Kingdom’s Princess Belle.”

“Guess that shoots a hole in your logical plan, doesn’t it?” Lacey asked, shooting the woman a vengeful smile.

From the shadows in the hallway, a bulk figure emerged emerged, still dressed in evening clothes. “Shame that there is no such princess,” Nottingham said with a similar smile.

Lacey scrambled to her feet with a snarl. “You!” Her hands twisted into claws at her side. “You bastard!”

“My, my,” Lady Tremaine gasped in mock distress. “I did tell you she had a mouth on her.”

The Sheriff merely smiled wide. “I like them with spirit.”

“It won’t take him long to figure out who Ella is,” Lacey said over them. “Half the kingdom saw her face and now they know her name.”
“True,” Lady Tremaine agreed. “But if she’s married...”

Lacey flung an arm between them and Ella. “You are not going to sell her to this excuse for a man. I won’t let you.” In her pocket, one of the shards of glass and a piece of wood from the floor sat, waiting. She might not be able to do much, but she could put his eyes out. She could at least do that.

“Belle,” Ella said calmly, reaching out a cool hand and placing it on her shoulder. “Stop.”

Ella stood beside her, gazing down at her. “You can’t be seriously considering this,” Lacey said. “He’s-!”

“He’s a powerful man,” Ella finished for her, turning to the two in the doorway. “If I refuse to go with him, I dare say, I’ll be accused of theft and sent away with him regardless. Isn’t that right, Stepmother?”

“I did say she was clever,” Lady Tremaine mumbled to her companion.

The Sheriff’s eyes remained on Lacey. “I want that one too,” he declared, tongue darting out to lick at a half healed gash on his chin. Ella grew pale, but stayed ramrod straight. Lacey did not envy her poise. Let him see her seethe. She would scratch him bloody before she let him touch her again.

Lady Tremaine regarded her a moment before she nodded. “Very well. Take the pair. Now, go before my girls wake. I don’t want to upset them.”

The Sheriff took a menacing step forward, cracking his knuckles as he grinned down at them. Ella, however, stepped to meet him. She was just slightly shorter than him. “Enough. Sheriff, I accept your proposal.”

Lacey stared on, gobsmacked.

“I pity you,” Ella told her stepmother, looking past the Sheriff to where the woman lurked in the doorway. “I have tried to love you these past years, but I see now there is no love in your heart. ’As for you sir, you will not touch Belle’” she declared. “You’ll find me to be a jealous wife.”

For a moment, the two stared each other down, one pale skinned and armed with brute strength and the other tawny and slight, her will blazing like a beacon in the shadowy attic. Lacey and Lady Tremaine were all but forgotten as the two battled out their first skirmish in what promised to be a long war.

With a bow, the Sheriff conceded. “Agreed. However, a thief and conspirator of the Merry Men should be in jail,” Nottingham said. A sinking feeling began in Lacey’s stomach, already queasy on the lack of food and adrenaline. “I’ll send my guards up to collect her.”

“Perfectly right,” Lady Tremaine said even as Ella began to argue. “Congratulations on your upcoming wedding.”

“My thanks,” Nottingham said, grinning at them as he began to back away. “Ella, my dear,” he said, silencing her attempts to protest. “I shall arrange the wedding. Tomorrow, you will be the wife of the soon-to-be most powerful man in the Kingdom.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ella demanded.

“Change is coming,” the Sheriff laughed, disappearing out the door. “And you, dear wife, will be
“As will her family,” Lady Tremaine added. It was a neutral statement, but the threat was clear.

“As will her family,” the Sheriff agreed with a slight bow. “After you, Lady Tremaine.”

As the door swung closed behind them, Ella sank down to her knees, breaking silently as the chatter in the hallway receded. Lacey went to the window, noticing the guards lurking just below them, waiting for orders.

“Shit,” she grumbled. Hurrying back over to Ella, she sank down before her and shook her, until Ella looked up at her with owl-wide eyes. “Listen to me,” Lacey told her, fingers digging into the other woman’s arms. “Run. The second he lets you out of his sight, run and don’t look back.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be fine,” Lacey assured her. “I have a protector.”

Ella’s eyes grew alarmed. “I thought they were just scared from the woods. That they were just making up stories,” Ella murmured as a growingly familiar veil of doubt and distrust fell over her features. So, he children had told her after all. “You work for the Dark One?” Ella whispered. “He’s a bloodthirsty nightmare, how-?”

The Dark One, honestly. The damn Imp had too many names.

“Yes, the Dark One,” Lacey said. “He’s a pain in my ass, but he’s the only way I’m going to get home.”

Ella took a small step back from her. “You’re not a princess, are you? I should have known, but I didn’t want it to be over.”

“Forget all that,” Lacey said urgently, as the sound of boots on the stairs grew louder. “You have to promise me, Ella. Fight. Stay alive.”

After a long pause, Ella nodded. The sound of a key in the lock startled them both into rising as a group of guards burst into the room. “The pale one,” the leader said after a moment of consideration. “Leave the other one.”

Two beefy guards, dressed in pale grey uniforms strode over, seizing Lacey and nearly knocking Ella to the ground. “Hey!” Lacey growled, kicking out at one of their booted shins. “Get your hands off me!”

“Silence,” the leader yawned. “Or we’ll do it for you.”

“I’d like to see you-!”

Lacey did not see the club from behind, but she heard Ella’s cry right before she felt it. A moment after the bright, hot burst of pain, she slid boneless to the floor and knew no more.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

I know I just updated this yesterday but...you'll see.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sounds of someone arguing broke the veil of unconsciousness.

Grumbling, Lacey threw her arm over her face, desperate to stay asleep, chasing the last few thoughts of her dream. It had been interesting. She had been someone else. Someone searching for something, and if she could just go back to sleep, she might be able to find it.

“Come on, Belle,” someone whispered. “Wake up now. Show them you’re more than some fainting maiden.”

Memories fluttered into her conscious mind, reminding her where she was, what had happened, what was going to happen. She shuddered at them, holding her arms closer to her chest, curling in on herself to avoid it all. Still, the idea she was a fainting maiden bothered her. It accompanied the throbbing pain just under the crown of her head. “I didn’t faint,” Lacey corrected groggily, fingers going to the sore spot where the club had collided with her skull. She rolled onto her side, away from the speaker. “Now, shut up and let me go back to sleep.”

A masculine laugh, short and sweet, rang out ever so briefly. Someone’s foot pressed into her back. “Now, now, none of that.”

“Excuse me,” Lacey growled, twisting her head over her shoulder to peer at the unwelcome nagger. “If I’m to be a prisoner, I can do whatever the hell I- Robin?”

Rolling over quickly, Lacey launched herself at the sitting figure beside her. The man grunted as she fell on top of him, laughing as she clung to his shoulders. “There, now,” he whispered into her hair. “It’s alright, you’re safe now.”

Pressing back away from him, Lacey frowned at him in the semidarkness. “Don’t be stupid,” she told him. “We’re anything but safe. We’re prisoners of that fucking lunatic for christ’s sake.”

Robin blinked in bafflement. “For a woman, you speak like a sailor. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“I’m not from around here,” Lacey sighed, releasing him to sit back on her knees before him. He moved his arms from her back, his chains clinking against the stone floor. His feet were shackled too, the chain disappearing into the shadows where the walls met in the corner. Lacey lifted a hand to his face, ghosting over the deep cut on his forehead and the purpling bruise surrounding his left eye. “They did a number on you, didn’t they?” she murmured. “God, Marian must be in a state.”

“She knows the way of it,” Robin said easily. If Lacey had not been so close to him, she may not have noticed the way his voice faltered ever so slightly at his own lie. “She’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, if they don’t find out she’s the one who’s been helping you,” Lacey agreed. “Lucky for us, we’ve got a scapegoat.” Robin lifted his right eyebrow, blood encrusted from the gash on his head.
“I’m already in jail,” Lacey said with a shrug of her shoulders. “What are they going to do? Arrest me again?”

“More likely to behead you,” Robin corrected. “Traitor of the crown and all that.”

“What is it with you people and kings?” Lacey grumbled. The dungeons around them smelled of mold and filth, a slightly sweet smell of decay making it all the more pungent. Her arms and legs were free of shackles, but she did not feel any better for it. She let her fingers roam the rough edges of the floor, finding stones and hay scattered underneath her.

She checked her pockets, hoping that the shard of glass or splinter of wood from the attic would still be there. It appeared that the guards were as thorough as they were ruthless. Her pockets were empty. Beside her, Robin sat, quietly amused as he watched her pat down her pockets. “Your trial is today,” she told him after a moment. “The Sheriff bragged about it to Lady Tremaine.”

Robin did not wince or groan, but nodded thoughtfully. “I assumed as much,” he said calmly. “Prisoners such as myself are rarely left to rot. Waste of a spectacle.”

Outside, a guard called from down the hall, and a riotous laughter followed as booted footsteps passed just by their door. Lacey and Robin fell silent. Although they were the only prisoners in this dungeon, they remained lightly guarded. The Sheriff apparently did not want his two prizes to be bothered.

“Well,” Robin said as the last footstep fell away. “Since they brought you in, they’ve upped the guard to three. Makes things a bit trickier, I suppose.”

Lacey stood, making her way to the door. A small bolt hole was slid shut, so there was no way to see out into the hallway beyond it. The windows, high slits in the wall, were almost ten feet off the ground. Lacey had the beginning ideas of a plan. “How tall are you?” she asked Robin.

Just tall enough it seemed. Standing on his shoulders and ignoring his well-meaning jokes about her being light as a feather, Lacey grasped the twin bars of the window, pulling herself up slightly to see outside. They were not in the castle proper, but she recognized the courtyard from the east. She and Ella had run through it just the night before, heading towards the forest gate. She whispered that down to Robin.

“What’s happening out there?” he asked, barely winded from her standing on top of him.

Lacey bit her lip, wiggling her stiff shoulders from sleeping on floors these past few nights, and tried to concentrate. The sun was high in the sky, at least late afternoon judging by the sweat stains on a few of the workers milling about. One stood just feet away from them, taking a break by leaning against his ax.

“They’re building something,” Lacey told Robin.

“A gallows?”

Lacey shook her head, before remembering he couldn’t see her from down there. “No,” she said. “More like… setting up for something or other.”

There was bales of hay lying here and there, all stacked in the distance. She watched as someone leaned against one, quickly straightening it as it shifted somewhat to the left. Puzzled, she turned to peer out towards the right, when she saw the painters busy at work on their knees. Round objects covered in animal skins lay before them, red, blue, and yellow circles being added to the skins by hand.
“It’s an archery range!” Lacey declared, bending down to whisper to Robin. “They’re getting ready to host an archery contest! Why the hell are they doing that?”

Robin laughed, bending down. Lacey slipped gently off his shoulders, peering back up at the window. “They hope to capture a thief,” Robin said, moving back to the center of the room. His chains clinked behind him, like snakes following after their master.

“You’re already captured,” Lacey pointed out, joining him. She sat down on the floor, crisscrossed legs mirroring Robin’s. “Bit wasteful, isn’t it?”

He smiled, his dimples disappearing under his high cheekbones as his thin lips slashed into a devil-may-care grin. “Yes, but the Sheriff can’t resist showing off,” he told her, tweaking a stray curl that had escaped her pins. “He’s going to make a game out of it. Defeat me in front of a crowd, and then preside over my execution.”

Lacey sighed, flopping backwards so her arms were behind her head as she stared up at the windows along the wall. Robin joined her, the chains slinking and chiming against each other as he settled. “Tell me, Robin,” Lacey said in hopes of keeping the fear abated. “How does one become a bandit?”

“Someone comes to your home and takes everything you’ve ever known and loved,” Robin answered. “You learn quickly how to take when someone shows you how.”

“The war?” Lacey figured, crossing a foot over her ankle. The hairs of her leg rubbed against each other where her drawers ended, just past her knee. She remembered the feel of smooth legs in a sundress in the summer and wondered if it would be worth it to demand the Imp to provide her a razor of some sort. Some men in this world were clean shaven, surely razors existed. There was always a prickling of hair in her armpits, long enough to probably braid by now. She shuddered. She missed waxings, manicures and pedicures and a good facial. God, she missed spas.

Ignorant of her musings, Robin continued on. “The Invasion,” Robin corrected. “The Third Lands had always been a part of the First Kingdom. We just had tribes instead of realms, chiefs instead of kings, and freedom instead of kneeling. That changed when the pale men came.”

“So, you followed them back to their lands,” Lacey guessed, snapping out of her own thoughts on personal grooming. “Guerilla warfare on their turf?”

“I have no idea what you just said,” Robin told her. “I simply take from the rich, and give to the poor. They have enough here not to miss it. Besides, my people are starving in the lands beyond the castles.”

“Explains why you were in the forest hiding. And Ella? How does she fit into all this?”

“Our Friar Tuck used to be a religious man from this kingdom. He came to the fronts to give last rights to the men, but when he saw how we were treated… he changed sides and became an outlaw.

‘He knew the Baron Tremaine. He said if we ever had need to go to the Baron for aid, but he died in the time Tuck had been away to the Free Lands. Instead, when we arrived at the door one day in desperate need, we found his daughter, nearly of age with me.” Robin paused, chuckling. “She was magnificent. Used a broom to bar the doorway, and threatened Little John with a butcher knife. Wasn’t until she recognized Tuck that she heard us out.”

Lacey laughed. “I would have liked to see that. I’ve only ever seen her cow under her Stepmother.”
“Now, Belle,” Robin sighed. “You can’t judge a person by the way they survive. I went to the earth, hiding in the leaves and letting my prey come to me. My people would have once chased us from our tribes for such cowardice. Now, we’re the only resistance left.”

“What else were you supposed to do?” Lacey asked, propping herself up on her elbow. “You would have been destroyed if you tried to march against the kingdoms.”

Robin lifted his bruised eyebrow, and Lacey flushed as her own argument hit home. “Oh, fine,” she snapped, wrenching her eyes away. “She still could have left. She could have gotten out of there.”

“We needed her,” Robin sighed. “If she had left us, we would have starved in the winter months. Her little mice have kept us alive.”

Lacey grimaced. “You eat the kitchen mice?”

Robin began to laugh, rolling over to face her as big belly laughs shook his muscular frame.

Lacey frowned at him, staying on her back, her cheek cold against the floor. “Stop laughing,” she grunted. “You look ridiculous.”

“Ella’s mice are merchants, travelers, and artisans,” Robin said, gasping for air. His eyes returned to the door, listening for sounds of someone in the hall. “Ella Tremaine may not be known to the nobility, but she is very much a leader in her community. She feeds the starving, shelters the homeless, and helps those without hope. Did you think she simply sat there in the fireplace for all those years? No, she worked the skin off her bones to make sure her Father’s estate stayed strong in the war. All the other estates lost sons and fathers to the war, but the Tremaine estate stayed strong, ruled unseen from the kitchen while the Lady Tremaine squandered the fortune away on clothes and appearances.”

Lacey sat bolt upright. “So, the Tremaine estate is powerful?”

“Most powerful one in the realm at this time I would say,” Robin nodded.

“So, that’s why the Sheriff wants her,” Lacey growled. “He’s after more than just a title.”

“He what!” Robin exclaimed, bolting to his feet. “Did her Stepmother actually agree to it? She would have to be mad!”

“Lady Tremaine seems to think it’s just because Ella’s of noble birth,” Lacey said, reaching over to clasp Robin’s wrist in hers. The locking mechanism looked simple enough. “She just wants Ella out of the way so her daughters can inherit the lands.”

“No,” Robin said. “The Tremaine Estate is practically penniless, but it’s very well respected. If the heir is produced, the other Estates of the realm will rally to her. If her husband goes against the King, and she is seen supporting it...”

“Thomas,” Lacey groaned. “He must have known. That’s why he made the decree.”

Robin grinned. “Prince Thomas is, my apologies, Belle, a well-intentioned idiot. He has a good heart, but nothing between his ears but what someone whispers into it. If I had to hazard a guess, I would say the prince has no idea who Ella truly is. He’s a good man, but not a leader. To be truthful, it’s been the very devil to love the woman actually responsible for running the kingdom you’re vowed to ruin.”

“Marian!” Lacey declared, smacking her forehead. If Thomas was as hopeless as Robin said, it
made sense why Marian, poor low-born Marian, had been chosen for leadership in the castle. There could be no one better suited to guide the Prince than the person he trusted most, his best friend since childhood. “We need to get to Marian. She can sort this out. Thomas made a vow to marry his Lady Ella at the ball last night, we just need him to find her before anyone beats him to the altar.”

“You’ll have to do it,” Robin decided. “When a guard comes in, I can distract him.”

“Forget that,” Lacey replied. “It has to be you. I’d blunder my way straight into the nearest guard or get lost in the woods within ten minutes.” Pulling a pin from her hair, she plunged it into the lock of Robin’s manacles, and twisted. A moment later, there was an audible click as the locking mechanism sprang free. The manacles fell off Robin’s wrists into Lacey’s waiting grip. Lacey hurried to repeat her success on his other wrist before kneeling down to free the lock between his feet.

A moment later, Robin stood before her unshackled. “How?” he asked, rubbing his wrists in disbelief.

Lacey pushed the pin back into her hair with a grin. “Summer camp. The counselors locked up their alcohol. You could say I learned to liberate it.”

“You are a strange and wonderful sort of woman, Belle,” Robin Hood declared, shaking his head. “If my heart did not belong to another...”

“God, you better watch that,” Lacey grinned at him saucily. “If I didn’t like Marian half as well as I do, I wouldn’t hesitate to take advantage of being alone with you in a locked room.”

It was worth the probable concussion, Lacey decided, to see Robin Hood blush.

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In the end, it was surprisingly easy to knock out a guard.

As Lacey buttoned her bodice back up, Robin dragged the unconscious fellow deep into the shadows before he began to undress him. He ignored Lacey’s offer to help, despite her reassurances she wasn’t a stranger to naked men. Robin was still a little dazed from Lacey’s distraction tactic.

“He smells like a rotting fish,” Robin complained, laying the jailer’s clothes out next to him. “God knows the last time he’s bathed.”

“All yours then,” Lacey conceded gracefully. She leaned against the nearest wall, cocking her head as she watched Robin reach for his own vest. Realizing she was watching, Robin turned and raised a single eyebrow at her. “What?”

He simply continued to stare back at her, a bemused smile playing at the corner of his thin lips. With one hand, he twisted a finger in a circle.

Lacey groaned. “Fine,” she said, turning to face the wall. “Spoilsport.”

After a few moments, Robin stood dressed and ready. With the keys jangling in his hands, he looked back at the now locked up guard before back to Lacey. “He’ll be out cold for a bit,” he told her. “If he wakes up, don’t go near him.”

“Not going to be a problem,” Lacey replied. “You better get going before they come to get you for the trial.”
Robin hesitated at the door. “You’ll be all right?”

Lacey grinned at him, patting his shoulder fondly. “I’ll be fine. I can hold my own until the cavalry comes.”

Saying their goodbyes, Robin disappeared out the door, locking it behind him. He left the latch open, wavering in the hallway. “Go,” Lacey urged him. “Find Marian and then get me the hell out of here.”

Before he could respond, booted footsteps were heard, tromping down the stairs. Robin tipped the guard’s hat at her with his forefinger, winked and then disappeared in the opposite direction.

Lacey swallowed, wrapping her fingers around the edge of the small bolt hole. She had to stand on her tiptoes to see out of it. She had gone nearly thirty years without ever being arrested in the real world, and here she could barely manage to go a day before someone felt the need to lock her up. At least in the last dungeon, she hadn’t the very real worry of a sadistic rapist holding the key.

As the guards approached, Lacey stepped back from the door. The steps were growing louder, which meant Robin would have little to no head start at this rate. Any second, they’d open the door, realize the figure in the corner was not the famous thief, and she was going to pay the price of their disappointment. She just ardently hoped the guards were more afraid of the Sheriff than she was.

The scuffle of boots came to a stop outside the door. Lacey’s heart began to beat faster and faster. Her breathing strived to match, growing shallow. Reaching behind her, she wrapped a hand around a column, using the cold old stone to support her as the key turned in the lock. Outside, someone whispered before they fell abruptly silent.

The door swung open, revealing at least ten figures standing in formation around the doorway. The chief guard, designated by a star on his breast, stood back from the door, bowing just to the left of the doorway. “Your Excellency,” he mumbled abashedly.

A moment later, a slight figure replaced the larger guard. Slightly taller than Lacey, he barely came up to the guard’s chin, but he somehow filled the doorway. His face was in shadow, the torch light behind him overpowering the weak sun spots that pock-marked the dungeon.

Lacey cleared her throat, and in her best flippant tone addressed the newcomer. “I’m afraid my cellmate is sleeping,” she told the group. “You’ll have to come back when he wakes up.”

The head guard leveled a finger at her in warning. “Silence, wench!”

The figure beside him, lifted a hand and instead it was the guard who fell silent. “No need for that,” the figure commented in a low, smooth baritone. “Tell me, Hedberg, why is it that the lady has been imprisoned with a male prisoner?”

“Sheriff wanted her well looked after, Your Excellency,” the unfortunate guard croaked. “Which means—”
“I do not need you to explain the man’s depravities,” the slight man interrupted.

“Begging your pardon, Your Excellency,” Hedburg offered tentatively. “We put her with Robin Hood, because he’s known to be a thief with honor. He’s locked up in chains, nice and tight. He wouldn’t presume to touch a lady.”

“No, and believe me I tried,” Lacey added with a sigh.

This caught the attention of His Excellency Whoever He Was. He turned back to her, remaining just in the shadows so she still could not make out much more than the fine cut of his clothes. He wore an immaculately cut suit, less militaristic than the one Thomas has worn with long coattails over straight trousers.

“Amusing,” he replied. His tone was dry enough to indicate it was anything but. “Perhaps you would like to stay here then? Try your luck again when he wakes?”

“No need for that,” Lacey said. “He’s a dead man walking according to that fellow.”

A guard elbowed the one who had spoken earlier. He winced, glaring at his companion before letting his gaze fall back to the floor.

“Oh,” Lacey said with a grin. “Was I not supposed to know that?”

“Regardless,” the man in charge said. “My visit has nothing to do with the so-called prince of thieves.”

Lacey tilted her chin at him. “Oh?” Lacey asked, waiting for him to say more. Men talked. They loved to hear their own voices, their own opinions repeated back to them. Lacey knew this. Hell, that’s how she had gotten to where she was in her career. Just sit back and let them talk, worked every time.

To her surprise, the man did not reply. He simply crossed his arms, stared back at her and waited. She narrowed her eyes as silence began to fill the room. Every second she spent distracting them was more time for Robin to escape.

After a minute, the guards began to fidget, some darting looks between the two of them in open-mouthed astonishment. “Your Excellency,” Hedburg hedged, but the man simply shook his head, effectively silencing the head guard.

Lacey, intent on her goal, still began to grow annoyed. This worked. This always worked. Taking a step forward, craning her neck to get a better look at the man in shadow, she prodded him. “Did you come here for anything in particular?” she asked him. “Or just to stare?”

He did not laugh, just nodded. “If you would be so kind as to come with me?”

Lacey did not move. “Why would I do that?” she demanded. A few guards shot her murderous looks, while others looked stunned. She ignored them.

Hedburg on the other hand growled, “How dare you speak to a Royal Ambassador like that, you little maggot!”

He advanced into the dungeon with his hand raised high. Lacey took a step to meet him, tilting her face up to meet the blow. She did not see stars. Just a white hot flash of light, and the sound of someone gasping echoing in her ears as pain blossomed not only on her cheek but across the base of her skull. Clutching her cheek, Lacey lifted her head to stare back up at the mammoth man. “I
am getting sick of being concussed,” she seethed up at him, feeling tears prickling her eyes. She raised her own hand up, hating the way it trembled ever so slightly. “If you raise your hand to me again, you had better kill me or I swear….”

Hedburg seemed to think this a fine idea. His hand went to his side where a club hung. Lacey had a concussion before, barely two months ago, and by some luck had barely avoided getting a second one earlier today. She did not plan on another one. If this oaf moved to strike her, all it would take was a well-placed knee to bring him down before he could.

“Hedburg!”

“Your Excellency?”

“Are you familiar with the punishments for striking a superior?”

“I am, Your Excellency,” Hedburg grunted, eying Lacey’s hand maliciously. “Losing a hand, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. You have just struck a princess of royal blood. So, which is it to be? Your left or your right hand?”

Lacey’s breath abandoned her. Stepping out from behind a now frozen Hedburg, she approached the figure in the doorway. If he believed her to be a princess, he was no friend of the Sheriff’s. “Who are you?” she asked. “Did Marian send you?”

“Princess Belle, I do hate to repeat myself. Seeing as the dungeons lack the proper accommodations for a lady of your station, I will ask again only once. Are you ready to leave?”

“As soon as you tell me who you are,” Lacey replied. In the corner, a slight movement alerted her to the fact that the fake Robin was beginning to wake up. Torn between buying Robin more time and getting the hell out of dodge, Lacey still couldn’t help feeling just a trifle defiant. She hated when men didn’t do what they were supposed to and this man was refusing to play by the rules.

“Your Excellency,” someone from the side of the door whispered. “We should be heading back to the castle soon.”

Ignoring this, the man did not waver nor did Lacey. Finally, with a bow, he sank before Lacey in a courtly gesture. After a moment, he straightened. He had dark brown eyes, lined with crow’s feet and set in a sharp angular face. “I have many titles. My current one being ambassador,” the man replied with a sharp twist of his thin lips. “However, for all intents and purposes, Your Royal Highness may call me whatever she likes.”

“I would like a name,” Lacey demanded curtly, growing tired of his power play. “Or should I just call you my hero?”

“That’ll do fine, I think,” he replied drolly.

The man beside the Ambassador grew nervous, toying with his lace cuffs as he shifted his weight from one side to the other. “I think your lapdog has to pee,” Lacey said, nodding in his direction. The ambassador turned, raising an eyebrow at his companion who flushed at the attention.

“My apologies!” he exclaimed, freezing where he stood. “It’s just-we were expected back at the castle over an hour ago, Ambassador Gold.”

The Ambassador sighed as Lacey smiled smugly. “Gold, hmm?” she purred. “See, that wasn’t so
hard, was it?” Pushing past him, she moved into freedom until her back was to the entire party. “Well, shall we?”

Gold offered his arm which Lacey took as they began their way up the stairs. Lacey made sure to mentally record every nook and cranny, every twist and turn, just in case she found herself back here sooner rather than later.

Gold tightened his grip on her arm ever so slightly. “No need for that,” he mumbled just loud enough for her to hear, but so their entourage could not. “You won’t be returning.”

“So sure?” Lacey replied.

He only grinned. “Of many, many things.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I want to thank you all for being so patient. I know a lot of readers have been staring at the screen going- “Okay but where is the Imp?” And I'm sorry that this arc took longer than I had meant for it to but I hope now you see I've been building up for this huge reveal.

We're going to wrap up here in the First Kingdom in the next couple of chapters but thank you for sticking with this story, and these characters, and all the in between. I'm very grateful and I've learned a lot from your feedback. I had written up to Chapter 31 but I have some great ideas now to move forward and I hope you stay with me as I explore this new dynamic between these two.

I've had this idea since I started the Gate and I'm thrilled beyond words to finally get here. I hope you love it. I hope you were surprised and I hope you're excited to see what happens next.
By the time they had reached the carriage, Lacey was thoroughly enjoying herself.

As the guards watched them leave, some appeared confused, others impressed while certain ones grumbled under their breaths. Lacey winked at those grumbling even as Gold ushered her out of the prison door. She was unable to help the grin on her face, giddy with relief as they stepped outside.

“Your Excellency,” the unfortunate captain of the guards called out after them. Gold paused just short of the drive where the carriage waited for them. “Perhaps you could be convinced to wait for the Sheriff?” Hedburg eyed Lacey in distaste. “As I protested earlier, this is very unorthodox.”

“As I stated previously,” Gold replied, “I have other matters to attend to than soothing the ruffled feathers of a local Sheriff. Now, if you’ll excuse us…”

Gold started forward down the stairs of the prison, but Lacey hung back. His grip on her arm jerked her forward slightly but she held her ground as she smiled up at Hedburg’s twisted features. “Do thank the Sheriff for his hospitality,” Lacey said.

Before Hedburg could reply, Gold tugged her away, dragging her down the stairs with a bruising strength. “Hey!” Lacey protested, struggling to keep up with the slight man. “Lay off!”

Gold did not such thing, pulling her forward. “If you could keep your attitude in line, perhaps I would be inclined to accommodate you.”

They arrived at the carriage. Gold’s toady from earlier hurried forward to fling the door open for them. Lacey wrenched her arm free as Gold glanced up at the afternoon sun as if gauging the time. The waning light lit his face, and Lacey was able to get a proper look at him.

He was older than she had previously thought. Lines surrounded his eyes and mouth, but it did not age him more than define him. His eyes were speckled with gold in the sunlight and his lashes were longer than any man had a right to. But it was his lips, pursed in a thin but steady line that caught Lacey’s attention, the way they curled even in repose that hinted at the personality of her otherwise mysterious rescuer.

He turned, catching her staring and those same lips quirked upwards in an amused smirk. Lacey returned the sardonic look, offering him her hand. After a hesitation, he took her hand in his to help her into the carriage.

As Lacey settled into the cushioned seats, Gold joined her, moving to the opposite side of the carriage as his man closed the door behind them and disappeared to the front of the carriage. Lacey leaned out the window as the horses jerked forward. The prison rolled away behind her as they headed towards freedom.

“When they discover the thief gone, they’ll be baying for your blood.”
Lacey shrugged, settling back into the seat as the carriage rocked unevenly across the makeshift roads. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said, glancing down at her filthy fingernails. She buffed them on her dress as he watched her. “Thank you,” she added. “For getting me out of there.”

For a second, he looked taken aback. He opened his mouth as if to say something but then tossed his head, turning to look out the window. “It’s a short drive to the castle,” he told her. “I do hope you’ve learned something from this.”

“Sure have,” Lacey shot back. “Make friends with people in high places.”

He didn’t respond, but a ghost of a smile flitted across his face. The mountains glowed in the sunlight. The forest shifted in the wind, and Lacey craned her neck to see how far the forest stretched on before them. “Like I said, it won’t be long,” Gold said, noticing her interest. “The jail was built close by in the town market square to alleviate the dungeons.”

“Charming,” Lacey drawled. “I suppose that makes some kind of twisted sense.”

“I suppose,” Gold answered vaguely.

“So, tell me,” Lacey pressed, scooting forward on the edge of her seat. “If Marian didn’t send you, who did?”

He shot her a devilish grin. “That would be telling,” he replied. Lacey did not smile back, but she was invigorated for the first time in what felt like forever. Here was a man that was her equal, she could tell by the way in the way he held back, twisting words into empty promises and crafting assumptions as if they were truths.

“I must say I’m disappointed,” she admitted.

He turned from the window, leaning forward towards her. “Oh?”

“Yes,” she replied. He was not handsome, more magnetic as if there was a secret current pulling her towards him. Lacey was not entirely sure if it was the head injury, the exhaustion or the uncertainty but she gave into it, wanting to see where it took her. “I’m disappointed that I did not meet you last night or the one before.”

There was danger here, but it was not the danger like that she had known at the hands of the Sheriff or the selkie or even the kelpie’s draw. No, this was something different entirely.

The driver called out a greeting as the gates of the castle rolled by their windows.

“I’m not one for parties,” Gold said as the carriage rattled up to the castle stairs. “Perhaps I may have decided otherwise if I had know my reception would be this warm.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Lacey told him, her voice pitched low. He quirked an eyebrow at her but before he could respond, they rolled to a halt and the toady hustled down to get the door for them.

“Your Royal Highness,” his man panted, holding his gloved hand out for her. Gold sat silent in the corner now, ignoring her. Lacey recognized the game, and let the man help her down. She did not wait for Gold, entering the castle on her own. She was unsure of her welcome here, but if Gold had brought her here, she would at least be admitted.

A footman swung the door open, eyes averted as Lacey entered. She was still wearing Cinderella’s
hand me downs and looked more a scullery maid than a princess. Gold followed behind her, but the sound of someone hurrying towards them made Lacey turn to the east hall.

Marian was briskly making her way towards Lacey, her face scrunched up in irritation. Lacey took a step backwards, hearing Gold chuckle as she brushed against him. “Steady,” he whispered to her, his fingers brushing the exposed skin at her wrist.

She shot him a look, but did not move her hand. Marian, eyes fixed on Lacey, opened her mouth to deliver what promised to be a heated diatribe and skidded to a halt before them as she saw who Lacey was with.

She sank into a curtsey. “Your Excellency,” Marian greeted formally. “I did not realize you were familiar with Princess Belle.”

“I believe my business is my own,” Gold replied as Marian straightened. The woman flushed but kept a polite look on her face. Lacey had to hide a smile, knowing Marian was seething on the inside. Gold bowed low to Lacey. “I will leave you in the capable hands of the Castellan,” he murmured. “Do try and stay out of future trouble, Princess.”

“I’ll try,” Lacey said, grinning down at him. “I’m afraid I can’t promise anything.”

With a nod to Marian, he left them, disappearing into the west wing as his man followed behind him. The nervous man shot a look back at Marian who waved him on. Her eyes narrowed at the ambassador’s retreating back. The ambassador was impossible, and entirely full of himself, but he also had a quick wit, intelligent eyes, and, as Lacey knew could see, a rather impressive backside.

Lacey, content to watch him walk away, almost fell sideways when Marian rounded on her.

“And you!” Marian exclaimed, swatting her. “What were you thinking?”

“Hey!” Lacey protested, looking around for potential witnesses. “I just learned what happens when people hit royalty, so if you want to keep that hand-!”

“Yeah?” Marian asked her, nostrils flaring. “Do you know what they do to people who pretend to be royalty?”

Lacey swallowed but kept her face as neutral as possible. “I don’t know what you’re insinuating.”

“I checked, Belle.”

Before Lacey could reply, a gaggle of nobles entered, chatting and looking at interest at the two plainly dressed ladies standing openly in the hall. They stopped in surprise, taking in Lacey’s appearance with horrified giggles. Marian nodded to them in greeting before linking her arm in Lacey’s. She steered her towards the east hall. “There is no such Princess Belle in the Fourth Kingdom or any other kingdom.”

“Ow,” Lacey complained, wrenching her arm free as they turned the corner. “Okay, fine. I’m not a princess, happy?”

“No, not really,” Marian sighed. “You’re going to have to keep pretending to be one if we’re going to get through this.”

“Wait, if you’re so mad, why allow the ambassador to bail me out?”

Marian shook her head, her hair bouncing about her cheek. “Allow?” she laughed mirthlessly. “I
nearly panicked when the guard at the front gate reported he had left the grounds. Then, I find out not only is he at the jail, but he’s liberating a woman from the lowest dungeons. A woman seen dancing in these very halls, a princess of the royal blood!”

“I don’t understand,” Lacey said, following Marian as they headed towards a back stair case. “How did he know I was there?”

“As if I have any idea! He went on his own agenda,” Marian concluded. “For all intents and purposes, it appears Ambassador Gold wants you here. Meaning you’re going back to being a princess.”

“You’re scared of him,” Lacey realized, pulling up her skirt to follow Marian up the stairs. “He didn’t seem all that terrifying to me…”

“He’s the Ninth Kingdom’s ambassador, Lacey,” Marian hissed over her shoulder. “When he showed up unannounced for the ball, I thought the King was going to have a nervous collapse on the spot.”

They fell silent as a host of maids appeared on the top of the stairs. They all curtsied prettily to the two of them, staring in open interest at Lacey. “Run along,” Marian instructed. “Lady Georgina was asking for someone to help with her hair.”

Two girls nodded, peeling away to head towards the lady in question. Lacey followed Marian the other way, coming to a door which Marian twisted open to reveal a large four poster bed. “In here,” Marian instructed, nudging her inside. Lacey obeyed, entering into the blue and white china-patterned room. Marian entered behind her, slamming the door shut. “Tell me everything,” she demanded, crossing her arms under her ample chest.

“Marian…”

Marian stomped her foot, and pointed a finger at her, cheeks flushed. “Don’t you dare,” she snapped. “Robin is in prison right now because of you. Thomas has been locked in his room all day sulking, and I’m at my wits end trying to keep this place running while the thrice cursed ambassador of the Ninth Kingdom waltzes about our castle, looking into matters he should not be looking into!”

Lacey faltered at this onslaught, trying to figure out where she should begin. “Okay, first of all,” she started, “Robin’s escaped. He’s on his way now to find you if that makes you feel any better. Thomas is going to have to get over himself because Ella has been engaged to the Sheriff of Nottingham and needs our help. As far as Gold, I’ve never met him before in my life, but he seems harmless enough to me.”

Marian snorted. “Yes, Belle, because the Dark One’s personal ambassador is the one person a king wants running around when the kingdom is dealing with the aftereffects of a war and the heir to the throne is acting like a child instead of a leader.”

Lacey didn’t hear anything after the first bit. Her entire body went completely numb, mouth agape. The man whose backside she had just been admiring worked for the Imp. Meaning their shared acquaintance was sitting somewhere twiddling his thumbs laughing at this whole fiasco.

When Lacey failed to respond, Marian cocked her head at her. “What’s wrong with you?” she asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Lacey’s fingers gripped the cotton fabric of her skirt and squeezed. As soon as the situation with
Ella was resolved, she was going to find Ambassador Gold and give him a piece of her mind. She had liked him, hell she had thanked him! Still seething, Lacey put on her best interview face, hoping like hell Marian would buy it so she would leave and she could destroy something. “It’s nothing,” she lied through her gritted teeth. “Just hungry.”

“I’ll have a maid bring you something,” Marian grumbled. She was obviously still angry from the deceit, wanting as badly to leave as Lacey wanted her to go. “You’ll stay here unless I come for you. I can’t have you roaming the halls too.”

“You can’t trust a liar,” Lacey translated for her. “That’s fine, but I promise you I want nothing more than to help Ella and Robin right now.” Marian looked at her doubtfully. “I promise,” Lacey swore. “Well, besides a nap and something to eat.”

Marian still didn’t look convinced. “I’ve got to go before someone misses me but I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

With that, Marian exited the room, leaving Lacey alone with a lot of questions and a growing desire to wring the neck of the Imp. At this rate, it was unlikely she was going to survive this world for another month, much less the next eight months.

Flinging herself down on the bed, Lacey stared up at the white canopy overhead as her adrenaline ebbed away, leaving her sore and tired, and her head aching. She hadn’t thought about it much but if she had kept track of the days, it was March now. Back home, spring was starting instead of the fall creeping into the air here. She wondered what winter would be like in a magical kingdom, if it snowed.

She’d worry about it later, she decided, closing her eyes.

First, she would sleep.

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“Marian, for god’s sake, slow down!”

Ignoring Lacey completely, the castellan continued to talk as she hurried around the room, closing the blinds as night started to fall over the land. “If all of that goes well, then Friar Tuck will marry them in the forest. Easy enough to tell the nobles there was an intimate wedding, everyone will be tripping over themselves to say they were there. No one will dare admit they weren’t.” Having finished explaining her detailed plan to not only liberate Ella from the Sheriff but also get Robin safely out of the realm, Marian turned her flushed face to Lacey. “Well, don’t just sit there!” she exclaimed, waving her from her spot on the settee. “You need to collect Thomas before his father drags him in front of the peers!”

Lacey finished toeing on the heeled satin slipper that Marian had brought up to her. It was dyed purple, matching the rich color of the dress she wore. Lacey plucked at the odd little bows that lined either sides of the full skirt, laid over black brocade. “Are you sure there’s nothing else I can wear?” Lacey asked Marian. “It’s kind of itchy.”

Marian shook her head before coming back over to rearrange the neckline, lingering at the tulle sleeves that hung just off her shoulders. “I’ll have you know,” she said fiercely. “This was my favorite dress of the Queen’s. She only wore it once but I remember how beautiful she looked that night...”

Her voice trailed off, and Lacey sighed. “Fine, if you’re going to be maudlin about it, I’ll wear it.”
“That look is back in style,” Marian said defensively. “Stop complaining or I’ll go get the pink nightmare I had to wear the past three nights.”

“This is fine,” Lacey said quickly, picturing the fringed ruffles clearly in her mind. Downstairs, the castle was preparing for the royal decree. The King, as Marian had told her, had been beside himself at his son’s headstrong behavior. Apparently, no one had expected Thomas to be defiant enough to go against everyone’s expectations. His current behavior was the talk of the entire realm.

“Now,” Marian said, stepping back and clapping her hands together. “Any questions?”

“Get Thomas to the Sheriff’s, free Ella and then escape into the woods where Thomas will pardon Robin and the Merry Men. After that, Tuck will marry them and we can all come back to the castle and have breakfast.”

The usually pleasant-faced Marian scowled. “This isn’t a joke,” she said, putting her hands on her hips. “It’s the very future of our realm.”

“You mean, it’s your one chance of living happily ever after,” Lacey snapped back. Marian looked affronted but Lacey, tired of being talked down, did not back down. “Don’t give me that face,” she said. “You finally have a chance to get Robin out of the woods and into your bed and you’re taking it!” Marian’s face flushed pink, eyes wide as she clamped her mouth shut. “Who cares about Ella or Thomas?”

“Stop,” Marian said, blinking back angry tears.

Lacey ignored her. “You get this right and you can be married right alongside them!”

“No!” Marian exclaimed. “I have duties. I have responsibilities and I can’t throw it all away. Not even for Robin!”

“Bullshit,” Lacey exclaimed. “You’re scared. God, look at you. It was fun playing scandal but now that shit’s hit the fan, you’re too afraid to admit it even to yourself!”

Marian took two steps over to her and lifted her hand to smack her. Lacey caught the round wrist neatly. Marian struggled to hold back tears but Lacey had no more patience for pity. “This isn’t a game,” Lacey told her, gripping Marian’s wrist tightly. “You don’t trust me. Fine. But don’t you dare accuse me of playing at this. I am sick and tired of getting sucked into other people’s dramas. I would happily walk out of here right now and never see any of you again.”

“Then, why don’t you?” Marian demanded.

“Because,” Lacey said, dropping Marian’s hand. “Ella doesn’t deserve the life she’s had and she certainly doesn’t deserve the life she’ll have as wife to that madman. I owe Ella if no one else.”


Lacey collapsed back onto the settee, rubbing her temples as Marian marched to the door. “I’m sorry,” she called out with a sigh, stilling Marian’s self righteous exit. “Everything’s going pear shaped everywhere I turn lately.”

“Lies tend to do that,” Marian said stiffly.

Lacey lifted her eyes to Marian’s. “You want the truth?” Marian did not respond but her hand fell from the door’s handle. “Fine. I’m not a princess. I’m not even from here. I’m someone who found myself way over my head and I’m by nature too stubborn to admit it.”
The room was silent, as Marian regarded her warily. “Who are you?” Marian asked. “Really?”

Lacey hesitated. The warning that names held power still echoed in her head. She didn’t know if she believed it but she couldn’t dismiss what she didn’t know anymore. She had learned too much to look down on magic and warnings. Still, there couldn’t be any harm in giving someone her real name. To just hear one person say it after all this time…

“Belle,” she said. She repeated it again as if saying it again would make it true. “Belle Ives.”

Marian moved closer to her, settling down primly on the nearby stool. “Where are you from, Belle?”

Lacey laughed. “You’re not going to make this easy are you?” Marian shook her head and grinned just for a moment before her face turned stoic again. “Okay, I’m from the Ninth Kingdom.”

Marian made an involuntary noise of skepticism but did not move from the stool. “There’s no one in the Ninth Kingdom,” she said bluntly but the anger had faded from her voice. “It was destroyed in the Ogre Wars. Only the Dark One actually lives there now.”

“You know that how?” Lacey bluffed. She really needed to learn more the lands of the Dark Castle. Bluffing her way through this was going to take finesse. If she alienated Marian any further, she risked losing her chance to help Ella. She doubted the Imp would be willing to assist her, and she would not let Ella owe him anything. Her own debt was large enough already. Who could imagine what Ella’s rescue would cost?

“Everyone knows that,” Marian told her. “The Dark One was drawn to the Great War. The people wanted an end to all the pain and suffering. Their safety was bought with their downfall. It was a warning to all other kingdoms.”

Lacey tugged at her ear, trying not to look entirely at a loss. “There’s the occasional person that finds their way to his kingdom,” she said nonchalantly. “Even the Dark One needs help from time to time.”

“So, you’re what?” Marian deadpanned. “His maid?”

“I am not his maid!” Lacey protested in shocked outrage. “I work for him. I don’t clean up after him!”

Marian, unable to help herself, giggled. It broke the tension and Lacey started to chuckle until the two of them broke into peals of laughter. The animosity faded away, and by the time they gained their breath, Marian was wiping tears from her eyes. “You are the oddest girl, Belle Ives. You just admitted you’re one of the Dark One’s toadies. Most people would hang you on the spot, but here you stand, bold as brass and openly admit it while insisting I don’t accuse you of being his maid!”

“I’m not one of his toadies,” Lacey huffed. “Someone I cared about made a deal with him—whatever, to keep me alive and safe for a year. I didn’t get a say in the matter.”

Marian shifted, her dress rustling around her as her eyes looked her up and down. “Why are you here then?”

Lacey stood, walking over to the day dress she had worn in Ella’s home, and took out the handkerchief. Unfolding it, she held out the dreadlock for Marian to see. “I was sent to the Second Kingdom to get the hair of the Blind Witch. Things got ugly. I got out of there, only to wander into this soap opera.”
“This what?”

“Never mind,” Lacey sighed, slipping the handkerchief into the large pocket of her new gown. “The point is, I didn’t know Ambassador Gold prior to this because I’m new to this whole Dark One thing.”

“But you work for him?” Marian asked.

Lacey nodded. “Does that make me untrustworthy?”

Marian sighed, standing up. “It at least answers why the ambassador is here,” she said. “Probably sent here to look after you.”

“Why not just magic me back?”

“Obvious isn’t?” Marian replied. “I’ve known you for less than a few days. You’re a stubborn thing. I doubt you would have let him. I have to go. I’ll see you in the forest—Oh, I almost forgot…”

She dug out something in her pocket, placing it down on a nearby table.

Even slightly dinged from the other night’s attack, Emma’s tiara still glowed bright.

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“Princess Belle?”

Lacey sank into a half curtesy. “Your Royal Highness.”

Thomas stood in the doorway, disheveled. His pale cheeks were drained of color, eyes sunken as he shook his head at her.

“You know,” Lacey suggested. “You might want to do something about putting a shirt on…”

Too confused to care about his state of deshabille, he peered out past her into his bedroom’s adjoining sitting area. “How did you even get in here?” he asked in amazement. “These are my Royal Quarters.”

“Marian let me in,” Lacey answered. “Now, are you going to join me or am I going to have to come in there and help dress you?”

“Are you alone?” Thomas asked, stepping past her to survey the room. When he saw she was, his shoulders slumped. Still, not a bad view. For a tall, lanky man, Thomas had defined muscles and numerous scars. A few were faint pink lines, while others were puckered and angry welts. The War had been over for months now, and yet the country and its prince were still healing.

Lacey joined him in the center of the room. “That would be why I am here,” Lacey told him. “Not that I’m complaining, but wouldn’t you be more comfortable with a shirt?”

Nodding absently, he retired back to his room to dress. Lacey made herself comfortable on the nearest couch, her eyes falling on the curious but familiar item that sat on the table before her. She reached out a finger to gently trace Ella’s glass slippers. Marian must have given them to Thomas, but had they helped his despondence or only increased it? How often had he stared at the slippers the past day, pondering where their owner had disappeared?

After a while, Thomas rejoined her in the parlor having thrown on a linen shirt over his trousers. It
was wrinkled and had a tea stain on the sleeve. He sat down across from her, looking lost. “How are you enjoying your stay, Belle?” he asked, his tone flat and eyes blank.

“Oh, snap out of it,” Lacey sighed. “Aren’t you even going to ask about Ella?”

Thomas looked rattled but he quickly composed himself. “She hasn't come,” he said hoarsely. “Which means she doesn’t want to.”

Lacey let her face fall into her palm with a satisfying smack of flesh. “You idiot,” she grumbled. “You didn’t even bother going to look for her?”

“Look for her?” Thomas repeated in amazement. “Why would I go look for her? She didn’t return to the ball or come to the palace today. As a gentleman, I’ve accepted her refusal and have retreated from the field to respect her wishes.”

Lacey’s mouth was gaping. The self righteous idiot thought Ella didn’t love him. He was falling on his own sword to respect what he thought was Ella’s wishes. Lacey wasn’t sure whether to throttle him or kiss him. “Thomas, that’s all very noble but she hasn’t shown up,” Lacey ground out, “because her stepmother had her locked up in their attic.”

Thomas looked perplexed. “She what?”

“My God, what does Ella see in you?” Lacey grumbled under her breath.

Thomas, leaned forward in apology. “Sorry, what was that? Didn’t quite hear it.” He gestured to his ears with a grimace. “Bad hearing. Cannon fire.”

Battle hero, kind heart and a handsome face, not to mention a royal. Slow as he might be, he had only been trying to respect Ella. As crown prince, he could have forced her to marry him. Instead, he had accepted Ella's wishes and attempted to move on. Taking a deep breath, Lacey tried again. “Look, Ella’s stepmother has arranged her betrothal to the Sheriff of Nottingham.”

“Oh,” Thomas said but even as his face fell, his tone remained unerringly polite. “I see. Thank you for letting me know.”

Lacey gaped at him. “She’s in love with you, you absolute idiot!”

“She is?” Thomas asked incredulously. “Why didn’t she say so?”

Lacey threw her hands up. “Seriously? What aren’t you getting about me coming to see you? She loves you but she’s-!”

Lacey didn’t get a chance to finish. Before she could tell him the plan, the crown prince of the First Kingdom’s Southern Realm had grabbed her arms and hauled her off the couch. “She loves me!” Thomas exclaimed joyously. He began to waltz with Lacey, laughing merrily as he swirled her around the room. Significantly shorter than him, her feet barely grazed the floor. “She loves me!”

“Oh, Belle, thank you! Thank you for telling me!” Thomas laughed, oblivious to her green-tinged face. “Ask me for the moon, ask me for the stars, ask me anything you desire!”

“We need to go rescue Ella!”
“Rescue her?” he asked, abruptly coming to a stop. Lacey’s feet whacked into his legs but he didn’t seem to notice. “I don’t need to rescue her. I’ll send one of my men for her. The Sheriff is a reasonable fellow. Once he realizes she doesn’t want to marry him, he’ll step aside.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that,” Lacey said as he put her down. “In fact, the only reason he wants Ella is because she’s the Baron Tremaine’s daughter, and he’s going to use the family name to make a bid for power.”

“Baron Tremaine?” Thomas interrupted quizzically. “That’s impossible. His daughter died years ago during the war.”

“No, she didn’t,” Lacey said. “She’s been forced to play maid to her stepmother and stepsisters. She’s been living in the kitchens all this time.”

Thomas looked like he had been gut punched. He grasped at the back of the couch for support.

“The Sheriff,” Lacey continued, trying to get through to him, “has some kind of scheme to use the Tremaine name to wrestle the kingdom away from you.”


Lacey resisted the urge to yell. “Because, he wants the kingdom. And you,” she waved at him, “have the kingdom.” She moved one hand from one side to the other. “See what I’m saying here?”

Realization slowly dawned on the prince’s face. “Guards!” he bellowed, moving hastily towards the door.

“Wait!” Lacey exclaimed, snapping her fingers to catch his attention. “Not that I care about my reputation, but I’m not supposed to be in here unchaperoned.”

“Oh, yes,” Thomas mumbled, reddening slightly. “Well, perhaps it’s better to handle this on our own. We’ll get horses, Nottingham’s residence isn’t far, we’ll be back before anyone misses us.”

Without pausing to change his shirt, Thomas, heir of the Southern Realm of the First Kingdom went charging out to rescue his love. Lacey went to follow him, before her eyes fell back to the glass slippers on the table. Unable to say why, she grabbed them before hurrying after Thomas.

Elsewhere in the castle, Marian found herself standing outside the kitchen with the fretful manservant that had been assigned to keep tabs on their esteemed guest from the Ninth Kingdom.

“He just disappeared, milady!” the man before her cried. “I watched him go into his room when we returned and I stood just outside, like you showed me, but when they brought dinner up, he was gone!”

“Hush,” Marian warned him. “I don’t need the King to find out again. Are you sure you were in the spot I showed you? The very one?”

The poor man nodded fitfully. “He’s got some magic,” he whispered. “Just like his master!”

“Don’t say such things,” Marian scolded him. “You want the entire castle proper to panic? Now, go get something to eat and then rest. I’ll send someone to watch for his return.”

“Thank you, milady,” he sighed, before heading towards the kitchens.
Marian sighed. The moons had just begun to rise. It was going to be a long night. The guards reported the prince had been in the stables, and the gossip was he had not been alone when he rode off through the gates. No one had recognized the mysterious lady beside him, but underneath her brown riding cloak, someone had seen the glitter of a tiara nestled in her curls. Already the castle’s bored nobles and curious servants had spread the news of the enigmatic princess like wildfire, and it wasn’t long before the news would escape the castle.

Now, Marian had the added worry of the Dark One’s chosen envoy loose on the castle grounds with the prince gone off into the night. Despite Belle’s assurances she could trust her, Marian had doubts of sending her with Thomas. If Belle proved to be as false as her master, Thomas’s very life could be on the line. Still, for her plan to succeed, Marian had to stay here and wait for Robin.

Crossing to the stairs, Marian began to climb upwards, her eyes on the skies outside. Her mind bent on the missing ambassador, yet she couldn’t help but think of the odd fake princess. Something about Belle had drawn Marian to her that first night, something fresh and exotic in the way she carried herself, in the way she looked at things around her. It was vastly different from the ambassador’s way of looking past things, as if they barely existed.

Arriving at his rooms, Marian entered and began to slowly tidy the already immaculate room. It did not even look as if the man had slept there the night before, nor bathed or eaten in the space. After a moment, Marian settled down by the window, overlooking the forest and waited. If he returned, she would pretend she had been sent up with dinner, which sat cooling by the fireplace. If he did not, she had a perfect view of the forest and would be able to see Robin before he had cleared the glen.

Still, her palms were damp and the back of her neck prickled in the empty room. Looking around, she shivered as she thought of the ambassador. She could only hope if he had any intentions for this evening, they would not conflict with theirs.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! Long I know, sorry to go on and on but I had to add the opening scene in and I couldn't make myself move the last bits over to the next chapter so, here we are!

Hope you're all enjoying this final few chapters of Ella and Marian's story! The next chapter is the last from my NaNoWriMo challenge this year so new chapters may be a bit longer coming in the future but thank you all for reading- I'm very excited for the next arc to unfold!
Chapter Notes

I am incredibly, utterly, insanely happy to announce The Gate won Best Adventure Fic in the Tumblr Hosted T.E.A's. this past weekend. Thanks to everyone who voted for it! Also the lovely Midstorm made a beautiful cover art for it, which I'm in love with. It's completely perfect!

As always, much love to Ramloth for her beta wizard skills!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The castle faded away as Thomas led them further and further south, despite his earlier assurances to her in the stable that the trip was not far. The woods stayed constant to the east, ebbing away here and there to reveal plains and fields. The prince’s pace was relentless. Lacey began to regret insisting on coming along. Although, she was grateful she had ignored Thomas’s attempts to convince her to ride sidesaddle. She could barely manage riding a horse as it was, she couldn’t imagine trying to do it in a gown.

So, she had borrowed some of Marian’s riding gear from the stable hands. Donning oversized breeches and a flowing linen shirt, Lacey tied and pinned the excess fabric up before draping Marian’s riding cloak over her shoulders. Marian wouldn’t miss these for the evening. If she did mind, she could ride across the countryside in a ball gown and see how she liked it.

“Good horse,” Lacey muttered to her steed as it veered suddenly left to avoid a hole in the road. She kept her knees relaxed despite wanting to squeeze harder. “Nice horsie.”

She hadn’t had her nightmares in a while, but she remembered the fear all too well. Her current transport, as far as she could tell, was an actual horse but in a land of kelpies, selkies, witches and Imps, she no longer trusted anything.

They had gone by the Tremaine estate almost thirty minutes ago, but Thomas showed no sign of stopping. They passed a large lake, their reflections racing alongside them. Besides Lacey’s initial hesitance to climb on the creature’s back, it was peaceful to gallop behind Thomas, content to let the horse follow its fellow stablemate into the darkness. From time to time, Thomas glanced back at her and offer her a reassuring smile before urging his mount faster. The moonlight gleamed iridescent off Thomas’s black hair, matching sparks of silver fire rippled across his mount.

No one was outside this evening. They had yet to pass anything like the port village in the Seventh Kingdom, but perhaps the First Kingdom did not have such places. The great rolling plains kept its people far apart.

“Just ahead!” Thomas called back, pulling Lacey out of her reverie. Her fingers were cold and clammy, and her thighs were starting to protest. She dreaded the ride back. Thomas veered off the main path onto a much smaller one, and Lacey nudged her own horse to follow. With a snort, the creature obeyed, tossing its head at her as if to assure that it knew what it was doing.

They passed through a gate, a large 'N' emblazoned on the iron. It was not as elaborate as the gate
through which she had passed through worlds, but it reminded her of home. By the time they reached the main courtyard, Thomas had already dismounted.

It wasn’t until Lacey went to follow suit, that she noticed the shadow at the window. “Thomas!” Lacey exclaimed, scrambling to get down. Her horse neighed in protest annoyed at her flailing. “Little help here!” His hands wrapped around her waist to haul her down. "There," Lacey whispered, "in the window."

Thomas’s usually pleasant face grew somber as his eyes flickered back to the main door. “Stay here.” He handed her the reins to her horse, his own mount perfectly still where he had left it. If the prince could inspire such loyalty in his mounts, why not his own people?

The door was thrown open before Thomas could reach it. Bright light flooded out as a great candelabra thrust out to meet them. When Lacey's eyes adjusted to the new light, a small wizened butler stood before them. “Your Royal Highness,” the old man croaked. “To what do we owe this honor?”

Thomas continued up the stairs without faltering. “I’ve come to collect Ella Tremaine,” Thomas said as the little man stood squarely in the doorway. “Stand aside.”

“Oh, the miss is indisposed,” the man said.

Lacey stood down in the darkness, holding onto the reins of her horse. With her breeches and her hood over her hair, the Sheriff should not be able to identify her.

The man's arm was beginning to shake wildly as the weight grew too much for him. Thomas took the candelabra from the old man, who sighed gratefully as he let his arm fall back to his side. "I would speak to her,” Thomas said. “Perhaps your master is available?”

“Oh yes,” the old man said with a rueful shake of his head. “Why, Master Nottingham is just out back.” At this, Thomas pushed past him, nearly knocking him to the ground. “Your Royal Highness!”

At this commotion, Lacey’s horse snorted and reared slightly. Lacey dropped the reins in alarm. Trampling the ground, it tossed its head and whinnied in displeasure. It was either stay here and be trampled or help Thomas find Ella, so Lacey hurried up the steps after him.

The little old man looked on in confusion as she brushed past him. “Oh, hello, miss,” he croaked, following after her as quickly as he could. “May I take your cloak?”

“Where did Thomas go?” Lacey demanded as his wrinkled hands fumbled for her cloak.

The butler paused, blinking up at her. His eyes were bright blue, a young man’s eyes in an old man’s face.

“Sir,” Lacey repeated. “Ella. Where is she?”

“Upstairs in the bridal chambers,” the man said in confusion. “She’s getting married in the hour!”

Lacey didn't wait to hear more. The estate's foyer was ornate but aged. Almost every item had a crest of arms or an 'N' painted, etched, or plastered on it. Ignoring all of it, she made her way up the grand stairs. “God, I missed pants,” she murmured, taking the next few steps two at a time. The butler struggled up behind her. “Which way?”

He paused, pointing a trembling finger to the left. “Left at the split and third door down. The
Master said no one is to disturb her.”

Taking quick strides over the carpeted runners, Lacey found the door in question. It was the only one with candlelight spilling under the doorway, and someone crying just beyond it. Lacey tried the handle, but it was locked. “Ella!” she said, knocking. “Ella, it’s Belle! Open up!”

The crying stopped. “Belle?” Ella cried through the door. “It can’t be! You’re in jail!”

“I got out,” Lacey replied, rattling the door handle again. “Let me in!”

“I can’t!” Ella cried. “I'm locked in here!”

Lacey pressed a hand against the door. “Are you okay?” Lacey asked. There was a snuffle from the other side and Lacey rattled the door handle again, making the whole door shake in its frame. “Where’s the Sheriff?”

“He sent for the minister,” Ella’s voice muffled through the wood. “He’s out back with his guards. You have to go. If he finds you here-!”

“Thomas has come for you,” Lacey cut in. “So, stop being a martyr and find something to break this damn door down!”

The little old man tottered up behind her, holding out a long silver key in his trembling hands. “Miss!” he admonished.

Lacey plucked the key from his hand and pressed an exuberant kiss on his bald head. “Oh, you beautiful man, you! I’ve got the key, Ella!” Lacey crammed it through the lock and twisted it. The door swung open and two long arms wrapped themselves around her as Ella buried her face in Lacey’s hair. Lacey swayed, trying to hold up the much taller woman.

“Misses?” the butler hedged, concern lacing his voice. “Can I be of any more service?” Ella bent down to envelop him in a hug. His shocked face disappeared under her embrace. When Ella straightened, he was blushing furiously. “Now, Misses, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to go back inside your chambers. His Excellency will be back any moment. It’s very bad luck to see the bride before the wedding.”

“He’s been holding her hostage,” Lacey explained, gesturing at Ella’s swollen eyes and tear-stained cheeks. “She doesn’t want to marry him.”

The older man blinked at Lacey, uncomprehending. “She’s his betrothed,” he stressed. “She’s to be the Mistress Nottingham.”

“No, she’s going to be Queen.” Lacey grabbed Ella’s wrist and dragged her past the confused old man.

“Most unusual,” the butler muttered behind them.

“He’s quite old,” Ella told Lacey as they hurried down the hall. “Dear thing has been very kind. He just doesn’t understand I don’t want to marry Nottingham.”

“Men,” Lacey grumbled.

Ella soon was in front of her, arriving at the bottom of the stairs first. Lacey joined her, opening the front door. Her horse had wandered down the drive and was eating the lawn. Thomas’s horse snorted at them in greeting, bobbing his head as if to mark his own good behavior. “Yes, yes,”
Lacey told him. “Good horse. Now, where’s your prince gone?”

The horse failed to reply. Lacey closed the front door to head towards the back of the house. She took a nearby candle sconce from a wall mounting and beckoned Ella to follow her. “It’s just the butler and the Sheriff,” Ella whispered to her as they went. Entering one of the darker rooms, the Sheriff’s horrible grinning face loomed abruptly out of the darkness at her. Lacey cried out, a flash of adrenaline running down her spine like a lick of fire.

“Belle, it’s fine!” Ella assured her. “It’s just a painting!”

Breathing through her nose and out through her mouth, Lacey calmed herself before she approached the life size portrait hanging on the wall. The painter had been overly kind to the Sheriff. His massive build had been captured as well as the coldness of his smile, but his features had been made amenable and his hair and beard were much more impressive.

“Really likes himself, doesn’t he?” Lacey whispered. Ella nodded as her eyes skirted over it. “Come on, we better find Thomas.” They moved through the house quietly, Lacey leading the way with her candle while Ella followed at her shoulder, whispering occasionally to suggest one way or the other. After a while, they arrived back in the foyer. It was still empty. “This doesn’t make sense,” Lacey said, frowning. “The place isn’t that big. Where are they?”

“Miss!” The butler was slowly, painstakingly making his way towards them. Ella hurried up them to catch his arm and Lacey put her candle down, following suit and taking his other one. He beamed at the two of them, obviously smitten.

“Have you seen His Royal Highness?” Lacey asked him.

“Why of course, he just left,” the Butler explained.

“Left?” Ella asked.

Outside, Thomas’s steed had joined the other horse in the grass. Lacey stared at them for a moment, before turning back to find that Ella had joined her. “Look,” she said, pointing at the grazing pair. “Thomas couldn’t have left, not without his horse. So, where did he go?”

The butler jumped slightly at the urgency of her tone. “Why, with the master, of course,” he told them as if they were both mad. “He told me to see to the Mistress while he took care of his affairs.”

Lacey leaned back against the wall and pounded her forehead with her fist. “He has Thomas,” she groaned. “Damn it, we just delivered the crown prince unarmed and unguarded to the man who wants his throne.”

“Rozenite,” Ella said softly. “Where did the Sheriff go with His Royal Highness?”

“Why, the palace, of course! He’s going to be crowned!”

Lacey twisted to slam her clenched fist into the wall. She stayed there a moment, letting her forehead rest against the cool surface as her eyes clenched shut. This was wrong. They were supposed to rescue Ella, thwart the Sheriff and escape into the woods to marry the couple while convincing Thomas to pardon Robin. Instead, they had just delivered the throne to Nottingham on a silver platter.

“Ella,” Lacey muttered to the wall. “What’s the Sheriff’s plan?”

“I don’t know-”
“No, come on, think. Tell me what the Sheriff’s going to do next.”

Somewhere, Robin was waiting for them by the palace in the east woods. His Merry Men would be around him, a group of outcasts banded together, hoping to make peace with a prince. If she just disappeared back to the castle, demand Gold to summon the Imp, Lacey could just leave this whole mess behind. Stay safe and wait for the rest of the year to pass by. No more princes and princesses, no more sociopaths or monsters, just an Imp and a magical castle until December came.

“He’s going to make a play for the throne,” Ella said hoarsely. “If not by birthright, then by force. The King is old. If something happens to Thomas, the throne’s right will be questioned. The nobles will hold a crowning to pick an heir.” She paused, stricken. "If he was found to be murdered… perhaps by an outlaw group that has been winning the hearts of the poor and desperate with stolen food and pennies, gaining sympathy from the court with their noble stories of dare-doing and bravery… the whole realm will turn on them.”

“Two birds, one stone,” Lacey said, turning back around. “What then?”

“The crowning… but the nobles will fight amongst themselves. There’s no way to assure he would be picked. Unless…” Ella fell silent, eyes widening as realization dawned.

Lacey grew unsettled. “Unless what?” she demanded. Rozenite beside them looked as if he was at a tennis match, his deep blue eyes sweeping from one speaker to the other as his daft smile stayed permanently in place.

“If he marries me, he’ll have the Tremaine estate. He’ll be able to sell off the land and buy the nobles’ votes.” Ella looked down at her own hands in horror. “If he also happens to captures the very thieves who murdered Thomas, he’ll have their respect.”

“It’d be a long shot,” Lacey murmured. “So, if you’re right, what’s his next move?”

“Thomas,” Ella cried, a hand rising to her mouth to clap the word back in her throat. “Oh, lords, he’s going to kill Thomas.”

“If he’s going to pin that on Robin, he’ll need an arrow,” Lacey replied.

“Nottingham's an well known archer himself,” Ella explained. “Robin’s arrows are unique since he makes his own and well known due to his notoriety. Nottingham would have to get his hand on one.”

Lacey nodded, pulling her hood back over her curls. “So, we have to get to Robin before the Sheriff does. Do you know how to ride?”

“Oh of course. I was a kitchen maid, I wasn’t dead,” Ella scoffed. She bent down to kiss the butler's cheek. "Rozenite, thank you for being so kind.”

Rozenite watched them from the door, beaming down at them as they hurried to the horses.

Lacey snorted. "Men."

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Just as the moons overlapped, Lacey and Ella arrived at the edge of the palace lands. Dismounting, Ella nudged Thomas's horse towards the palace gates. Lacey let her mount follow after him. Ella nodded for Lacey to follow her into the woods, before disappearing into the shadows.
“I am growing incredibly sick of the woods,” Lacey grumbled up to the heavens before following after Ella.

The sky’s lights disappeared under the canopy of branches and leaves, and Lacey bumped into Ella who stood on the path, staring straight ahead of her. “They’ve been through here,” Ella whispered, indicating broken branches on the side of the path. “Few men abreast, probably guarding something.”

“Thomas,” Lacey guessed.

Ella nodded and moved forward when they heard a bird’s trilling call to their left. Lacey ignored it, pressing forward but Ella stopped short, grabbing her cloak and pulling her back. With a small smile on her face, Ella repeated the call, nearly pitch perfect. Lacey turned to the trees in question, and stumbled backwards when a voice at her shoulder groused, “You’re late.”

“Hello to you too, William,” Ella replied. “William, this is Belle.”

The newcomer was already vaguely familiar to Lacey. He had been one of the men who had stepped off the path to surround her and the children a few nights ago. With a red streak in his dark shoulder length hair, he was as handsome as Robin, but for the two large ears that stuck out like car doors from his head. “You’re the bird from the Second Kingdom,” he said, with a nod. His tunic was made from animal skin, patterned and dyed with rich colors. He moved closer to her, allowing her to see his necklace of beads and animal teeth more clearly as he returned her curious looks.

“A woman in breeches,” he said appreciatively. “Different.”

Lacey grinned back, winking at him. His smile widened as he leaned closer to her.

“William Scarlett, this is no time for flirting!” Ella exclaimed in frustration. “We need to find Robin!”

William didn't look away from Lacey. “He’s at the camp,” William said. Quite glad she hadn’t gone off to find Gold, Lacey lifted a hand to touch William's arm. He instantly moved closer to her. “You remember the way, don’t you, Ella?” he said over his shoulder.

“Belle!” Ella exclaimed in a furious whisper. “Stop making eyes at the thief and let’s go!”

“I’ll be right behind you...”

“Fine,” Ella snapped. “He’s already stolen the tiara out of your pocket, by the way.”

Without shame, William held up the gleaming trinket. Lacey gaped at him. “Hey!” She snagged it back from him to cram it back into her pocket. “Do that again and you’ll lose a hand,” she warned him.

His dark brown eyes rested on hers, a finger reaching out to trace her cheekbone. “Couldn’t resist,” William said in lieu of an apology. “I like things that shine.”

“If you say ‘just like my eyes’, I’ll knock you on your ass,” Lacey warned him as she brushed his hand off her face. “Shame,” she told him. “I could have used some stress relief.”

Muted laughter was the only response. William materialized in front of Ella, gesturing for them to follow him off the main path. Ella, in her day dress, paused, before reaching down and ripping her hem off. William didn’t pause. Lacey grabbed Ella’s hand and hurried after him.
The forest around them buzzed with life. Here and there, William stopped to listen, before turning in the complete opposite direction. Lacey felt eyes on them, some curious, some friendly, and once William boosted them up a tree for an agonizing five minutes when a faint growling emanated from some nearby bushes. They heard the snorting and scraping of something large passing below them, before it disappeared the way they had come. William did not explain, he just put his tomahawk back away in the belt at his side and dangled them down out of the tree before heading back off again.

“Do you think he’s okay?” Ella whispered to her after a while. “Thomas, I mean?”

Lacey nodded. “They need one of Robin’s arrows, right?” Ella nodded, a faint movement in the darkness. “Then, he’s fine. If we have a guide taking us to Robin the short way, we’ll beat them even if they do know where they’re going.”

William appeared behind them. “That lot?” William snorted. “They’ll be lost for hours.”

Lacey glanced back at the path before back up to where he had been a moment before. “How did you do that?”

“Magic,” he whistled, laughing as he surged forward.

Ella shook her head at him, but a smile lingered on her lips. Lacey, on the other hand, resisted the urge to throw something at him.

Nearly a half hour later, they emerged into a clearing. There was habitations and fires throughout the space. People paused and turned as if they had been expecting them. They all had similar coloring as Robin, and most were young and hearty.

A trio came to greet them, all speaking in a language Lacey couldn’t understand. Ella smiled and touched her lips, her heart, and her forehead in response to the words.

“Custom greeting of our people,” William explained, coming up to stand beside her. He nodded towards a group by the fire who were smiling at them, but remained seated. “Care for something to eat?”

“Please,” Lacey nodded, following him to the fire. Over the fire there was a pot bubbling, a stew of sort, smelling heavenly but too dark to see. Someone handed her a bowl of it, and she thanked them. When she looked about for a spoon, she caught a small boy’s eyes. He grinned at her, and tilted his hands as if to drink out of an invisible bowl. She glanced down at the dark liquid and back up to the boy who grinned, two teeth missing on his bottom jaw. She smiled thinly back before putting the bowl in her lap under the pretext of letting it cool. “Where’s Little John?” Lacey asked Will.

“Out on patrol,” came the reply from a portly man beside her. He looked more like Thomas than Will, fair skin with pale eyes. He smiled at her, nodding towards the bowl in her lap. “Eat up. There’s a lot to do this eve.”

Ella joined them, a toddler clutching at her ripped skirts. “Friar Tuck!” Ella exclaimed in delight, embracing the man where he sat. “It’s been too long!”

“You have had quite a week, my child,” Tuck replied, patting her hand. “I was just telling your enchanting friend here that Little John is out waiting for you to appear.”

William handed Ella a bowl as she settled down beside the friar. “I’ve sent the jackalopes out,” he said. “They’re rounding everyone up.”
“The what?” Lacey asked, fingers sticking to the warm bowl’s side. Beside her, the fire crackled and popped, but it was too small to give much warmth. A young man stirred the pot, his arm in a makeshift sling.

“That’s what they call the women hunters,” Ella explained with a smile. Friar Tuck nodded at her, helping himself to another helping of the stew.

“Okay,” Lacey said with a shrug. She let it lie, but her stomach growled as the others ate. That is until she looked down to find an eyeball staring up at her. Gagging slightly, she pressed the bowl into William’s nearby hands and clapped a hand to her mouth.

Ella grinned sympathetically at her, before slurping her bowl. “It’s a lucky omen,” she said. “Getting the eye in your bowl.”

“He can have it,” Lacey shuddered. William toasted her before slurping the contents of the bowl. He smacked his lips as he lowered the now mostly empty bowl, starting to pick chunks of meat and vegetables out of it. He seemed unfazed by the eyeball still staring up at him.

“My first meal here I got the eye as well. The very sight of it made me sick,” Friar Tuck whispered over the fire to her. “They laughed for weeks.”

“You don’t eat it, do you?” Lacey asked in disgust as William continued to eat with his fingers.

William laughed, and shook his head. “No, it’s just a tradition. Reminds us of home. Plus, we could use all the luck we can.”

“Robin’s back!” someone cried. The whole camp seemed to jump to their feet and even more people materialized from the nearby brush. William hopped up and moved to greet his leader, allowing Ella to move to his vacant spot beside Lacey on the log.

“There’s a lot of them.” The entire camp crowded around the figure which Lacey assumed was Robin. “I didn’t realize there were so many.”

“Nearly four hundred,” Ella confirmed. “That’s just this camp. There’s two other camps further north. Alan-a-Dale’s been away at one for nearly a year now. I think William’s been so reckless lately because he misses him.”

“Alan-a-Dale?” Lacey repeated. “Is that a person or a song?”

“Both,” Ella replied cheerfully. “He’s the tale-teller, the minstrel, the bard. Beautiful voice, sounds just like a bird. Caught an arrow in the side last winter, he went to the sick camp to die.”

“But he didn’t?”

The crowd was returning back to their hiding holes and blankets, content that their leader was back and all was well. A few glanced curiously at Lacey, but they seemed to know Ella, gesturing to her with the growingly familiar heart, lips, and forehead touches.

“No,” Ella said. “He got better, but he’s lost the taste for the fight. He prefers the other camps now. He always did say the old and the young have the best stories.”

“Belle!” Robin sat down beside Belle, and tugged a curl from her head. “My hero!”

“Hello to you too,” Ella grumbled good-naturedly. Her smile was just as infectious in the camp firelight as the kitchen’s.
“Now, Ella, when you help me escape prison,” Robin said in mock seriousness. “I will greet you as affectionately.”

Tuck sat back down by the fire. “Robin,” he chastised. His hands now held a cup, full of dark liquid that smelled of honey. “Ella’s saved everyone in this camp twice over. Just because she didn’t have the pleasure of seeing you in chains…”

Tuck passed Lacey a flask from under his jacket, winking at her as she accepted it with grateful hands. Lacey settled back against Ella, and for a moment, there in the comfort of the fire and the warmth of laughter and new friends, she forgot there was anything more in the world to fear than the dark of the forest.

“Eat,” Ella told Robin, passing him a bowl. “We have a lot to talk about.”

“It’s all right, Ella,” Robin said with a heavy sigh. Ella gave him a tight smile, as she shook her head. “All the reports say Nottingham is holed up in the old monastery.”

“What about Thomas?” Ella asked, her voice cracking slightly.

Robin nodded gravely. “He’s under guard, but alive. They’re waiting for dawn.”

Lacey nodded towards the quiver on his back. “They’re after one of your arrows,” Lacey told him. “They’re going to kill Thomas and frame you.”

“Ah, explains his recent interest in trying to get me to compete in archery. I had wondered what all that show and prompt at the jail was about. Well, not much we can do till the morning.”

“I’m not so sure of that.”

In a moment, every tree had a crown of light as Robin’s people lifted torches up, ringing in the newcomer. Robin’s bow was already out, arrow pointed at his heart.

He seemed unfazed, wrinkling his brow at them in distaste. “Such dramatics,” he giggled, spreading his hands out before him.

“The Dark One,” Ella breathed.

“No need for all that. I’ve only come to collect my maid.”

As every head swung in her direction, Lacey groaned and took another long sip of Tuck’s flask.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! Alright, thank you for reading! I know this chapter was a bit Imp light but I can promise going forward he will play a much larger role in all chapters. It was very important for this story to unfold with Lacey on her own for a bit, although I understand and admit for a shipper perspective that was a bit sad. However, with Gold being in the picture, I can say that the next arc will be much more interesting for shippers.

Time for some good news bad news.
Bad News, this is as far as I have written to date, which means there will be a bit of
down time for a while as far as updates.

Good news, I have decided to do a pseudo NaWriMo and try and get through another
50k in the next 30 days! My hope is to finish up the First Kingdom storyline before
plunging headlong into the next arc which will take place in the Second Kingdom, as
we have some unfinished business there.

(Teaser for the next arc: Lettuce.)
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

This chapter is dedicated to RiskPig, because today is her birthday. This joy has been such a wonderful friend and I am so delighted that I have the pleasure of knowing such a beautiful soul as herself.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No one said a word.

The camp inhabitants skirted around the campfire. After the Imp had arrived, everyone had fled back to their own respective campfires and lodgings, leaving the center campfire bare except for the two of them. Even Ella had disappeared with Robin and Friar Tuck. She hadn’t even looked back.

Lacey felt the cold now more than ever. She clutched the drink closer to her chest as she tried to not care. She failed miserably.

Beside her, the Imp wrinkled his nose as he inspected the stew. With a murmur of disdain, he dropped the lid back on it before reseating himself on the nearest log. “Disgusting,” he grumbled, wiping his hands on his breeches. “No one knows how to properly spice meat anymore. It’s a travesty.”

“Why are you here?”

He huffed. “I just said,” he pointed out. “You’ve proven it’s impossible for you to stay out of trouble. I left you in the hands of a kitchen maid, and yet here you are, traipsing around a forest after I so kindly sprung you out of jail.”

“So, you did send Gold.”

He merely examined his nails, more concerned with his hygiene than her quickly growing ire.

“Figures,” Lacey grumbled. “So, why come now? Why come at all?”

“I’ve grown tired of your little antics,” he shot back. “I sent you to collect a witch’s hair, and you mangled it. If I had wanted her dead, I would have done it myself.”

Lacey got to her feet, scowling down at where he sat composed and relaxed on the log. “Your little task nearly got us all killed.”

“Only,” he replied, eyes looking straight ahead at the fire, “because you continue to fail to realize actions have consequences.”

“Fuck you,” Lacey spat. “You sit there like you haven’t been the reason I’ve been put in these situations! You’re the one sending me off to my death left and right! ‘Oh, here you go dearie, go make a deal with a mermaid.’”

“I never said to agree to help her win her prince. You made that deal on your own.”
Ignoring the small voice in her head that agreed he was right, she continued recklessly. “It’s just a walk in the forest, the kids will show you the way! It was a cannibal witch, you heartless, sick son of a bitch!”

Her raised voice had drawn a crowd. They huddled under the tree branches around the clearing.

“I didn’t realize you were so fond of children.”

“You left me there! If Robin hadn’t found us, if Ella hadn’t taken me in, what was I supposed to have done?”

“Stay put, perhaps?” he suggested. “Return to the Woodcutter’s cottage? Use your brain for once?”

Lacey chuckled mirthlessly, before downing the rest of the spice drink Friar Tuck had left behind. “Well, you win,” she sighed, tossing the cup down to the dirt at her feet. “They’ll never trust me now.”

“I didn’t figure you as the type for self pity, Belle.”

Ella stood just outside the campfire, arms crossed. Behind her stood Robin, Little John, Friar Tuck and William, all their faces cloaked in shadow. Lacey didn’t dare look at the Imp.

Ella took a step forward to capture Lacey's hand. “You made a deal with the Dark One for me,” Ella said. “I’ll never know why, or how, but I will not condemn you for it. Not when you’ve given me a reason to hope again.”

“Ella,” Lacey began, but her throat was dry. The words stuck there. She cleared her throat and offered a half-hearted shrug.

Ella merely smiled down at her, before she turned to the being in question. “Dark One,” she said respectfully. “You have my thanks for the magic you bestowed on me those three nights, and even more gratitude for the company of your servant.”

“I am not his servant!” Lacey protested. Ella shot her a look which she ignored. “I’m not,” she added, throwing a dark look to the Merry Men who still stood in the shadows. From his prone position on the log, the Imp grinned up at her.

“We would ask only to say our goodbyes to her before you depart,” Ella continued. “She has been a staunch ally and will be sorely missed.”

The Imp cast a quizzical look at Ella. “She’s just a girl. Gotten you in more hot water than she’s helped. Why, you were perfectly fine before you knew love. Would you have missed it?” He popped up, moving towards the Merry Men. The campfire seemed to grow, reaching higher as the flames were stoked by an invisible hand. The light reached out to brighten the faces of the men, weapons drawn. The Imp seemed unimpressed, stopping just before Robin and smirking at the arrow pointed at his throat. “You’ll remember,” he said with a flourish of his wrist. “I cannot be killed by such things.”

The men all exclaimed in distress as their weapons turned into snakes in their very grips. William bolted up on to the shoulders of Little John who cast his snake as far from him as possible, making the nearest tree’s top branches rustle as it lodged in the boughs. Robin stared at the snake at his feet, hissing at him as it coiled around his legs. His face was pinched but he did not flinch.

“Now, you lot. Robin Hood here wouldn’t have to have escaped prison, which is a crime, you know. You’ve got a very large bounty on your head. And now, kidnapping as well,” the Imp hiked
his thumb back at Ella. “He’ll add harboring a criminal when he says you’ve got my loudmouth. He’ll have every reason to raze this place to the ground at dawn.”

“Perhaps,” Robin replied, voice tense. He did not move a muscle as the snake inched its way up his body, fangs exposed and venom dripping as it slithered its way over his chest. “He would have done it eventually. Belle has given us warning, she has given us hope and we intend to use it.”

“False hope,” the Imp pointed out. “She does work for me, after all.”

“I don’t believe that,” Robin said. “She repaid her debt to me. She has stood by her friends and she stands here even now when the way out is open to her. She is more than just your servant, Dark One. She is a friend of the realm.”

There was a rather unpleasant heat pooling behind her eyes and Lacey rubbed at it, pretending the smoke had caused them to water. Ella’s hand came to rest on her shoulder, and Lacey did not brush it away.

“Interesting,” the Imp drawled. “Well, dearie, you seem to have an odd habit of making friends wherever you go. However, you do still owe me a debt.”

“I know,” Lacey acknowledged. She fished out the hair of the Blind Witch from her corset, holding it out in the palm of her hand. “This takes care of one of those.”

“So, it does,” he acknowledged, taking it from her. “Although it does seem to have come at quite a price.”

“You’re telling me,” Lacey grumbled under her breath, snatching her hand away. “I’m done with magic. No more witches, amulets, and magical creatures.”

He pocketed the hair. “You’re ready to return to the castle?” he asked. “Despite your friends being in peril? My, I find myself surprised.”

“Don’t be,” Lacey sighed. “I’ve just made a mess of things.”

“You’ve done no such thing,” Ella said, still at her side. “You’ve shown us that we can change our lives if we dare to try.”

“As nice as this is,” William called out from his perch on Little John’s shoulders. “There’s still a snake wrapped around Robin’s throat.”

“Oh, yes, forgot!” The Imp chuckled, turning and snapping his fingers. He aimed his finger at Robin and the next moment, the snake disappeared, leaving a bow draped around Robin’s neck. The man gasped for air, sinking down to his knees in relief. “Better?”

“Belle,” Ella whispered, clutching her hands again in a tight squeeze. “Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

“Yeah,” Lacey promised her, feeling incredibly helpless. “He’s got this whole ‘has to keep me safe’ deal with a friend of mine. So, there’s that.”

Ella nodded, her eyes full of tears as she nodded reassuringly. “I don’t know how to repay you for everything you’ve done for me,” she said, voice thick with emotion. “You’ve showed me there’s hope even in the darkest of places.”

“I got you locked up in the attic,” Lacey pointed out, smiling the best she could. “I’m not even
helping you rescue Thomas…”

“It’s okay,” Ella assured her, sniffing. “We’ll come up with a plan.”

“Tick tock,” the Imp sang from beyond them, but Lacey ignored him. This time at least she was going to get to say goodbye.

“I’m sure it’ll be great,” Lacey told her, before she let her own hands fall from Ella’s grip. Ella looked up, tears already running down her face but Lacey pretended not to see. She made her way to where Robin had regained his feet, staring daggers at the Imp who was grinning incorrigibly at him from his place by the fire.

“Robin,” Lacey laughed, nudging his arm. “Relax. Just don’t point arrows at wizards and you’ll be fine.”

“I don’t trust him,” Robin growled, fingers tightening on his bow. “You don’t have to go with him.”

“Yeah,” Lacey said, shaking her head. “I do. Tell Marian I said goodbye after you rescue Thomas and earn a pardon, okay?”

Robin’s glanced down at her, a grudging smile on his lips. “My dear lady, don’t you ever doubt at all?”

“All the time,” she admitted with a shrug. “Trick is to act like you know what you’re doing.”

“Before sunrise, if it suits your royal highness,” the Imp called out sarcastically.

“I’m coming!” Lacey snapped over her shoulder. “Would you just let me say goodbye? I’m never going to see them again!”

“Don’t say that,” Robin said, frowning at her. “You don't know that.”

“Oh, but I do,” Lacey said, thinking of her world beyond the gate. If all went as planned, she’d never see any of them again. She’d spend years in psychotherapy, trying to make sense of all this. Sometimes, she hoped she had a bad reaction to medication or had hit her head on that horse back on the hill and was in a coma somewhere.

“Be safe,” she said, smiling tightly. Robin made a motion towards her but she stepped back, smiling at where Little John, Friar Tuck and William were watching from a safe distance. “Take care of them,” she told them before turning away.

There were faces in the shadows, everyone watching as she marched toward the Dark One. Whispers floated in the early hours of dawn, and she felt the eyes of friends and strangers on them as she looked up and caught his eye. “I’m ready,” she said, closing her eyes as a tear threatened to slip out. “Let’s go.”

She braced herself for the swirl of smoke, the noxious fumes of magic choking her, but instead found the wariness of the forest still around her. She peeked one eye open to find the Imp frowning at her in thought.

“What?” she demanded, looking down at herself. “What’s the matter?”

“You want to stay,” he said. “Why?”
“They’re my friends,” Lacey said incredulously. “Haven’t you ever had friends?”

“No,” he replied shortly, glancing behind her at the campfire where Ella still stood. Lacey didn’t dare breathe, watching him in disbelief.

The moons were beginning to set, and the owls no longer hooted in the treetops. Instead, there was a powerful stillness that seemed to seep into the air, as if something was coming on the heels of the dawn. Lacey felt it encroaching, and she was torn between running from it and running towards it. Behind her, she heard people falling silent, waiting with bated breath to hear what the Dark One would say next.

“You can stay.”

“I can what?” Unsure if she had heard him right, Lacey asked again. “Did you say I can stay?” He nodded, eyes switching to where Robin stood behind her. “On one condition.”

“Name it!” Ella cried out and Lacey waved her hand at her to shush her. She knew better than Ella what a deal with the devil cost.

“What’s the catch?” Lacey asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“No catch,” he grumbled. “I just don’t want you moping around the castle for the next few months. You were bad enough the last time.”

“You’re serious?” she said in disbelief. “I can stay?”

“You can stay until this business is settled. Our deal was for three nights at the ball and by my count you only attended two. A wedding or a funeral should be sufficient, don’t you think?”

Lacey wasn’t able to respond before she heard Ella’s feet crunching over the leaves to join them. “Thank you!” Ella enthused, bowing low before the Dark One.

The Imp smiled smugly at the two of them. Glancing from Ella’s bent back to Lacey’s scowl with an eyebrow wiggle that conveyed his amusement of the situation all too well. “Get up,” Lacey hissed, tugging at her friend’s arm. “You’re embarrassing me.”

“Oh, and a little gift for the soon to be newlyweds is in order,” the Imp added. He snapped his fingers and smoke billowed forth. Wincing, Lacey closed her eyes against the terrible fumes and felt her own arms grow heavy as something weighty landed in them.

“The hell is this?” Lacey demanded, staring down at a bow nearly the size of her. “It’s huge!”

“It’s magnificent!” Robin whistled, moving to join her and Ella. “I’ve never seen anything like this… It’s almost as if…” His voice died away as his fingers took it from Lacey. She handled it over gladly, shooting the Imp another look. He merely smiled at her, clearly enjoying himself which was suspicious on its own.

“It’s Fail-Not,” Little John whispered, and Lacey nearly jumped out of her skin. The gentle giant had approached them, and she hadn’t heard him in the slightest. William had gotten off his back finally, and was on the other side of Robin, eyes huge in his face.

“It can’t be,” Robin said, but his fingers slowed over the intricate carvings in the wood as if reading the story of the bow with his fingertips.
“Oh, but I assure you it is,” the Imp replied. “Picked it up almost a century ago in the Sixth Kingdom.”

“What the hell is Fail-Not?” Lacey asked Ella, who shrugged uncertainty. “Sounds like a birth control product,” she mumbled to herself, eyeing the enormous bow.

“It’s the birthright of my people,” Robin answered. “The founder of my tribe made it from the wood of the first tree. He strung it with the gut of the first deer, and Mother Nature bestowed upon it a great blessing since he was pure of heart. It has never missed its target.”

“Actually, magically speaking,” the Imp added, “it’s just enchanted to never miss its target. Nothing special about it other than that really.”

“Shut it,” Lacey hissed through clenched teeth. Behind them, more and more of the camp was inching closer, all with wide eyes and whispering amongst themselves. “It’s their culture.”

“It’s my bow!”

“You stole it!” Lacey accused, gesturing towards Robin’s blissful expression. “Look! It’s clearly theirs!”

“It was a gift to the future queen,” the Imp grumbled. “She can give it to them if she wants.”

“I do,” Ella answered hastily. A cheer went up from the crowd, all pushing closer to see it. “Will this help us rescue Thomas?”

“It will,” Robin avowed, straightening. He handed his own bow to William before draping the mythical bow over his chest. “We need to get moving, we can’t have them attack the camp. There are too many people here.”

“The jackalopes are back,” Little John said, as the Merry Men began to move away. The crowd followed them, all jostling to get a better look at the bow. “We have a long way to travel before dawn.”

“I’ll be going now,” the Imp declared. “Lots to do.”

“Thank you,” Ella said again, bowing once more. Lacey just stared at him with an arched brow. Ella elbowed her as she straightened, nodding towards the Imp with a raised brow of her own. “Belle…”

Lacey shook her head. She had made a promise to herself and she did not intend to break it now. Besides, he was only letting her stay, it was the least he could do. “See you after the wedding.”

“Not if I see you first,” he said, and for a moment, Lacey swore she saw something on his face beside his usual manic grin. Before she could look closer, a column of smoke surrounded him and then he was gone.

“I can’t believe you,” Ella breathed, turning to her with wide eyes. “He could have turned you into a toad!”

“Hasn’t yet,” Lacey said with a smile. “Besides, I’m starting to think he likes having someone tell him ‘no’ from time to time.”
“Sun’s almost up,” Friar Tuck said, coming towards them. “Robin’s got a plan, but I’m not sure you’ll like it.”

“What?” Ella asked, but Lacey already knew the answer.

“He wants to use us as bait,” she groaned, shaking her head. “He’s got Nottingham’s bride to be and Nottingham’s most wanted in camp, where he most definitely does not want the fight to be.”

“Very true,” Robin said, coming up behind Tuck. “I’m sorry Ella, but the Dark One was right. If you stay in camp and something goes wrong, he would be able to lay waste to the camps under the law of the realms. I’m a known criminal, but you’re a citizen of the land. He has the power of the crown behind him in more ways than one where you’re concerned.”

“Fine,” Lacey sighed. “I’m only agreeing to this because you have the bow of power or whatever.”

“Bow of Legend,” Robin corrected her. “We need to move before first light. If we can get to the monastery before they leave, we’ll have higher ground.”

“And they’ll have a building with four walls and roof,” Lacey argued. “That’s bad.”

“That’s good,” Ella replied. “They’d be trapped. The monastery is only made for a hundred men or so.”

“Oh, and we have a hundred men?” Lacey demanded, looking around. “All I see is fifty if we’re lucky.”

“We’ll have the forest,” Robin assured her. “We’re used to making our numbers seem larger than they are. It’ll be fine. All we need is Nottingham to come out of the walls, and we’ll have our man.”

“What about the guards?” Ella asked.

“Hopefully the fight will go out of them knowing their leader is dead, and their Crown Prince is still very much alive and incensed.”

“Thomas won’t be angry at them,” Ella said with a frown. “He’ll just say they were following orders.”

“Sure, orders to kill him,” William grumbled, joining them. “Very forgiving fellow this prince of yours? Sounds good for us.”

“Quiet, William,” Robin grunted, shooting the younger man a sharp look. “You’re speaking to the future Queen.”

“Don’t ‘Queen’ me just yet, Robin,” Ella said, turning and heading towards a group of women gathering at the edge of the camp fire. They had bows on their backs, and all wore the same tanned skin color with stripes across the back.

“What say you?” Robin asked, turning to Lacey with a smile. “Are you in?”

“Fine,” Lacey grumbled. “How can it go wrong?”

Chapter End Notes
Much love to Ramloth as always for editing this in the middle of her semester. I hope everyone enjoyed this chapter as Ramloth said "Dorky Flirting!" FTW.

Next chapter, the gang goes to rescue Thomas. What could go wrong?
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

With love always to beta queen Ramloth

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time they reached the monastery, Lacey deeply regretted not taking up the Imp’s offer.

“Come on, Belle,” Ella urged from up ahead. “We’re almost there!”

Lacey shot her an incredulous look. It was slightly ruined by the fact she was out of breath, huffing and puffing as she leaned against the nearest tree for support. “You said that an hour ago,” Lacey called after her, pushing off the tree.

Cursing the near pitch darkness, Lacey made her way to where Ella stood under a rock wall that spread as far as Lacey could see. Despite everything, Ella looked perfectly composed after their two hour hike through the forest. Lacey stumbled to a stop, disliking how both Robin and Ella were glancing upwards thoughtfully. “How are we supposed to get around this?” she demanded irritably. “Fly?”

“We climb,” Robin answered, shifting his bow and quiver to drape off his back. He looked positively thrilled at the prospect. Ella nodded along with him as if this made perfect sense. She started to unbuckle the cloak Robin had lent her, handing it over to Lacey before she could protest.

Lacey glanced back at the hurdle in question. She had been rock climbing once, on a terrible blind date, and she had been safely harnessed, inside and sufficiently buzzed enough to give it a try. Still, she had failed miserably at it, and had given up after ten minutes. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” she protested, even as Robin bent down to hoist Ella up to grab at a rocky projection a few feet up. “Ella, get down from there before you break your neck.”

Ella shot her a smile over her shoulder, before returning her attention back to the task at hand. Robin watched her, standing alert below in case of any trouble. He needn’t have bothered; in the doe-skin tunic the jackalopes had lent her, Ella scaled the cliff face effortlessly. By the time she pulled herself over the ledge, she seemed barely out of breath.

“Your turn, Belle!” Ella called down. “Just take your time!”

Robin turned to her, but Lacey shook her head. “You’re nuts, the both of you. There’s no way in hell I’m climbing up that.”

“--

“I hate you. I hate you both so much,” Lacey groaned from her hunched position on a nearby log. Her arms were cramping and her heart rate was still outrageously fast from the adrenaline and strenuous exercise.

“You did fine, Belle,” Ella encouraged her. “Besides, we didn’t have time to go around. It’s nearly dawn.”
“So you say,” Lacey grunted. “Are we’re almost there or what?”

“The monastery is just around those trees,” Robin answered, appearing from nowhere. Startled, both women jumped, betraying their frayed nerves and lack of sleep. Lacey was content to shoot him a dark look, but Ella hurried forward to meet him.

“Oh, Thomas,” she murmured, hands wringing in front of her. “Please be okay.”

“Looks like the Sheriff’s men are still sleeping,” Robin answered. “There was a guard on duty, but Little John took care of him. Everyone is in position.”

“Wait, how did anyone manage to beat us here?” Lacey demanded, standing up despite her body’s vehement protests. “We were practically running!”

“They just made better time,” Robin shrugged.

“You mean they didn’t have us slowing them down,” Ella responded. “I told you we could have tried to keep up with the main group.”

Robin looked over at Lacey and she caught his eye. He looked away hastily but not before Lacey caught his meaning. “You may have been able to,” Lacey grumbled, joining her. “I’m dead on my feet as it is.”

“You’re also loud,” came a new voice. “We could hear you complaining from across the realm.”

A woman had materialized behind them, no small feat considering the space behind them was empty of trees and the only way around them was up the cliff they had themselves just climbed.

“Oochigeas,” Robin greeted. “Well met.” Ella smiled at the newcomer, touching her lips, heart and forehead in the customary greeting. Oochigeas did the same, but her eyes strayed to Lacey.

“This is the Dark One’s spy?” she demanded of Robin without looking away. “Why did you bring her?”

“I’m here,” Lacey grumbled through clenched teeth, “because I can help.”

The woman scoffed, tossing her head in angry disbelief. “You can’t be serious, Robin.”

“I trust her,” Robin interjected, and his voice, pitched low, rang with authority. “You will respect her as a friend of the camp.”

The woman opened her mouth to respond, but quickly snapped it close. She cast Lacey another dark look, and this time Lacey was able to see her more clearly as the heralding streaks of dawn created lurking shadows.

The jackalope had a proud face. Despite her clenched jaw and her beak-like nose, she was an arresting woman. Her prominent feature, however, was not anything with which she had been born. Her entire face was scarred, puckered, and shiny as if it had been burnt and stretched into the shape it was now. Her left eye was milky white with no brow over it, and the other a dark black that was glaring at Lacey knowingly.

“Well met,” Lacey finally replied, tentatively doing the customary greeting that she had seen Ella perform. The woman turned away, back towards Robin.

“They told me you had Fail-Not,” she said, eyeing the bow clutched in Robin’s hand. “You can no
longer deny leadership with that in your hands.”

“I did not deny my responsibilities,” Robin replied, knuckles whitening. “Only the title.”

The scarred woman did not respond, but after a moment, she nodded. “My jackalopes have surrounded the monastery. One every three trees as you directed. The Merry Men are in the branches, awaiting your arrival.”

“Excellent,” Robin said, pulling an arrow from his quiver. “I only need the chance.”

“You’ll have it,” Oochigeas answered. With a touch of her heart, she was gone.

Lacey shook her head as Ella turned back to the trees to peer down at the monastery below. “Dramatic, much?”

“Oochigeas does not have much love for your people,” Robin explained. “When she was a young child, her tribe was caught in the first of the battles of the realm’s armies. She survived, but barely.”

“That’s terrible,” Lacey said, moving back towards the vantage point overlooking the monastery. “Still. What a bitch.”

“Belle!” Ella cried, elbowing her hard in the ribs. “She’ll hear you!”

“Ow,” Lacey groaned, rubbing at her ribs. She lashed back out at Ella, swatting her upper arm. “Stop hitting me!”

“I’m sorry,” Ella said, flushing. “I’m just nervous.”

“Well, doesn’t give you an excuse to bruise me,” Lacey grumbled, clutching her side. “Nottingham will happily do it for you.”

“It’s time,” Robin told them, sliding up beside them. “Remember the plan?”

“Act like we’ve been lost in the woods all night,” Lacey answered, “and approach the monastery like we’re seeking shelter.”

He pointed between them, his finger aiming at a spot down in the monastery glen, about twenty paces from the door. “If they don’t stop you by there, pretend to twist your ankle and fall. Any closer and I won’t have a clear shot.”

“What if Nottingham doesn’t come out?” Ella asked, peering down at the glen below. There was some movement in the halls; they could hear the sounds of men awakening, and soon they would be milling forward into the glen below. Lacey agreed with Ella. If Nottingham failed to come out, they would have a battle on their hands that they could not win. Knights in armor versus men in trees was not a fair fight, element of surprise or no.

“If he doesn’t take the bait, fall down flat, stay down and don’t move no matter what, understood?”

“Understood,” Ella replied breathlessly.

Lacey simply rolled her eyes. “Do not let me get killed,” she told Robin, leveling a finger at him. “The Dark One will squash you like a bug, got it?”

“Understood,” Robin repeated solemnly. “Remember if anything goes wrong—”
“Play dead,” Lacey groaned. “Yes, got it.”

“Good luck,” Robin whispered.

Lacey nodded, turning back to the glen with a sigh, her shoulders slumping. Ella stood beside her, arms hugging herself, lost in thought as wind whistled across the back of their necks. Lacey suppressed a shiver, remembering an old saying about stepping on graves. “Shall we?” Lacey asked brusquely, indicating the rough path winding below them. Ella nodded, and stepped towards the point of no return.

They made their way down the hill, thankfully nowhere as steep as the cliff face. Lacey slid a few times, and Ella’s hair caught on some low branches, but they eventually arrived in the glen just as the sun hit the ceiling of the old building. Neither of them felt particularly brave at the moment, but as the night began to fade, they could hear rustling indicating Nottingham’s men were stirring.

“Belle, look,” Ella whispered, pointing at the door. A man had strode out, still half asleep as he meandered his way to the edge of the clearing. He lowered his breeches, preparing to piss when all of a sudden, without warning, he was jerked out of sight.

“Nice,” Lacey whistled. The leaves where he had vanished had already settled back into place. Perhaps there was some hope after all. “Okay, ready?”

“Won’t they wonder where he went?” Ella asked, staring at the area. Her hands were clasped over her heart, and her calloused fingers worried her cracked nail beds. The first light of dawn was approaching the clearing, and the pending doom of Thomas’s execution hung over them both.

“They’ll have other things to worry about,” Lacey reassured her. “Now, come on. Act tired.”

“Easy enough,” Ella replied with a yawn. On cue, Lacey’s own mouth widened in a jaw-cracking yawn of her own, and they stepped into the sunlight, blinking as they both fought back the exhaustion creeping in on them.

They moved slowly, leaning to the side slightly, wiping away the leaves from their hair and tugging their clothing back into place. Ella fastened her borrowed cloak, hiding the tell tale doeskin outfit underneath. Lacey glanced down at her own borrowed clothes. They easily looked as if they had been walking all night, with bags under their eyes and dirt caking their shoes. Still, something felt off.

Lacey didn’t dare look over at Ella, but she made sure to lag behind, forcing the leggy woman beside her to slow down to match her pace. “We’re almost at the twenty paces mark,” Ella whispered under the guise of another yawn. “Should we turn back?”

“Steady,” Lacey answered, catching a shadow in the cracked front wall. “Someone’s watching us.”

“Nottingham?” Ella whispered, clutching her elbow and stopping abruptly. “Belle, he knows something’s wrong.”

“Well, he probably does now,” Lacey hissed, covered Ella’s hand where it was digging into her flesh. “It’s kind of hard to pretend to fall down when you’re standing still, Ella.”

“Ladies.”

They needn’t have worried. Standing in the now open doorway was the man himself, the vile Sheriff of Nottingham. He did not move, but in the next instant, every window had a soldier in it, all aiming arrows directly at them. None of them looked tired or dirty, Lacey noticed irritably.
“Nottingham,” Lacey replied. “Funny seeing you here. I was under the impression you had slithered back into the hole from which you spawned.”

“Careful, pet,” Nottingham drawled from his shielded position by the door. “I didn’t sleep too well last night. The prince’s screams kept me up so I’m bound to be a bit short-tempered this morning.”

“Bastard,” Lacey grumbled, already wishing for the knife hidden in her boot. Little John had insisted they conceal weapons on their person. Ella’s knife was tucked away in a holster at her side but Marian’s riding clothes had no pockets. Of all the things she missed, her favorite pair of jeans was the one she wished for the most. They would have been incredibly useful more times than not.

Nottingham was still too far away. He was still in the shadows, the door blocking Robin’s angle. They’d have to lure him out. “Now, is that anyway to speak to the future queen?” Lacey asked, forcing laughter into her voice. “You need to work on your social skills, Sheriff.”

Ella, catching on, hurriedly pulled her hood down, exposing her identity. A stray ray of sunshine illuminated her dark hair, glinting off like burnished silver. Nottingham looked intrigued, but he did not move. Lacey’s heart began to speed up, her fingers fumbling for the knife that was too far way to reach.

“Ah, so it is you, my love,” Nottingham greeted Ella coldly. “I thought I had left you locked up. No matter, I assume you’ve come to wish me good luck?”

“I’ve come for the prince,” Ella declared, standing firm. “If you turn Thomas over to us, perhaps you won’t hang for treason.”

“Hmm,” Nottingham thought, smiling nastily. “No, I don’t think so. You see, I have an army, all happy to obey their current commander and future king.”

The army in question looked less like career soldiers and more like thieves and murderers. Lacey caught one grinning at her in a toothless smile and she stepped closer to Ella. Nottingham continued. “All you have, Ella, is some two-bit whore and a false sense of confidence.”

“Did he just call me a whore?” Lacey growled under her breath. “I’m going to tear his goddamn eyes out when I get a hold of him, I swear to God.”

“Enough of this,” Nottingham said. “I don’t want us to fight, Ella, my love. That’s no way to start a marriage. How about this? You give me your little pet there and I’ll give you your precious prince.”

Ella looked askance in puzzlement. Lacey, just as confused, shrugged back. Nottingham’s interest in her had been intense from the start, but there was no reason he would feasibly want to trade the prince’s life for her’s. Ella seemed to have come to the same conclusion, moving to her left. Lacey followed her, hoping Nottingham would follow suit, giving Robin an opening.

“Why would I do that?” Ella demanded, crossing her arms. “You think I’m stupid enough to think you’d allow us to leave in peace?”

“Dearest Ella,” Nottingham laughed, coming slightly out into the sun. Lacey’s heart gave a leap, her body bracing for the sound of arrow being loosened from a bow.

Nottingham’s eyes flashed in the light, but no arrow appeared from the trees above them. All around them, there was an eerie silence. No birds whistled, no bugs buzzed, and the feeling of being watched itched at Lacey’s skin. “Do you think I’m such a fool to not know the Merry Men are, at this very moment, all around us?” he laughed.
There was a rustle, and then from the trees, came the people in question. They appeared with only the slightest sound, an announcement of their presence, a showing of their force. Lacey didn’t dare look around them, watching instead as Nottingham surveyed them. “Ah,” he said, nodding to himself. “More than I had thought, but no matter. You may not believe me, my love, but I have no use of Thomas myself.”

Figures appeared in the shadows of the doorway, and then with a murmured protest, a figure came tumbling out at the Sheriff’s feet. Nottingham leaned down and yanked the wiggling form up by its hair. “See? Pathetic. Now, your little pet on the other hand… Her, I could use.”

“Thomas!” Ella gasped, wrenching forward. Lacey braced herself, tugging the much taller woman back even as an arrow released from the inner wall, embedding itself in the dirt a mere foot in front of them. Ella stumbled backwards, but her eyes remained on Thomas.

He was bloodied, dirty and looked half dead on his feet. His left eye was swollen shut, purple and black and his lip was busted open. He could barely stand, but the Sheriff propped him up, using him as a human shield of sorts. His regal head lolled to the side, barely conscious from what looked to be numerous beatings.

“Oh,” Ella moaned, biting her own lip hard enough to draw blood. “What have you done to him?”

“Nothing true love’s kiss couldn’t fix,” Nottingham laughed, shaking Thomas slightly. His head lolled sickeningly like a puppet with it’s strings cut. “What do you say my dear?” Nottingham asked, enjoying her distress immensely. “Do we have a deal?”

“Why does he want me?” Lacey asked Ella under her breath. “He’s not insane enough to throw away his life for a little revenge.”

Ella did not respond, but stood there, trembling in worry as Thomas’s knees almost buckled from beneath him. Nottingham grasped him tightly. The bastard was large enough to hold the tall, slender prince easily. Still, he did not move towards them, nor did any of the Merry Men or jackalopes move forward to intervene. There was a sense of waiting in the air, even the guards felt it.

Lacey wondered what was keeping Robin. Despite the poise of his people, they too had a sense of tense anxiety, waiting for their leader to issue a command. Still, none of them risked looking up at the hill, too much was hanging in the balance. As the sun cleared the treetops, Nottingham glanced up at the hill above, waiting for something else entirely. Lacey’s stomach dropped as realization kicked in.

“Ella,” Lacey whispered, pulling the woman closer to her. “We’ve been set up.”

“What?”

“Get back to the path,” Lacey urged, starting to back them away from the monastery. “He knows the plan.”

“That’s impossible,” Ella argued, wrenching her arm away. “How could he?”

“The first guard,” Lacey whispered. “It was the signal for us to come down, they set it all up! ”

Before they could get to the relative safety of the low brush, there was the sound of branches breaking and crunching as something very large pitched off the top of the hill behind them. Lacey whirled around, but Ella stayed facing Nottingham. The large object continued down the hill, and when it finally rolled to a stop at the bottom, Lacey saw a hand through the bare bushes, limp and
empty of the bow it had held moments ago. She felt nauseous.

“Robin,” she muttered, closing her eyes against the sight. “Oh god, Robin…”

There was a sound of a bird whistle, clear and high pitched and the very next second, the entire clearing was full of guards. They were like black ghosts, pushing forward the overwhelmed and outnumbered camp members, all too stunned to put up a fight. There was only a brief scuffle from the far trees. The next moment, Oochigeas came tumbling out of her tree, face bloodied as a guard hoisted her to her feet.

“Bastards,” the scarred woman spat at her assailant, reaching up to try and pry his helmet from his shoulders. He backhanded her. Her head snapped back and she went eerily silent.

“My, my, that was almost too easy” Nottingham said, moving forward. He released Thomas, who dropped like a sack of potatoes at his feet. Ella cried out and, heedless of the danger, rushed forward to him, past a smirking Nottingham. Ella collapsed beside the prince, cradling his prone body in her lap, whispering to him as she pushed the bloody hair back from his forehead.

Nottingham ignored his betrothed. Instead, he lazily approached her instead, eyes raking over her. Lacey stayed stock still. The knife in her boot was heavy, and she repeated the plan under her breath. “If anything goes wrong, fall down and play dead.” She took a shaky breath as Nottingham came closer, a smirk of victory on his twisted face. “If anything goes wrong, fall down and play dead.”

Before she could follow through, she heard the noise of someone emerging from the thicket behind her. She whirled, half hoping for Robin to be standing there, only to find William Scarlett walking towards her, Fail-Not clutched in his grip.

For a moment, relief washed over her. Then, she saw the shame in William’s face and her eyes dropped to where Robin’s body lay and her stomach rolled unpleasantly. The thief followed her gaze to where Robin lay, and his face went pale as he stared at his fallen leader. He made no move to aim the bow, nor a move to go to Robin.

“Yes, well met,” Nottingham said, and Lacey spun back around to find he was inches away from her now. “I’ll admit I didn’t think you could actually pull it off, but I’m pleasantly surprised.”

“William?” Lacey said low, ignoring Nottingham. “What did you do?”

He looked away, ears turning red as he shuffled forward. When he reached them, Nottingham plucked the bow from his grip, holding it up to the morning sun. It looked wrong in Nottingham’s grip, and Will averted his eyes from the sight. “You’re disgusting,” Lacey growled at him. “They trusted you! You betrayed your own people. For him!”

“Oh, don’t be too hard on him,” Nottingham whispered, eyes glinting cruelly. He stepped forward and Lacey felt her stomach go hollow. He dragged a filthy fingertip over her cheek as he smiled down at her. “He betrayed everyone and everything he has ever known in the name of love.”

“Love?” Lacey spat, wrenching her face away from Nottingham’s grip. “You killed us all for love?”

“He has Ana,” William blurted, but he wasn’t just speaking to Lacey. He was speaking to the entire clearing, his voice shaking with suppressed emotion. “He was going to sell her into service in the Sixth Kingdom. I had to. I had to!”

“Shut up, Scarlett,” Lacey growled. “You’ve done enough.”
“Your precious milk maid is in the old gatekeeper’s house on the border of the Second Kingdom,” Nottingham sighed. “I don’t see how such a cow is worth the lives of your companions, but I’m grateful. Now, go before I change my mind.”

Will looked stricken, but finally he nodded. With one last look back, he disappeared into the forest. Around her, the people of the Third Realm looked utterly defeated. She saw Little John, being held back by four guards, all aiming lances at his throat. He had a cut over his eye and a bloody lip, but he was weeping openly. Ella clung to Thomas, her face pressed against his chest as her shoulders trembled with quiet sobs. Everywhere Lacey looked, there was hopelessness. They had lost.

Nottingham was fiddling with his prize, plucking at the string of the bow as he let Lacey look her fill. “He was very useful,” he confided to her. “Never been able to capture one of them before but one of my sources informed me there was a savage wooing a milk maid up north. Once I had the girl, he found me. He was more than willing to cooperate.

“Not only did he let me know the plan for rescuing the prince, he made it here this morning first to warn me of the so-called magical bow, a present from the Dark One himself.” Nottingham lifted the bow up, admiring it. “With this, the crown is mine.”

There was a second, just a brief moment where Lacey let herself give up. Then, in the next heartbeat, she began to laugh. Hysteria, fatigue and grief swirled through her bloodstream like a double shot of tequila.

“Magic bow?” Lacey repeated, shaking her head. Nottingham’s eyes narrowed, lowering the bow as he glared down at her. “God, you’ll believe anything.”

“Stop that,” Nottingham snarled, stepping closer. “Stop that at once!”

Lacey just laughed harder, feeling her knees weaken as she bent in two, clutching her stomach. She hadn’t laughed like this since the doctor had told them it was cancer, inoperable. She hadn’t felt tears pricking her eyes and laughter burning her gut since the wake when everyone had patted her on the head and murmured meaningless platitudes about her dead mother. She welcomed it this time.

Unnerved, Nottingham grasped her chin with his free hand, wrenching her upright. “You’re saying he lied?” Nottingham demanded. His fingers pinched but she kept the smile on her face. She had to buy them time. She had to do something before he won for good. Thomas was still alive. Ella was still alive. There was still hope.

“Of course he lied,” Lacey told him. His breath was putrid, but she kept his gaze. “You think the Dark One would bestow a magical bow upon them?” She spread her arms out, casting a scornful expression at the captured people. “Look at them. They’re pathetic.”

Nottingham released her, stepping back to glance behind him at his prisoners. There were nearly a hundred of them, all of them broken by the betrayal of one of their own, haunted by the death of their leader. A few still held their heads high, and they were glaring at her from behind the guards. Still, most of them did not have the spirit to fight back and Nottingham knew it.

“No,” Lacey continued. “He bestowed the bow upon someone he trusted. Someone he would protect.”

“You’re lying,” Nottingham growled. His face was pinched, and his eyes darted behind her to where Robin lay.
“Am I?” Lacey shot back, lifting her chin. “Think about it. I, a mere ‘whore,’ was liberated from your dungeon by the ambassador to the Dark One himself. So, you have to ask yourself, why would he bother to do that for me?”

Nottingham’s mask slipped. For a brief moment, Lacey saw fear. Smiling up at him, she reached for the bow, wrapping her own small hand around the carved wood just below where Nottingham himself held it. His shoulder twitched, but he did not jerk it away from her.

“Perhaps,” Lacey whispered up at him, a coy smile on her lips, “I’m more than some two cent whore. Perhaps,” Lacey murmured, grabbing hold of the bow with her other hand, “You’re scared that you angered the Dark One. You know the stories, you know the legends. Do you think he would forgive?”

She pitched forward, standing on her tiptoes as she smirked into his face. “Do you think I’ll forgive?”

Nottingham’s face went pale, and for a second, his grip slackened. Lacey, seizing the opportunity, wrenched the bow away from him. With a growl of outrage, Nottingham reached down to grab her, but Lacey jabbed the bow upwards. It connected with his jaw with a crack and Nottingham toppled backwards.

Whirling around, Lacey scrambled towards Robin. Behind her, she heard Nottingham yelling for the guards to go after her. She ignored it, pitching forward heedlessly into the trees at the foot of the hill. The sound of arrows whistled overhead, and one buried itself into the tree just in front of her. Lacey gasped, dropping down and trying to scramble through the brush on her hands and knees, the fucking bow catching on nearly every branch as she tried to get to Robin without being killed.

Her left hand collided with something sticky and hot, and she looked down to find she was kneeling in blood. “Oh, god,” she moaned, closing her eyes against the sight of it coating her palm. Behind her, she heard people fighting, and she knew the Merry Men and jackalopes had bought her some time with their own lives.

She followed the blood trail, finding Robin’s body where it lay just at the brush edge. His face was turned away, his leg bent awkwardly beneath him. She crawled forward, kneeling beside him. “You great big idiot,” Lacey sniffed, fumbling for the quiver on his back. A branch had impaled his lower side, and the blood still oozed from it freely. “You just had to go and get yourself killed.”

“Belle?”

Jerking her hands back, Lacey nearly screamed. She stared down at the body for a moment, breathing heavily. “Robin?” she finally asked, touching his shoulder again. “Are you alive?”

“William….”

“William betrayed us, yes, got it. Stay quiet and breathing, for like five more minutes, okay?”

He murmured something in response, as Lacey finally found a non-broken arrow in his quiver. She hurried to fit it to the giant bow. “How do you even shoot this thing?” she grumbled, fighting to hold it upright.

Behind her, she heard the crunching of leaves as someone trod through the trail, coming ever closer. “Shit, shit, shit,” she moaned, getting to her feet and crouching over Robin. “Please work, please, please work.”
The bow was slick in her bloody hands, and the arrow refused to stay in position unless she held it between her two fingers. She lifted the bow up, wedging the bottom tip into the dirt for stability and holding the top part steady with her shoulder. She didn’t realize she had been crying, until she felt the tears drop off her chin onto her hand.

“Please work, please work,” she whispered, closing her eyes for a moment in the closest thing she knew to a prayer. When the noise came closer, she pulled the string as taut as she could manage with her bloody fingers and exhausted muscles and waited.

The cracking of a branch to her left caused her to spin and with her eyes still clenched shut, she let the arrow fly.

With the arrow’s release, a sharp pain cut across her cheek as the string snapped back against her face. With a gasp of pain, Lacey’s eyes flew open.

Her hand fell away from the bow as her eyes met the stunned eyes of her would be assailant. The mystical bow fell from her grasp. The person toward whom she had fired her enchanted arrow at close range stared back at her with wide dark brown eyes.

It was not Nottingham.

It was Ella.

Chapter End Notes

I know! No Gold/Imp! I’m sorrrrrrry, but this last adventure is something Lacey had to do on her own.

He’ll be back next chapter!
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

As always, all hail Ramloth, beta queen extraordinaire.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ella!”

Tears blinding her, Lacey flung herself forward before Ella could fall to the ground. As Lacey wrapped her arms around her, she expected to feel the shaft of the arrow, or the sensation of fresh blood, but despite being pressed flush against Ella, neither of those things happened.

Instead, Ella wrapped her arms around her to help hold her up. “Good thing it’s a magical bow, huh?”

“You’re- you’re okay?” Lacey peeled away from Ella, looking down. There was no arrow or wound visible. Lacey quickly patted her friend down, searching for the mortal wound. To her relief, she found none. “It was aimed right at you!” Lacey said, shaking her head. “How are you alive?”

“Belle,” Ella steadied her. “Did you mean to shoot me?”

“No! I thought you were Nottingham and I just...”

Ella nodded and Lacey’s eyes grew wide. “Oh my god, it worked,” she said. ”It’s an actual magical fucking bow!”

Ella burst out laughing, her eyes filling with tears as she bent down to embrace Lacey. Unable to process this, Lacey dodged her embrace to scowl at the other woman. “You scared the hell out of me! I could have killed you!”

Ella’s face grew somber and she turned back the way she had come. “Do you think...?”

The sound of someone calling their names interrupted her. The voice was familiar but Lacey couldn’t place it. She raised the bow again, regretting her lack of arrows. Ella put her hand up, straining to listen as their names faded away. “That sounds like Little John,” Ella said. “We’re over here!” Ella yelled, cupping her hands around her mouth. “Through the thicket!”

She turned back to Lacey with a sad smile. “We need to get Thomas back to the castle,” she said. She paused, looking down at the blood stains Lacey’s hands had left on her clothes. “Oh goodness, Belle, you’re bleeding!”

“Shit! Robin!” Lacey exclaimed, furious at herself for not saying something sooner.

“Belle,” Ella murmured worriedly. “It’s not anyone’s fault. Robin wouldn’t have wanted us to blame ourselves.”

“That’s not- he’s alive.” Ignoring Ella’s exclamation of surprise, Lacey turned and headed back where she had left Robin. She could only pray he had been able to hang on. “He needs help.”
Ella followed her into the small clearing. At the sound of their approach, Robin lifted his head slightly. Pushing past Lacey, Ella knelt by Robin’s side. Lacey stood behind her, trying to wipe her bloody hands off on Marian’s ruined breeches.


Little John called out for them again, and this time, his voice sounded panicked. Ella made a move to stand, but Robin moaned, stilling her. Lacey brushed a reassuring hand against Ella’s shoulder. “I’ll go get him,” she said. “You take care of him.”

Lacey made her way back towards the clearing, which was a very different scene.

Ten yards ahead of her, right where she had left him standing and gloating, lay Nottingham. Robin’s arrow stuck out of his chest, the feathers blowing softly in the morning breeze. He had an expression of confusion on his face, frozen forever in death. She stilled for a moment, staring at the man she had killed.

He had tried to rape her. He had imprisoned her. He would have killed her and still, there was a heavy weight in her stomach which she could not fully explain. A noise to her left startled her, causing her to look up to find Thomas sitting on the steps of the monastery, being tended to by Friar Tuck. The so-called guards seemed to have fled. No sign of a battle was visible, save the lone dead man.

Little John appeared at her side as silently as a ghost. He put a heavy hand on her shoulder. She cleared her throat, blinking up at the sunlight streaming through the clearing. “The guards?”

“Ran off,” he said gruffly, nodding towards the trailhead a hundred feet away. “The arrow?”

She avoided the question. “This way, quickly,” Lacey said. “Robin’s still alive.”

Now that Lacey wasn’t running from arrows and certain death, they made their way easily back to Robin. Ella glanced up at them, her face pale but determined. “He’s lost a lot of blood,” she said. “He needs a healer.”

“Robin,” Little John sighed, sinking down to where Ella sat. “You had us worried.”

Robin grinned weakly up at him, but Ella cut him off before he could reply. “Do you think you can carry him?”

“Aye,” Little John replied, bending to carefully pick his friend up in his arms. Robin’s face went white and then green, before his eyes closed and he lost consciousness.

“Probably for the best,” Ella sighed. “We have to hurry.”

“I’ll get Thomas,” Lacey decided, moving towards the glen. “We’re going to need him if we want to get to the castle without getting arrested.”

--

As it turned out, Marian had been far from idle in their absence.

When they reached the border of the forest, the sound of galloping horses could be heard approaching from the main road. Little John paused, clutching Robin to his chest. Even Ella looked uncertain, but Thomas pushed away from her supportive embrace and moved to meet the party.
Little John made an instinctive move to block him and Thomas lay a reassuring hand on the giant’s arm. “It’s okay,” Thomas said, smiling weakly. “I know those horses.”

From where she stood at the back of the group, fighting to stay awake and still clutching the bow that had taken Nottingham’s life, Lacey stifled a yawn. Overhead, the forest was coming to life as the sun climbed higher in the sky above them. The trees cast shadows over the five of them, dappling them in black and brown stripes. Behind them, drops of blood marked their slow path through the woods, the blood of a prince and an outlaw mingling together in the earth of the First Kingdom.

Thomas made his way gamely to the edge of the forest, waving his arms and whistling to capture the attention of the quickly moving patrol. A horse near the back pulled short, and the lead horse swung around mere seconds later.

“They’ve seen us,” Ella sighed, moving under Thomas’s left arm. He collapsed against her, letting his head loll intimately upon her own as his left hand clutched her hip.

“That was the idea,” Lacey commented drily. She scratched idly at the exposed skin of her collarbone, noticing her nails were caked with dirt and dried blood. Little John stood before her, not moving out into the sunlight. “It’s okay, big guy,” she promised him. “We have a prince on our side now.”

While the giant didn’t look convinced, he stayed put. Robin was still unconscious, which was for the better judging by the extent of his injuries. His breathing was growing shaky though, and Lacey trusted Ella’s judgement on returning a wanted fugitive to the castle.

The patrol was nearly upon them now, and a familiar face was at the front. Swinging down from her still trotting horse, Marian threw herself at Thomas, nearly knocking both him and Ella over.

“Thomas!” she exclaimed, her voice muffled from where her face was pressed to his chest. “I’ve been looking for you!”

“Well, you found him,” Lacey grumbled, from her relatively unseen position behind Ella and Little John. “Now, let’s get back to the castle where I can have a proper bath.”

No one heard her. Marian was already hurrying Thomas towards the now empty horse with Ella’s aid. “Your father is worried sick,” she continued. “We sent all the royal guard out searching for you. What happened?”

“Great idea,” Lacey replied. Ella shot her a warning look as a guard helped get Thomas situated upon his own steed. Lacey ignored it. She was exhausted, filthy, her legs were cramping and she had killed a man. Her patience was spent.

“Later, Marian. I’ll explain later. As for now, that man needs assistance far more than I,” Thomas said, gesturing towards Robin. “Get him to the castle as fast as you can.”

Marian, her eyes finally seeing past Thomas, made an inhuman squeak. Her hand flew to her mouth, and she had to visibly restrain herself from running and throwing herself at Robin.

“Sir,” the guard said, eyes large as he took in Little John. “These are wanted men.”

“They have the full pardon of my name,” Thomas decreed. “We will take him straight to my father’s healers at once. His life is in our hands.”

As if the spell was broken, Marian rushed forward to where Little John stood in the shadows. She
noticed Lacey, and a small smile appeared on the woman’s face for the briefest of moments before her whole attention switched to Robin.

“Oh, Robin,” Marian murmured, brushing his hair from his forehead. “What trouble did you get into this time, my love?”

“T’was William,” Little John sniffed. The giant was crying, bottom lip trembling as Marian gently caressed Robin’s face. “He pushed him from the overlook by the monastery.”

“William?” Marian gasped. “He would never!”

“Nottingham made him. He had someone important to William,” Lacey chimed in, coming to stand beside Little John. “Ana?”

Marian and Little John shook their head, the name not familiar to them. “He’s hurt, bad,” Little John murmured, shifting Robin slightly. “His heartbeat grows weaker and weaker.”

“We need to hurry then,” Marian decided.

Up ahead, a guard led Ella to a horse, but the rest didn’t dare step foot into the forest itself. They kept glancing towards them nervously.

“Laing can carry Robin and I,” Marian said thoughtfully, glancing back at her mount who was pawing the ground in interest. The unspoken question of what steed would be large enough to carry Little John was left unspoken.

“I need to return to the camp,” Little John said apologetically. “I will come as soon as I can.”

Marian nodded, and the two made their way to Laing, a beautiful mare with dappled spots across her hind quarters. The horse snickered in greeting at Little John, nuzzling his nose to the giant’s shoulder. It was evident to the entire party that this was not the first time the two had met. Lacey shot a glare at two guards who were whispering, and they fell silent but their eyes didn’t miss the tender care Marian bestowed upon the unconscious famed outlaw.

Ella had somehow argued her way to sitting behind Thomas. He looked abashed but relieved as she held him up. He held the reins in his loose grip but her knees were the ones clenched around their horse.

Marian herself mounted with no issue, and Little John gently deposited Robin before her. The outlaw’s broken leg laid at an odd angle to Marian’s. It would be an excruciatingly painful journey, and Robin was losing color quickly.

“What about me?” she asked Marian. “Where’s my horse?”

Marian looked guilty. “Well…” she started, eyes glancing to the rear of the group. Lacey followed her gaze and found another familiar face smirking at her from atop his horse.

“He insisted,” Marian whispered. “Claimed he knew exactly where you were going to be and here you are.”

“Marian,” Lacey hissed. “I do not want to ride with him!”

“Belle,” Marian growled. “I do not have time for this. Robin is dying, Thomas is seriously wounded and I have a kingdom poised on rebellion. Get on that horse or so help me-”
Less than five minutes later, Lacey was seated in front of Ambassador Gold, frowning down at the pitch black mane of what appeared to be the largest horse of the party.

“Compensating for much?” she grumbled. The horse snorted, tossing his head up at her. Lacey’s hands instinctively gripped at the closest thing, which happened to be the ambassador’s hands holding the reins at her side.

“Easy now,” Gold murmured, but whether it was to her or the horse, Lacey wasn’t sure. She snatched her hands away, and kept her gaze fixed straight ahead.

They were going at a snail’s pace across the fields to the castle. A more direct route, to save on time, but it was too dangerous to go quickly. Lacey was fairly certain both Thomas and Robin had internal bleeding as well as their various wounds. Ella and Marian seemed to both think so as well. A few guards had ridden ahead to alert the healers and castle staff to their arrival, but the main party moved slowly over the landscape.

Her stomach chose that particular moment to gurgle, reminding her that she hadn’t eaten in over twenty four hours. Behind her, she heard a snort of laughter. “Not used to skipping a meal, Princess?” Gold asked. His tone sounded pleasant but Lacey heard the dig in the comment all the same.

“I’ve been off rescuing the heir of the kingdom,” she snarled, refusing to give him the satisfaction. “Shockingly there was no buffet option in the wilderness.”

There was a masculine noise of disbelief, one that made his chest rumble against her back. She leaned forward on pretext of wiping her bloodstained hands on her breeches, but when she straightened, he was still very much there.

She wasn’t sure why she was so annoyed at the mysterious ambassador. He had done nothing really, it was just the knowledge that the Imp had tricked her into trusting someone of his that irked her. Besides, if Gold represented the Imp, he was no more to be trusted than the giggling magic moron anyways.

Ahead of them, she saw the dark hair of Ella shining in the sunlight, while Marian’s blonde locks glinted golden. She reached up to touch her own hair and found it gritty and ratty. “Now, now, Princess” Gold murmured, not missing the small gesture. “Looks aren’t everything.”

She turned, glaring at him through narrowed eyes. “Watch it, pal,” she snarled. “I don’t know if the Imp has deigned to share this with you, but I’m not just one of his little pawns.”

Gold lifted an eyebrow, but it was the smirk playing around his lips that made Lacey want to smack him. “My apologies, your Royal Highness,” he said with a nod. “I had no idea I was dealing with someone of such importance.”

“You’re laughing now, but I just killed a man so show some respect,” Lacey growled, and the effect was only slightly ruined by the fact their horse stepped gingerly over a dip in the ground, causing Lacey to pitch to the left. Gold, having the advantage of seeing where they had been going, had his arm there, and he slid her back into position between his thighs with ease.

Resisting the urge to glare at him some more, Lacey turned back around. She could see the castle in the distance, but it was still some distance away. “How much longer?” she asked, growing suddenly unsure of the journey. Robin’s survival from a fall of such height had been miraculous, but in a land without hospitals and antibiotics, she was unsure how long he could hold on in such a state.
“We’re close,” he said after a moment. “I’m not sure it’ll be soon enough though.”

“ Couldn’t we just… summon the Imp or something?” Lacey asked after a moment. “If he’s as all powerful as they all seem to think he is, surely he could do something?”

“You know better than that,” Gold replied. “Ask yourself what a life would cost. What magic would be needed to save what is lost.”

Lacey shook her head. “Robin’s not dead.”

“He’s mostly dead,” Gold said. “Still, if the lady would like to try, far be it for me to stop her.”

“Don’t try to be charming,” Lacey shot back.

“What exactly have I done to earn your ire?” Gold asked, pulling the reins a bit to slow their pace. A guard glanced back at them, but she felt Gold wave him on. With one last lingering look, the guard rode on to protect his prince as their horse began a meandering trot.

Lacey disliked this development. She wanted to be back in the room Marian had given her, wanted this whole thing to be behind her, and she wanted to be off this horse. “You lied to me.”

She felt him rumble in laughter again, and she leaned forward to escape the sensation. “How do you figure that?” he asked her.

“You work for him,” she reminded him. “The Dark One, or whatever you call him.”

“He has many names,” Gold replied after a moment. “Still, I fail to see how my association condemns me. I liberated you from your jail cell and discovered you all this morning before someone else did. Without the assistance of the Ninth Kingdom, you all would be dead many times over.”

Lacey scoffed. “Says you,” she mumbled, twitching her shoulders. “The Imp’s the whole reason I’m in this mess in the first place.” Her companion didn’t take this bait, and Lacey soon found the silence uncomfortable. “So, how exactly did you find yourself in his employ?”

“I volunteered,” he said, his voice rough and low. His tone invited no further conversation on the subject, and he tightened his knees around the horse, spurring it faster. Lacey pitched forward, and only Gold’s arm wrapping around her stomach and hauling her back upright prevented her from breaking her nose on the horse’s neck.

Her protests were ignored as their steed carried them forward. They passed by Marian and Robin, and despite her attempt to crane her neck around Gold’s frame, she only saw the smallest glimpse of Robin’s pale face before they arrived beside Thomas and Ella.

“Your Royal Highness,” Gold greeted. Thomas looked up, smiling wanly as he tried to get his eyes to focus. Ella’s face was pinched as she continued to stare straight ahead towards the castle. “How do you feel?”

“Happy,” Thomas replied sincerely despite his occasional wince. “Blissfully happy. I’m betrothed!”

“Hush,” Ella murmured, blushing slightly. “I can’t marry you if you die before we get back to the castle.”

“Die?” Lacey blurted, looking back at Thomas. “Ella, he’s just dinged up. I’ve seen worse in bar
fights.”

“Bar?” Thomas remarked in confusion. “What’s a bar?”

“Tavern,” Lacey corrected. “We call them bars in the Fourth Kingdom.”

Gold made an incredulous noise and she dug an elbow in his ribs. The others missed this, but Gold tightened his own thighs around hers in clear warning.

“She’s just worried,” Thomas said, resting his hand on Ella’s thigh. Ella twitched slightly, and the horse neighed in protest. Lacey laughed, even as Ella brushed his hand off her.

“Honestly,” she murmured, cheeks pink. “You’d think we already married the way you’re carrying on!”

“As soon as the official is before us,” Thomas said in all seriousness. By the look on both their faces, this had been something determined upon their reunion.

“How’s Robin?” Ella asked, changing the subject neatly.

“He’s still breathing,” Gold replied with a shrug. “For how much longer, I’m not sure.”

Ella frowned. “We’re at least another hour away from the castle. Maybe more if we have to slow down again.”

“He’ll be dead within two,” Gold said with some confidence. “His lung is collapsed.”

“How do you know that?” Lacey demanded, shifting slightly.

“His breathing,” Gold explained. “His color has gradually gotten worse despite his wounds being wrapped.”

“Maybe you should ride ahead?” Ella suggested. “Have the healers come to us?”

“No,” Lacey chimed in. “They’ll need a sterile environment.”

“A what?”

The entire party was staring at her now, and Lacey gulped. “Clean room and tools. You know. To avoid bacteria.”

“Do you mean fever?” Ella asked, brushing her hair out of her eyes.

“Yes!” Lacey said in relief. “Fever.”

“We’ll ride ahead,” Gold agreed before she could make a further ass of herself. “If only to let them know the prince wants an official.”

Thomas grinned at him, as Gold squeezed his knees. This time, Lacey was prepared for it and leaned into the forward motion. They surged into a gallop, wind whistling by them so quickly that words would be lost. Lacey settled into the rise and fall quickly, feeling somewhat more secure with the feeling of someone behind her on the great animal.

The empty plains rolled beneath them, as Gold angled the horse towards the west, away from the forest. The cool autumn air chilled her, and she leaned back, electing to be warm instead of continuing to show her disapproval of the ambassador. She’d continue when they were inside,
when she was bathed and had been fed.

It was in this warm cocoon, her head nestled against the ambassador’s shoulder that Lacey fell asleep. It wasn’t until she felt hands wrap around her waist, sliding her down off the giant creature that she blinked awake to find a guard wrapping her in a blanket and hustling her up the stairs.

She caught the briefest glimpse of Gold, talking with a tall man Lacey had never seen. She let her eyes close again, nestling deeper into the warm embrace of the guard as her jaw cracked open in a very unladylike yawn.

The guard took to the stairs, taking them carefully, but quickly as he bore her to the relative safety of what Lacey could only hope was a four-poster bed and a waiting bath. When he reached the landing, she opened her eyes, blinking down at the gallery below as they made their way to the far wing.

Below, Gold stared up at her from where he stood in the thong of servants. Men in white stood before him, talking, oblivious that they had already lost his attention. Behind him in the doorway, sunlight streamed in, illuminating his hair with golds and reds. His upturned face bore the look of concern, but it was the way his eyes followed her that made Lacey raise one hand from the cloak she found herself wrapped in and wiggle her fingers at him.

It was a small gesture, she told herself as he nodded back at her. It meant nothing more than to let him know she was fine, although for the life of her, she wasn’t sure why he would care.

It was just evident to her, as she closed her eyes and let herself fall back asleep, that in some small way he did.

Chapter End Notes

You clever cats! You all knew (or suspected) Ella would be fine, and she of course is.

I want to take a moment to thank you the readers who every chapter comment and let me know their thoughts on the chapter. It’s a great part of writing with readers, because it nudge me in directions and encourages me when I’m uncertain where to go next. I feel like Richliga, Anisky, Prissy, Dewey, Rian, Jayenn and Amrei are part of this story and I’m so grateful to you all.

We have one more chapter before we say goodbye to the First Kingdom. See you all next Tuesday.
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

All hail Ramloth, beta queen to the extreme!
(I did ret-con a bit here and there, so any mistakes are mine and mine alone)

In exciting news, I want everyone to take a look at the beautiful, stunning, jaw-droppingly gorgeous fan art that Nia-Nita made for my birthday. She was super sneaky and did not alert me she had started reading the Gate in order to surprise me. I'm in awe of it, and it currently my background for all things digital. The Gate alone is stunning, but I'm obsessed with everything from the hotel on the hill to the sugar high cottage in the forest. Ariel, Ella, Pinoc, and Gepetto all make appearances as do Emma and Graham. But the absolute gorgeousness that is Lacey/Belle and the Imp is spot on and please leave her some love if you like it. I will make sure she gets all of it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A number of things happened over the next few weeks.

The royal wedding of Prince Thomas and Lady Ella was announced. Despite Thomas’s wishes to be married the second they arrived back at the castle, the healers refused to allow him so much as a kiss goodbye before they whisked him away.

Lacey, sleeping through all of this, later learned that Ella ignored the healers’ orders and marched into his room to help care for him. She had not left his side until a week later when he was proclaimed healthy enough to leave his bed.

During this, Lady Tremaine had visited the castle upon hearing of Nottingham’s death. She had loudly demanded her errant stepdaughter back home to don black widow weeds. The King himself ordered her escorted out. She was not heard from again.
Robin was cleared of all charges. The people of the Third Realm were granted citizenship and the First Realm’s lands in the Infinite Forest were bestowed to them as a sign of peace.

It was meant as a gesture of solidarity, one meant to stop war when their chief died. When, because there was no question of if. The great outlaw Robin Hood lay in a state of near death for three weeks. The healers, sworn to save all life, did their best, but at the end of it, there was not much they could do but wait. Little John, Friar Tuck and even Oochigeas visited when they could, but they disliked the great stone castle. No one spoke a word of William Scarlett, and despite how it rankled her, Lacey respected their wishes and stayed silent.

Marian refused to give up hope. Working as hard as ever while Thomas also recovered, she refused to let the burden of the kingdom fall to anyone else. Everyone let her work herself to exhaustion, recognizing her need to keep busy. In between, she would visit Robin, telling him about the day and helping the healer bathe and feed him.

Once everything had settled down a bit, Marian even confessed to her crimes. The King, annoyed at her interruption of his chess game, sent her back to work without another word on the matter. Lacey laughed herself silly watching Marian stumble out of the royal throne room, dazed and confused.

“But I committed treason,” Marian said in bewilderment. “A capital crime!”

“You’re as close to a daughter as he has,” Lacey reminded her, falling in line beside her as they headed down to the kitchens. It was nearly lunchtime and Lacey hated eating with the other nobles. She preferred the small table in the kitchen where, when possible, Ella would join her and Marian for a quick bite between royal lessons.

As soon-to-be Queen, Ella had a lot to learn. She knew how to darn socks, and fix hems and polish silver and clean the cracks, but she did not know how to curtsey to a visiting dignitary or how to address a dowager. Luckily, she was a fast learner, and she did not complain although she had barely a moment to herself between wedding planning and these lessons.

Lacey managed to avoid any unwanted attention by the simple confession of her association with the Ninth Kingdom. “No, I daresay I’m not a true princess,” she would say with a cutting smile to the newest visiting noble. “I live in the Dark Castle, and the Dark One himself sent me to represent his kingdom at the royal wedding.”

“Belle,” Ella would sigh, barely suppressing a smile as the latest arrived noble hurried off, wide-eyed to tell the story to their entourage. “You’re enjoying this.”

“Of course I am,” she would reply. “It’s not every day you get to be the good guy and the bad guy.”

Lacey was free to do this little routine because the Ninth Kingdom’s ambassador had left shortly after the prince’s safe return. Gold had not said a word to anyone, but his room had been empty by the next morning. A simple letter thanked the King for his continued gracious hospitality of Belle, who would be staying on until the wedding.

It was a kindness she had not expected. Gold had given her nearly a month to spend with the people she had come to care about despite her best intentions to the contrary. Despite her best attempts, she found herself thinking fondly of the mysterious ambassador despite his association with the Imp.

The only other development worth noting was not nearly as enjoyable.
“I’ve gained ten pounds!” Lacey groaned, collapsing on the bed in her stays. Her maid of the day made another valiant effort to rouse her, glancing nervously at the clock over the bed. The maids, all terrified of Lacey, rotated duties every day for their sanity and to her and Marian’s continued amusement.

“Miss,” her latest maid cajoled fitfully. “The lunch is in an hour!”

“I’ll take it from here, Posey,” Marian said, striding into the room. She was balancing an empty tea tray, and Posey gratefully took it from her and disappeared out the door. “What did you do to poor Posey?” Marian laughed, closing the door behind her. “She looks as if she’s swallowed a lemon.”

“I gained ten pounds,” Lacey complained, throwing an arm over her eyes. “Ten!”

“I don’t see the issue,” Marian replied, sitting down at the small desk by the window. She sighed happily, slipping her shoes off to rub her arches. “You look lovely.”

“Ten pounds,” Lacey hissed, leaning up on her elbows. “What about this aren’t you getting? I’m huge!”

“What in the world are you screeching about now?” Ella asked, appearing in the doorway. She closed the door quickly behind her, leaning against it in exhaustion. Lacey shot her a dirty look before collapsing back onto the bed. The feather mattress bounced about her and she sank deeper into its embrace, a chorus of ‘fat, fat, fatty fat fat’ echoing in her head.

“Dancing lessons?” Marian guessed, grinning over at her.

“With that horrible bear of a man,” Ella shivered. “‘Faster! Slower! Float like a swan, not waddle like a duck!’ Horrid.” Marian patted the seat beside her and Ella gratefully collapsed. “So, what is our lady of secrets complaining of today?”

“She’s gained ten pounds!” Marian said proudly, smiling over at Lacey.

Lacey scowled back, reaching down to pinch at the roll that was now sitting stubbornly on her hips. Ella broke out into laughter, patting her own stomach in response. “I’m up eighteen,” she bragged shamelessly. Lacey opened and then closed her mouth, trying to figure out what alternate dimension she had wound up in now.

“That’s not exactly a good thing, Ella,” she pointed out carefully. She had noticed her friend had filled out in the face, her angular features softened by regular meals. Her curves slightly more pronounced, but she had not realized Ella’s corsets had been hiding nearly twenty pounds. She looked away hastily.

“Of course it is!” Marian replied in surprise. “No one likes a skinny woman, Belle.”

She narrowed her eyes at them, trying to figure out if they were joking. Marian, full figured and lovely, had a look of superiority on her rosy face and Ella looked down at her own bosom proudly. “You’re having me on,” she decided, crossing her arms. “This is a joke.”

“Belle!” Ella chastised as Marian shook her head.

“Honestly,” the castellan murmered, “only you, Belle, would think a well-fed woman’s figure would mean something negative. A woman is meant to be round and warm and lovely, not sticks and bones in the cold. Some women are born narrow and thin, tis true, but even the fullest women pad their figures.”
Images of Marilyn Monroe appeared in Lacey’s head and she nodded hesitantly. “Okay,” she sighed, standing. “But I’m not a huge fan of it myself.”

Ella stood, coming to help her without a request. Marian, happy to sit for a moment, let her. Lacey’s arms came up as Ella began to tug at the strays, plucking them expertly as she redistributed the weight. “That poor maid,” Ella clucked. “She must have been terribly confused as to why you were trying to make yourself into a scarecrow.”

“She was,” Lacey admitted with a smile. “She kept asking me if I was feeling alright.”

Marian laughed, a rare noise these days. It ended too quickly though, as if Marian grew suddenly silent, darting a guilty look at the door as if Robin may have heard her enjoying herself.

“A woman with curves,” Ella said firmly, keeping Marian’s mind off the man in the room down the hall, “is desirable. Her womanly figure shows health and prosperity,” she continued, her fingers tracing the soft curves of Lacey’s small pert breasts. Marian nodded along from her seat. “Her blushing complexion shows youth and vitality,” she remarked, pinching Lacey’s cheeks as she came around the front to tie the final bow.

“Thanks,” Lacey shrugged. “But I’m still not having any dessert.”

“Suit yourself,” Marian replied, standing and stretching. “Ella, you better head back to your room before Posey worries herself to death. She’s dressing you today.”

“I thought she was supposed to help me?” Lacey asked, gesturing towards her hoops across the room.

“You would have been done by now if you hadn’t been so worried about your figure,” Marian reminded her. “I’ll help you get dressed. I have time this afternoon while everyone is at the banquet.”

“Oh, but Marian,” Ella protested feebly, “the wedding’s tomorrow. Thomas will be heartbroken if you aren’t there for the toasts today.”

“Ella,” Lacey murmured, shaking her head behind Marian’s hunched shoulders.

Ella, realizing her mistake too late, colored. The love of her life had recovered. Thomas was healthy and whole, while Robin still lingered in a state where no one could reach him. Comas were hard to explain to people, Lacey had quickly discovered. When the healers had realized she had no magic of her own, they had quickly dismissed her and her notions of “comas”. It had taken everything she had to not throw the bedpan at them.

“Better go on,” Marian reminded her. With a nod, Ella slipped out of the room. “Ready?” she asked Lacey, brusquely turning with hoops in hand.

“As I’ll ever be,” Lacey replied, stepping into the dreaded hoops and allowing Marian to draw the skirt up to her waist. “What old dress do I get to borrow today?”

“A new one, actually,” Marian said with a smile, tugging the hoops in place and tying the bows behind Lacey’s back. “Ella’s dresses came in, and I had ordered two for you for the festivities.”

“Marian!” Lacey turned, her hoops swinging into Marian. “That wasn’t necessary! I’ll be gone in two days.”

“I know,” Marian said, her throat working oddly. “That’s why I did it.”
Ignoring the fact that she had less than an hour to get presentable before the royal banquet, Lacey leaned over and enveloped her friend in a hug, pressing her cheek to Marian’s shoulder. Marian’s hands gripped her arms, and then she began to tremble, quiet little sobs escaping. Lacey didn’t speak. She just let her cry for what Lacey suspected might be the first time since Robin had been injured.

“Oh,” Marian said after a moment, straightening and wiping the tears from her face. “There’s one more thing.”

“What?” Lacey asked as Marian bustled away to the wardrobe. When her friend did not immediately answer, Lacey narrowed her eyes at her back. “Marian, what aren’t you telling me?”

“Gold’s back,” Marian said without turning around. “And due to the numbers, he’s escorting you into the hall.”

If Ella had thought she had screeched earlier, it was nothing compared to the noise Lacey made then.

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“Not a word,” Lacey warned, taking the silently offered arm without bothering to look at him. The dress Marian had gifted her was a monstrosity of frills and ribbons, lace and rosettes. With skirts fluffed out far enough to be stylish, she looked like a barbie doll cake. It was not exactly the impression she had been hoping to make upon Gold’s return.

Gold wisely took her advice, tucking her arm under his. The bare skin of her arm prickled at the contact. Lacey pointedly kept her eyes forward, ignoring the growing murmurs of the rest of the guests. Gold did likewise, although his bearing seemed a bit easier. Whenever someone caught his eye, they made an odd squeaking noise and looked hastily away.

Directly ahead of them, Ella turned to look over her shoulder, her raised eyebrow a clear message. Lacey widened her eyes, before giving Ella a glimpse of a smile. Thomas turned his head slightly, a whisper was exchanged and Ella quickly straightened as they made their way into the dining room. Ella took her place across from Thomas, and the King sat at the front of the table.

His Majesty caught her eye, nodding warmly before his eyes went cold, flashing over Gold as he deposited her at her seat. Without a word, the ambassador glided across the way, waiting as the rest of the guests filled in before sitting.

Usually Lacey found the seating of a couple across from each other ridiculous, but today, with no way to communicate with Gold except expressions and subtle kicks under the table, she was relieved. The last time she had seen him, she had been too tired to think straight. Her ire had died down that was true, but she was still oddly uneasy around him. She was not exactly used to this unsettled feeling when it came to the opposite sex, and it unnerved her.

Ella leaned over, the King busy talking with his son. “You didn’t tell me Gold was coming for the wedding!” she complained, eyes locked as Gold made a study of his soup. The girl next to him didn’t even touch her spoon, too busy trembling in horror at her bad luck.

“I didn’t know,” she whispered back. “I guess he’s here to make sure I go quietly.”

“You can stay,” Ella said seriously, dark eyes glancing to Gold. “We want you to stay.”

“That wasn’t part of the deal,” Lacey reminded her softly. “Not that I don’t want to stay, but who
knows what will happen if I try. He could send more ambassadors.”

“Belle,” Ella murmured, but a faint smile had appeared. “Talk to him. Maybe he’ll speak to the Dark One for you.”

Before Lacey could reply, the King had turned his attention to them. “My dear,” he said warmly, catching Lacey’s eye. “How have you been?”

“Very well, your Majesty,” Lacey answered, flicking her napkin out and settling it into her lap. The King beamed at her, ignoring the fluttering waiter trying to refill the wine glass at his elbow. Despite her association with the Ninth Kingdom, he was very fond of Lacey as he often reminded her to Thomas’s continued embarrassment. “Are you looking forward to tomorrow?”

The King turned his attention on his future daughter-in-law for a brief moment, and his face, as always, showed his thoughts. Thomas had inherited his father’s easy going manner, and his tendency to wear his thoughts on his sleeve, if not his father’s flirtatiousness. Lacey didn’t mind it, the King was kind and warm and he reminded her of the father she had lost.

Ella felt rather the same way. She had taken to the monarch quickly, and despite her odd history, the King had never said a word against her. He ignored talk of her calloused fingers, reprimanded anyone who dared utter the name Cinderella, and doted on her whenever Thomas was busy.

“Ella is already part of the family,” he answered kindly. “Tomorrow is simply a formality.”

“Here, here,” Thomas replied, and the look of utter adoration that passed between the two of them made Lacey turn away. Across from her, Gold arched his damnable brow at her, eyes widening in comment on the sickening display. Lacey kicked at his shin playfully, only mildly disappointed when he easily avoided her. By this time, the waiter had arrived at her elbow and was pouring her second glass of wine.

Grasping it, she tipped it to her lips and prayed that lunch would be over quickly.

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The problem with these kinds of things were they lasted forever.

Sinking back further into her chair, Lacey attempted an air of interest as what seemed to be the twentieth person stood to make a toast to the happy couple. It was becoming obvious to her why this function was a lunch instead of a dinner. All the Kingdoms and realms had sent someone, although Lacey had been disappointed to find Eric and Ariel, still newlyweds themselves, had sent some odd little bird, white hairs fluffing out of his head like feathers. He hadn’t recognized her either, and she had topped off two glasses during his speech.

Bored, she glanced away, letting her gaze settle on Gold. He ignored her, keeping his attention diverted. Fine by her, it allowed her a moment to take him in without that damn brow arching up to his hairline. His rather full hairline, Lacey noted, for a man of his age.

She had debated his age, never quite remembering if he had been silver or grey. Silver, she decided, watching the candle light glint off the highlights in his otherwise light brown hair. It went well, his shoulder length mane streaked with silver and his expressive amber brown eyes. In all, she rather liked his pointed face with its angles and ridges. It was interesting, and slightly familiar, as if she had known him before she met him. A face with character, her father would have said.

It was that memory, a father’s warm smile, and a large hand holding hers tightly that broke her concentration. Wrenching her mind back to the present, she shook her head to clear it of the
memories. The man beside her glanced over at the sharp movement. Lacey raised the glass to him in a small toast, winking conspiratorially. Her neighbor went beet red in a heartbeat, diving for his glass as the speaker raised his own glass for a toast.

A soft press against her ankle caused her to look sharply across the table. Gold was dutifully watching the man speaking, but by now she knew that press of leather against her skirts. She artfully dislodged his shoe from her person. He never once glanced over at her.

“Fine, be that way,” Lacey grumbled, topping off the remains of her eighth or ninth glass of wine. Ella thankfully didn’t hear. She didn’t need two people kicking her shins under the table.

“Thank you, Sir Melton,” the King said warmly, moving to stand. “My thanks to all of you for coming so far for this momentous occasion. If that is all, we shall adjourn to the salons for the remainder of the afternoon.”

Gold stood. Relieved, Lacey followed suit. She pushed her chair backwards, already clambering to her feet when she realized no one else was doing the same. Across from her, Gold had plucked his goblet from the table and was raising it in what was unmistakably another godforsaken toast. His eyes glittered at her in amusement and she begrudgingly settled back down.

Her neighbor smiled at her in commiseration, but it was Ella’s soft touch on her knee that kept her from saying something she’d regret. The King and Thomas, both drained of color, stared at Gold as he waited for the room’s complete attention.

If Lacey hadn’t been in desperate need of the chamber pot at the moment, she would have been impressed. As it was, she was mainly just uncomfortable.

“As many of you know,” Gold started, “I am here representing the illustrious Ninth Kingdom.” His eyes flashed over the crowd, all cowering as they stared up at him in nervous apprehension. “I would like to raise a glass to the future King and Queen of the First Kingdom’s Original Realm, and wish them both a long and illustrious life as leaders of their people. May they reign in peace and prosperity.”

He raised his glass. Beside him, Thomas was smiling tightly, the pointed reminder of the continued… alliance between the kingdoms obvious. Gold tipped his glass, and the rest of the table scrambled for their glasses. The following toast was lackluster, and it left an uneasy pall over the celebration. Ella was smiling tightly, as everyone else looked around uncertainly. No one stood, not daring to presume to toast after the Ninth Kingdom had its say.

Lacey didn’t recall getting to her feet, but when she found herself looking down at Ella’s upturned face, she gulped.

“Love is something unpredictable and strange,” Lacey stared, having no earthly idea what she was saying. The wine was warming her, tingling along her nerve system like champagne lightning. “When I met Ella, I didn’t know that. I thought it was a fluke, something that only happens in stories.”

Gold had seated himself, but she could feel his eyes burrowing into her.

“I was there when Thomas first saw Ella,” Lacey continued heedlessly. “In a crowded ballroom, with a million other people there, he saw her.” Lacey paused, glancing over at the two of them. They smiled back at her and it gave her the confidence to continue. “Which considering they’re the two tallest people in the realm wasn’t too terribly difficult.”
No one dared laugh, but she saw a few smiles ducking behind napkins. Marian would have laughed, but the castellan was not here and she was on her own. “When Thomas saw Ella, there was no mistaking it as a fluke. When he took her hand to dance, everyone knew it was over.”

The girl next to Gold nodded gloomily at this, prompting Lacey’s smile to widen. “They did not have an easy love story. There was magic, sure, but it did not come freely. They had to work to get here, and they’ll have to work to continue moving forward. That’s what love is,” Lacey continued. “It’s putting in the work because it’s worth it.” She glanced down, reaching for Ella’s hand. Ella hurriedly produced it from her lap, squeezing Lacey’s fingers.

“I didn’t know about hard work before Ella,” she murmured, shrugging as she tried to keep her emotions in check. Her glass was light in her hand and she gestured with it a bit wildly, to make her point. “Now, I know a little hard work is necessary from time to time. Nothing just is. It takes work and dedication, faith and determination. Ella has that in spades and Thomas,” Lacey turned to find him smiling a little confused but good naturedly over at her. “She’ll bring it out in you if you let her.”

“To the happy bride and groom,” Lacey toasted before maudlin emotions could overtake her. “May their love never fade, their loyalty to each other never waver, and that their union will be prosperous as it is happy.”

She had never been in a wedding. Her college roommates had tolerated her. Her so-called friends from high school had all gotten married young and her bar buddies had their own fucked up lives to deal with. Still, it occurred to Lacey as everyone raised their glasses, relieved smiles directed back at her, she had just given a fairly decent maid of honor toast. Gold stared up at her, his lips twisted into a thoughtful expression, and his eyes bent on her and her alone. It was a heady feeling, and for a moment, Lacey forgot exactly what she was doing.

The sound of running footsteps heralded someone’s rapid approach, bringing her back to the present. Everyone stood, turning to the main doors, just as Marian rushed in, breathing heavily with a rapturous grin on her face.

“He’s awake!” she crowed, tears pouring down her face. “Robin’s awake!”

By midnight, the castle had fallen asleep. The future Queen in her rooms, the future King in his suite, and Robin awake. She had spent most of the early evening with him and Marian. When she had left the two of them alone, she found Gold had disappeared, leaving Lacey to her own thoughts.

At the moment, Lacey stood in the winter garden, the small sunken gardens by the main doors. The moons shone down through the glass ceiling, bathing everything in silverlight. It was April back home, Lacey thought, and here the chill of winter was beginning to settle in.

A prickling of magic dusted over her shoulder, causing her to shiver slightly. She did not turn to greet him. So, he lingered behind her in the deep shadows of the hall. “How fares the outlaw?” he asked.

“He’ll live,” Lacey replied. “Healers say they’ve never seen anything like it.”

“A miracle,” the Imp giggled. He made little noise as usual, and Lacey had to resist the urge to flinch when he appeared beside her in the sunken garden.
“Perhaps,” Lacey shrugged. “You’re early.”

“A matter has arisen in the Second Kingdom,” the Imp said. “You’ll leave at first light.”

Lacey twisted to face him. The moonlight dappled over his features, casting them into stark white light. His eyes flickered to hers, a dare lurking deep within. “I thought—”

“You’d get to stay for the wedding?”

Lacey fell silent. “Something like that,” she finally murmured.

“Time waits for no beast!”

“Lovely,” Lacey sighed, shaking her head. He sniggered, shoulders twitching as he laughed at his own little quip. “I haven’t missed you at all.”

“No?” he asked, drawing out the syllable.

“No,” Lacey said, crossing her arms. “Does Gold know you’re here?”

“The ambassador,” the Imp said, flicking his fingers at her, “is of no importance.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Lacey said, lifting an eyebrow at him meaningfully. She was rewarded with a look of what could almost be called surprise. “Is he coming with me?”

The Imp stared at her, and then after a moment, he nodded. Lacey smiled. With a suggestive wink, she moved back towards the great hall. She had goodbyes to make, and this time at least, she could say them.

“Til we meet again,” the Imp called after her.

“Not too soon, I hope!” Lacey replied. She didn’t look back, but the familiar tingle of magic along her spine told her he was already gone.

Chapter End Notes

Have Gold AND the Imp! Have Marian and Ella and Lacey being pals and giggling over boys, have maid of honor toasts and hope and Robin waking up and have allllllll the happy!

Sorry for the week long delay, I came down with the stomach bug last Tuesday and was unable to do anything but curl up in a ball.

Next time, we say goodbye to the First Kingdom as Gold and Lacey go off to the Second Kingdom where their next adventure awaits.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

All hail Ramloth, Beta Fairy Godmother!

(I did some more retcon in here so if you notice a mistake it's mind and mine alone)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With the Imp’s warning, Lacey had enough time to say her farewells. More than enough time really. Still, even with nothing to pack and only four people to say goodbye to, the past few hours had gone by too quickly.

They made their way outside when the morning dawned over the mountains. The dew caught the light, sparkling as bright as the stars had gleamed that night. There was a chill in the air that spoke of an early winter.

Without thought, Thomas put his arm around Ella to draw her closer to him. She went willingly, fitting perfectly against him. They made a lovely picture. There was little doubt they would lead the realm into prosperity but at the moment, they looked young, uncertain of their future.

Robin had refused to say goodbye from his sick bed. Marian had finally agreed to let him come to say goodbye, but only if he stayed seated. This entire situation rankled the usually independent outlaw who was still feeling the after effects of his injuries.

“Do you have to go?” Ella asked again.

Lacey smiled, giving them a half shrug. It was the best she could muster on no sleep. “It’s time,” she said. “Besides you won’t even miss me.”

“Don’t say that, of course we’ll miss you! All of this,” she gestured to her fiance and then towards Robin,”is because of you.”

“Well, not everything,” Robin said. “I think we can blame Nottingham for this.” He indicated his current seated position in a wheelchair, four blankets tucked around his legs pinning him in place.

Marian darted a quick, apologetic look towards Thomas. “Robin!” Marian scolded, swatting at him. She missed by a mile. “I told you to behave!”

The prince, good natured as always, beamed back at her, completely unfazed by Robin’s mood. “About that,” Thomas said, almost as an afterthought. “Father asked me to find a suitable replacement for the Sheriff. Problem is, I haven’t a clue where to start. Then, I thought, Robin, you know the woods better than anyone. Plus, you have a...familiarity with the laws, having skirted most of them in one way or another. Perhaps you’d be interested?”

The four of them stood gobsmacked as the future king surveyed them thoughtfully. When no one spoke, he looked to Ella. “What’s the matter? Was it something I said?”

Ella tried but failed to hide the smile that was already lifting the corners of her mouth. “Thomas, are you asking Robin to become the new Sheriff of Nottingham?”
“Yes?” Thomas replied uncertainly. “Is that not appropriate?”

“Thomas,” Marian cut in, hardly daring to believe it. “Robin would be titled, a peer of the realm.”

“Shouldn’t he be?” Thomas asked, looking to Lacey now. They had not spent too much time together, but Thomas had come to rely on Lacey’s bluntness when the other two women in his life tried to shield him.

“As king,” Lacey said, “you have every right to grant lands and titles to citizens of the realm. Since your father legalized Robin and his people as citizens of the First Realm, there’s no legal issue.”

She glanced at Marian for confirmation, receiving a hurried nod. Marian’s fingers were entwined with Robin, clutching tightly as their future started to rise up before them. “So, yeah,” Lacey finished lamely. “I mean, you’d be making a Third Realm refugee a peer to the oldest families in the land. I’m sure some people won’t like that much but whatever. Plus, you’d be giving him the ability to marry whoever he chooses.”

“Especially a castellan of a castle,” Robin murmured. Marian had tears running down her cheeks now. Luckily, she was short enough for Robin to reach up to swipe them away, his thumb brushing tenderly over the curve of her chin.

Thomas still looked rather confused, but Ella tightened her arms around him and tilted her head up for a kiss. He happily obliged, leaving Lacey standing there on the steps, watching two couples’ rather emotional public displays of affection.

“Whenever you’re done,” Lacey grumbled, causing both parties to spring apart.

“Sorry Belle,” Ella murmured, cheeks pink.

“Save it for tonight,” Lacey said, smiling as the blush deepened. Thomas flushed now too, causing Marian and Robin to laugh. The sun was quickly rising, chasing the night chill away. The artfully designed stone edifice of the castle glowed to life, the gargoyles at the top bursting into color as the sun dusted over them.

“Well, looks like everything’s settled,” Lacey said. She clasped her hands together, mentally preparing for the burst of smoke that would herald her departure. She had already hugged Ella and Marian goodbye, and she didn’t trust herself to do it again.

“Better go,” Lacey told them. “Take care you two.”

“Us?” Robin laughed, even as Marian started to maneuver his wheelchair. “We’ll be fine. I’m going to be Sheriff, didn’t you hear?”

“You won’t be anything unless you rest,” Marian warned him. “Little John will hate to have missed you, Belle.”

“Make sure to tell him and Friar Tuck I said goodbye,” Lacey reminded them. “I don’t trust Robin to stay awake long enough to.”

Robin laughed but his face fell, as his chuckle turned into a wheeze.

“That’s it,” Marian decided. “Back to bed you go.”

“I was saying goodbye!” Robin exclaimed, twisting to see around Marian as she pushed him gently inside. Lacey laughed as she heard Marian remind him they had been saying farewell since
As sunlight burst into the great castle, it illuminated flowers and bouquets towering tall on each table. A white runner was waiting to be unrolled and the family crest was being polished by a man balancing carefully on a ladder.

“Be careful with that!” Marian shouted from inside, visible from down the hall as servants started to throw the windows open.

Left alone with the future rulers, Lacey sighed. “Well,” she said, gesturing to the morning sky. “You guys get hitched today.”

“I should go,” Ella murmured, glancing at the rising sun. “I need to get some sleep before the maids come to dress me.”

“Go,” Lacey urged. Ella nodded, stepping forward for one last hug. Lacey shook her head, using her hands to shoo Ella back inside. “Go on, it’s the happiest day of your life.”

Ella shook her head, ignoring Lacey’s protests to throw herself at Lacey for one last hug. Lacey finding her face smushed against Ella’s now more prominent bosom froze for a moment, before sighing and wrapping her arms around the tall woman’s frame. “I’m happy for you,” she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut. “It couldn’t have happened to a more deserving person.”

“What?” Ella asked, pulling back slightly. “Becoming queen?”

“Finding someone who loves you as much as you love him,” Lacey replied. Ella opened her mouth, tears springing to her eyes when the sound of a carriage approaching made them turn to the drive.

A blood red coach, one that looked remarkably like a car with grill designs on the front and a low back driver’s seat rolled to a stop before them. With golden lanterns on each side of the doors and a black awning leaving the carriage windows open to the elements, it was an extravagant monstrosity parading as elegance. From the back, a black flag stiffened flat bore a golden wheel. She had seen the symbol before in the Dark Castle, and recognized it at once.

“That’ll be my ride,” Lacey said. At least, it wasn’t smoke, she told herself as she made her way down the stairs. There was no one driving the team of four black horses, but a lone man sat in the carriage itself, watching her warily from his position. “Morning, Gold,” Lacey greeted, pulling the door open for herself. She settled herself in as he watched her. “Thanks for the help.”

“Did you need it?” he asked.

“It would have been nice,” she replied.

“Ah,” he said. He shook his head regretfully. “I’m afraid I don't do nice.”

“Could have fooled me,” Lacey mumbled under her breath. She glanced out the window, noticing Thomas had joined Ella at the top of the stairs. They both waved goodbye. Ella’s lip was trembling, but there were no tears. Lacey nodded back at them, lifting a hand in return.

After a moment, she turned away. “Ready,” she croaked. With the air of one with better things to do, she leaned back into the velvet cushions and closed her eyes. There was a crack of a whip from the invisible driver, and the carriage jolted forward. Lacey kept her eyes shut as they rolled away from the First Realm’s castle.
“Was it easier?”

She cracked an eye open, staring at him balefully. He looked remarkably well rested, dressed in his usual tan breeches and dark jacket. “Was what easier?”

“Saying goodbye.”

Lacey didn’t bother to answer him. Her abrupt departure from the beach had been nearly two months ago. She could still remember the fairy flittering before her as the smoke had surrounded Lacey, dragging her back to the Dark Castle without so much as a goodbye to Ariel and her prince.

Lacey had been vocal in her displeasure, and while she did not want to admit it, it bothered her that the Imp had shared this information with Gold. It reminded her that the man across from her was not to be trusted, that he worked for the noxious creature that had locked her in a dungeon, used people for his own gain, and giggled openly at death and destruction.

The open carriage was chilly and she was already shivering. From the corner of her eye, she noticed a small basket on the floor and bending down, she snagged a blanket from it. Pleased, she draped it over her lap. Ignoring Gold’s inquisitive look, she let out a yawn and then settled back to sleep.

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“How much longer?”

Judging by the sun, it was well past noon but the magic carriage made no motion to pause. Across from her, Gold flipped through a book, hardly bothered by the fact that they had been trapped in this excuse of a vehicle for nearly six hours.

She was guessing of course. It felt more like years.

He glanced out the window before returning to his reading. “Nearly there.”

Lacey groaned, stretching her legs out as best as possible in the confined space. The traveling dress Marian had scrounged up for her itched terribly and the stockings pinched her calves. “We need to stop soon,” Lacey told him after she resettled herself. “I’m thirsty.”

He nodded towards the small basket on the floor. Lacey grudgingly glanced down to find a canteen glistening with cold condensation staring back up at her. Grabbing for it, she hoisted it open and took deep long sips, delighted to find it was like its counterpart back at the Dark Castle. No matter how much she drank, there was always more.

Sated, she placed the canteen in her lap. She nudged the basket with her toes, finding it once more completely empty. Closing her eyes, she thought very hard about being cold and when she opened her eyes again, another blanket was spilling out of the wicker. “You could have told me it was a magic carriage,” she said offhandedly, kicking at the new blanket’s fringes.

“I didn’t think I needed to,” Gold replied. “There’s an invisible coachman, surely that was your first hint?”

She laughed, causing his head to jerk up out of his book. “You’re can’t do magic, can you, Gold?”

His brown eyes surveyed her for a moment, and she returned his gaze. “Myself? No,” he answered. “I do enjoy the use of magic through association.”
“The Imp, you mean,” Lacey replied.

Gold shrugged. “You could say that,” he said.

“Do you always talk to people without looking at them?” Lacey asked, angling her head to get a better look at his book. “Or am I an exception?”

He slipped his finger in between the pages to mark his spot as he gently let the book fall shut. It dangled off his lap, as he leaned closer to her. “Do you dislike everyone or am I just an exception?”

She leaned in as well, until their foreheads nearly bumped together over the uneven terrain. His nostrils flared slightly but he did not pull back. They were jostling in unison as the carriage rolled onwards, but neither looked away.

There was unspoken challenge here. Neither of them was entirely certain what the winner would take, but they were not about to back down. Lacey leaned in a bit further, angling herself into position and immensely enjoying the way Gold’s eyes narrowed as she encroached in his personal space.

“Who said anything about disliking you?” she murmured. Scooting backwards, she winked before breaking their stare. When she looked back up, he had returned to his book, but one corner of his thin lips was tilted upwards ever so slightly.

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After a few restroom stops reminded Lacey that a never ending canteen did have its drawbacks, she started digging around the magical basket just for the hell of it. It provided a few books, a puzzle game of some kind and even knitting tools although Lacey had never knit anything before in her life.

She became bored enough to even risk an attempt at conversation. “Useful, this,” she said, kicking at the basket gently. “How does one make a magic basket?”

Gold pulled his attention from the window where he had been watching the sun start to descend into the east. He glanced down at the object in question, before leaning down and picking it up. It appeared light, as if it didn’t hold anything one could want and more.

“If I remember correctly,” Gold said, fingering the lattice sides of the basket. “There was a trade for that particular spell.”

“A trade?” Lacey snorted. “The Imp seems more likely to just take something rather than trade for it.”

Gold shrugged, placing the basket back between them and turning to face the evening. “You have a strong opinion of the person helping keep you alive.”

“I know him well enough to know it’s not out of the kindness of his heart.”

“I wouldn’t say anyone knows him well,” Gold said. His tone was casual, but fraught with something deeper that Lacey couldn’t quite follow.

They had been in the carriage together all day, and the most they had spoken since earlier had been a few words about the scenery. Gold’s face was washed in the early colors of sunset, oranges playing about his hairline and shadows already deepening under his brow. “We’ll be stopping
soon,” he said suddenly, nodding to the right of the carriage.

Like magic, the trees fell away on the right hand side, and a large clearing came into view. The gentle rise and fall of the hills of the forest now gave way to rolling hillside, with green grass growing as tall as the carriage spokes.

Towering above it all was a large wooden building perched up on the hillside. With a long hipped thatch roof, the building looked like a child wearing its father’s hat, the tail ends of the roof coming down like coat tails on either side of the back of the building. It was still some way away, but the horses, energized by the sight of it, hurried forward.

“We’re staying there?” Lacey asked doubtfully.

“Ah, she’s accustomed to castles,” he said sotto voce.

She was tempted to tell him she had slept in worse places, but decided against it. She turned to look out the window.

“The Hill House is perfectly suitable, Belle,” Gold said after a moment. His voice was low, but there was a quality of appeal in the way he said the words, as if he wanted her to believe him.

It occurred to her that she was growing accustomed to the name Belle. The past month had been spent answering to it, and sometimes she had whispered her true name to herself while in bed. A reminder, a bedtime prayer, a lifeline in the darkness, but in the morning she’d wake up to being Belle again.

Being Lacey felt fuzzy, as if there was some bit of herself that had been dulled by being Belle. Before Storybrooke, she would have never been so disappointed at missing a wedding. Hell, she would never have even agreed to go to a wedding...she hated weddings.

Or at least…. she had, before she had made friends who called her Belle.

Swallowing roughly, she leaned back and kicked her slippered feet up on the opposite seat beside Gold. Desperate for a distraction, she shot him her best flirtatious grin, the one that even made the priest on the church stairs blush scarlet. “You never said where we were going.”

“You never asked.”

His lips were curved up in a smile. She slid her foot towards him, enjoying the warmth as it nestled into his side. He looked askance at it, and she moved the other foot until both were warm and cozy next to the feared ambassador of the Ninth Kingdom.

It was his turn to be speechless, but he quickly recovered. Plucking first one foot and then the other, he dropped them back to the floor of the carriage. “Careful of the upholstery.”

Lacey straightened back upright in her seat, shrugging before turning back to the window. She hoped he had missed the way she had shivered slightly at the feel of his thumb through her stocking. “Where are we going?”

“The Sun Court of Corona,” Gold revealed. “The preeminent realm of the Second Kingdom and the home of King Frederik and Queen Arianna.”

“No prince?” Lacey asked playfully. “There’s always a prince.”

Unfazed by her attempt at teasing, Gold shook his head. “No, there is no male heir to the throne of
“Which is why we’re going there,” Lacey guessed. Gold shot her a sidelong glance. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

“She died?”

“She was taken,” Gold corrected.

The open carriage had been nice during the warm autumn day, but as night started to descend again, she looked forward to getting indoors and away from the wind. She pulled the blanket back onto her lap, tucking the ends under her legs to keep her warm.

“What’s that got to do with us?”

“We,” Gold continued, “are going to offer our services.”

“How so?”

“Why, we’re going to give them their princess back.”

“How are we going to do that?” Lacey asked, crossing her arms under her chest. “You don’t happen to know where she is by any chance?”

Gold shot her a pointed look and the plan suddenly made perfect sense.

“No!” Lacey exclaimed. “Absolutely not! It’ll never work!”

“You’re a bit older,” he agreed. “Still, you look young enough. Nothing a little rouge can’t fix.”

She glared at him. “There is no way in hell I am pretending to be their little lost princess.”

“You owe a favor,” Gold reminded her. “I suppose you could go back to the Dark Castle. It should only take four to six weeks to get back in the carriage, that is if griffins, dragons, or witches don’t get you first.”

“Ugh,” Lacey growled. She had lost as soon as she had agreed to leave Thomas’s castle. “What’s the plan then?”

“Easy,” Gold remarked, leaning backwards. For the first time, he had an easygoing look on his face and Lacey got the distinct impression he was enjoying this immensely. “As the ambassador for the Ninth Kingdom, I travel between realms. Recently, Lešak vanquished a witch of his acquaintance in the Impossible Forest and discovered she had been keeping a girl as a ward.”

He gestured to her with a pointed nod. “You know the residence in question well enough I assume to be able to talk of it with the proper revulsion?”

“More than I care to remember,” Lacey replied. “So, I’ve been right under their noses in the Infinite Forest this entire time?”

“Why not?” Gold shrugged. “Witches kidnap princesses all the time.”

“This is a weird, weird world,” Lacey grumbled.
“What was that?”

She turned to find Gold staring intently at her, and for a moment, she couldn’t decide if he knew or not. Perhaps the Imp shared her frustrations and her tantrums, but had he shared her origins?

“What?” Lacey lied, settling back down with a sigh. “Okay, kidnapped as a baby, been living in the woods with a witch, and rescued by the Imp to be delivered by the ambassador. What’s the catch? What’s in it for us?”

“Us?” he asked. She made a rude noise, gesturing for him to continue. “Well, for the safe delivery of their only child, nothing major.”

She was quickly losing patience with him. He was in a fine mood, in fact, he was positively chatty but she felt like she was missing something, and she didn’t enjoy it. “Gold...”

“There is the matter of the Corona Crocus,” he finally said. “Known for its legendary healing powers, it only grows in the Sun Court.”

“Crocus?”

“A flower,” he replied drily. “Golden Yellow like the sun, it gave the Sun Court its name when it was first founded in the gardens of this land.”

“Okay, so he wants flowers. Why not just go and get them?”

“Flower, singular, one,” he corrected. “And for the same reason a thief does not simply walk into a residence via the front door to take the valuables,” Gold said. “There’s numerous protections against that ever happening.”

“What does the Imp want the flower for?”

“I’m sure I have no idea,” Gold lied.

“Must be pretty bad if the only thing they’d trade for them is their daughter,” Lacey commented drily. Gold shrugged, lip slightly protruded as he pulled a innocent face. Lacey sighed.

“You think this will actually work?” she asked. “Won’t they care that I’m not their actual daughter?”

“Who said anything about being the actual heir?” he said. “The King and Queen are growing older and some groups are growing restless. The worst case scenario is you buy them some time to put down the factions, by posing as the heir.”

“Are you going to stay?” she asked. “With me?”

Gold blinked, even as Lacey realized how that had sounded. Furious at herself, she hastened to clarify. “I mean, I don’t need you to or anything, I just thought you might...you know.” She was floundering.

Lights started to come on in the Hill House, and a shadowy figure came outside, walking down the sloping hill to meet them. Lacey, eager to get out and stretch her legs, stuck her head out the window to see a woman standing in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron.

Lacey wanted to curl into a ball and die, embarrassment burning in her cheeks as she cursed herself seven ways to Sunday. Gold, for his part, regarded her thoughtfully which only made her more
uncomfortable.

“Do...do you want me to?” he finally asked, sounding puzzled.

She risked glancing back at him, and for a moment, she almost admitted she did. Instead, she shook her head. Before she could embarrass herself any further, they arrived at the house.

In the fading light, the hostess took one look at the Dark Castle crest and quickly disappeared back inside. Lacey looked over at Gold. “This happen often?”

Gold sighed. “Occupational hazard,” he admitted. He swung open the door and disembarked. He held his hand up to help her down.

Lacey stared at him for a second, before she put her hand in his. Without fanfare or subtext, he gently helped her down as the husband of the woman came out to greet them. Lacey stood, adrift, as he dropped her hand and strode towards the house.

A small sign over the doorway read The Hill House with a small illustration beneath it. Even in the dimming sunlight, Lacey could see the tankard of ale, fork and knife, and pillow that made up the inn’s sign.

“Two rooms,” Gold said as he disappeared inside. He left the odd couple and Lacey outside, staring at each other helplessly.

Once again Gold had managed to throw her for a loop, without so much as pausing to notice.

She wasn’t sure if she was impressed, frustrated, or just plain confused.

Chapter End Notes

I'm terribly curious as to how you all feel about this major Gold/Lacey chapter....I figured you guys won't mind terribly I locked these two in a carriage for a chapter?

I hope you all enjoyed Ella, Thomas, Robin and Marian. I had a blast writing them, and I know I'll miss them as much as Lacey. The First Kingdom was amazing to write.

Lacey's back in the Second Kingdom, and off to deal with a long lost princess. I was inspired by the David/James storyline in Season 1 for the current deal, and we will meet the royal family in a chapter or two.
Gold had already finished with his porridge when Lacey finally stumbled downstairs for breakfast. A quick look around showed that their hosts were hiding out in the kitchen.

Lacey yawned as she fumbled for her spoon. God, she would kill for a proper espresso. Or a bagel. Gold watched her impatiently, eyes burning into her forehead as he started to impatiently jiggle his
Lacey slammed the spoon down on the table, glaring back at him. “Can you stop with the third degree? It’s barely light outside!”

“Dawn was thirty minutes ago,” he replied. Their hostess hurried out of the kitchen with what smelled like strong coffee. She didn’t look up from the mugs when as she held them out to the two of them.

“Ah, bless you.” Lacey took the warm mug gratefully. Gold took a cup as well, nodding his thanks. The hostess, who hadn’t spoken a word since their arrival, disappeared quickly from view again. “Skittish, around here, aren’t they?” Lacey remarked, burying her face into the steaming cup.

“Not overly fond of Lesak and his minions,” Gold said. He flicked a piece of lint off his pants before his foot started its impatient jiggling once more.

Feeling much more human now that caffeine was entering her system, Lacey relinquished her death grip on the coffee to reach for her spoon. “Okay, okay,” Lacey said, “give me fifteen minutes to eat at least.”

He gave her ten. Then, without any regards to her still half-full coffee, he announced it was time to leave. With little fanfare, they left the Hill House to the obvious relief of their hosts.

Less than thrilled about another early morning and in no mood to talk at the moment, Lacey let the rolling of their carriage lull her back to sleep.

Her dreams were scattered. She had not been plagued by nightmares since she had left the Dark Castle. In fact, her travels had left her so exhausted she had barely dreamed at all. If she did, she hadn’t remembered upon waking.

As the morning disappeared under the wheels of their carriage, Lacey dozed peacefully until the unmistakable scent of the sea woke her. It tickled her nose and roused her from her reclined position. Across from her, Gold was reading, unfazed by the warm wind and sound of seagulls crying overhead. Wiggling onto her knees, Lacey leaned out of the carriage to stare out towards the sea.

Unlike the blue green ocean she had nearly drowned in, this water was opaque but smooth. There were no large ships or docks within sight. Instead, a large rocky isle dominated the nearby horizon, a mound topped by a sprawling castle.

Lacey whistled, a disbelieving smile breaking over her features. “Gold,” she called. “Come look at this!”

“I’ve seen Corona before,” he said. He flipped a page without looking up. “It loses its luster after the tenth viewing or so.”

Lacey doubted that. Spiraling into the clouds, the castle of Corona had three towers, leading the eye upwards to the sun that currently hung directly overhead. Glistening white in this direct light, the castle’s unique stone gleamed like polished marble. It was a stark contrast from the rocky gray of the isle beneath it. A few small boats floated by along the coastline, most appearing to be leisure trips or ferries judging by their size. To the left, a single sprawling bridge connected Corona to the mainland, and they were fast approaching it.

The wind was blowing parallel to the shore, pushing Lacey’s hair into her eyes. Unable to hold it into place, Lacey slid back inside the carriage to grab a now waiting hairbrush from the helpful foot.
“Careful,” Gold murmured without looking up. “You keep smiling like that and I’m going to think you’re enjoying yourself.”

Lacey began to plait her hair into a messy braid to keep it out of her face. It had been too long since her last haircut. She flicked at her wispy split ends but there was nothing much she could do about it at the moment, so she settled for a distraction. “Gold, tell me more about Corona.”

Gold put his book to the side, allowing himself to be drawn into the conversation. “You’re rather interested for someone who wanted nothing to do with this venture.”

“For the record, I still think it’s a terrible idea,” Lacey said. “Shouldn’t I know some things about life in Corona though?”

“Doubtful,” he snorted. “Most kidnapped princesses don’t learn much beside cooking and cleaning.”

At the casual offhand delivery of this comment, she narrowed her eyes at Gold. “Has...has the Imp ever kidnapped a princess?”

He snorted. “No,” he said. “Can you imagine? A spoiled brat running around the Dark Castle, complaining about the dust and the cold? Crying and sniffing about missing home?” He shook his head. “No, there’s nothing tempting about that scenario.”

Lacey supposed he had a point. After all, she had been there little over a month or two and the Imp had been less than thrilled about having his solitude interrupted. Still, she couldn’t resist teasing Gold about their shared acquaintance. “The Imp never gets lonely?”

Gold shot her an arched look. “What do you think?”

“I think,” Lacey said, “he wouldn’t tell anyone if he did.”

Before Gold could reply, the carriage rolled slowly to a stop. Unable to resist stretching her legs for a moment, Lacey opened the carriage door to stand on the step below. They were in a line of carriages, all waiting patiently to travel across the great bridge.

“I see why you wanted to leave early.” Lacey counted nearly thirty carriages, wagons and carts lined up before them. Lacey retreated back inside. “We’ll be here all day at this rate.”

“Nonsense,” Gold murmured. “They’ll have seen the sigil by now.”

Before Lacey could puzzle out what exactly he meant, two guards began to approach them. They wore golden armor, shining helmets perched on their brows.

“The Imp’s popular,” she said to Gold. “They’re coming straight towards us.”

“Not every day one sees this crest,” Gold replied. “It tends to inspire the right amount of reverent awe.”

They watched as the guards approached. Their armor clanked as they walked, growing louder as they neared. “Your Excellency,” came a gruff voice. The guard bowed his head, clutching his fist to his chest. His fellow did the same, although both kept their other hand curled around the hilt of their swords. “Our apologies, we did not know to expect you.”
“No, I’m afraid this is an impromptu visit,” Gold said, keeping to the shadows of the carriage. “I have urgent business with the King and Queen.”

The guard’s eyes flickered to each other before back to the ground. “They will be honored to receive you,” the senior guard answered perfunctorily. The older man had hard eyes, small and intense and his mouth was set in a straight line with no evidence of laugh lines on his face. He must have felt her gaze, and he turned to regard her in turn. “May we have the honor of your esteemed guest’s name?”

Gold was frowning at them both, obviously displeased with this curiosity. “She is part of my business,” he grated, still not moving a muscle. “Her name is none of your concern.”

“Ambassador Gold,” the younger guard began, nervously eyeing the empty coachman seat. His senior stilled him with a slight shake of his head.

“Your Excellency, you and your guest are most welcome,” the senior guard said formally. He turned to Lacey, watching her carefully. “My lady, is this your first visit to Corona?”

Before Lacey could answer, Gold did it for her. “Something like that. Now, Captain Gainey, if you’ll kindly stand aside.”

The guard, startled at Gold’s knowledge of his name, went white. The thick mustache over his lip quivered but finally he gave a brusque nod. “I’ve sent word to the castle of your arrival,” he said stiffly. “I’ll ride ahead to have them expect you at the castle gate.”

“Very good,” Gold murmured. He gave a flick of his fingers to dismiss Gainey. Something about the casual gesture registered to Lacey’s as familiar. Before it could click into place, the sound of ringing steel drew her eyes back to the bridge where an iron gate was being slowly opened, revealing a private entrance to the bridge.

They moved onto a partitioned section of the bridge, free of the slow-moving traffic of the throng. In the main roadway, pedestrians, carrying bags and baskets of wares and goods, hindered the passage of various carriages and carts. Everyone seemed to find this perfectly normal, most enjoying the lazy pace and talking amongst themselves.

One older vendor, struggling with his basket of fruit, seemed to be the main cause of the wait. He moved off to the side. Just as the Dark Carriage passed by, he tripped, and a few of his fruits spilled from his basket to splat onto the otherwise pristine bridge. The tangy smell of the ruined fruit wafted up and into their open window.

The sweet smell was tantalizing. Mouth watering, Lacey glanced down expectantly at the magic basket, but, to her disappointment, no fruit appeared. Her stomach rumbled in protest, audible even over the noise of the busy bridge. It had been hours since breakfast.

Gold, without warning, rapped the carriage bench sharply. The carriage began to slow, the horses stomping and tossing their heads as they came to an abrupt stop. Lacey shot Gold a puzzled look as he dug a golden coin from his pocket. He placed his hand out the window, holding the coin up to the sun.

Everyone had stopped to watch in amazement, but no one dared move forward. Gold, sighing, turned around and caught the eye of the old vendor, kneeling as he tried to scrub fruit off the bridge with his own shirt. “You, there,” Gold called out. “Are those for sale?”

For a moment, both the man and Lacey gaped at Gold in silence. The farmer recovered first.
Amazed, he clambered to his feet and hurried forward, nearly tripping over his basket.

Gold offered him the gold piece, and he took it gingerly. “My thanks, sir!” the farmer replied, clutching at it reverently. “These were freshly picked from the tree this morn,” he told them, lifting his basket up to the window.

Lacey picked two of the largest she could find. The fruit was familiar looking, a reddish purple globe, heavy in her hand. It smelled divine, and satisfied she settled back into the carriage with her prize.

To her surprise, the farmer made a noise of distress. He lifted the whole basket towards her again, shaking slightly under it’s weight.

“Oh, thank you,” she said, “but this will be fine.”

“But...but...you’ve paid for the whole basket!”

They were drawing attention from other vendors. Even the carts and wagons on the opposite fareway had stopped, drawing their mules and horses short to stare at the proceedings.

Lacey glanced back down at the basket, before back at Gold. “Did we really?”

“I gave him a golden crown,” Gold drawled. “We should get his whole orchard for that.”

She shot him a warning look. “Two is plenty,” she assured the farmer with a smile. Remembering Gold’s trick, she tapped the side of the carriage and it leaped forward. She glanced down at the fruit in her hand, squeezing it gently as the startled thanks of the fruit vendor faded away behind them.

“That just paid his taxes for the year,” Gold said. “Not to mention, he’ll be inundated with customers today, all clamoring to hear the story of the mysterious lady’s generosity.”

“You just did something nice,” Lacey said with a grin, “and you’re embarrassed.”

He shook his head. His shoulder length hair swished over the collar of his jacket. Even in the warm autumn sunshine, he didn’t look at all uncomfortable in his various layers. “I’ve just made you the most talked about woman in the court,” he said. “All anyone will talk of today is the overwhelming generosity of the mysterious beauty.”

His eyes glinted as the clouds chased over the sun, casting him in shadow and then bathing him in light again. Grudgingly impressed, Lacey lobbed the second fruit at him, and he snatched it from the air. Without any effort, he had just endeared her to the working class of Corona.

She let the beauty comment alone, ignoring the fact that the small smile on her face had something to do with the casual praise from her companion. Before he could ruin it, Lacey changed the subject. “What are these, anyways?”

“Pomegranates,” he replied. “Have you ever had one before?”

Lacey nodded, recognizing it now. Feeling a bit silly, she dug her fingernails into the skin of the fruit. “I need a knife,” she complained.

Before she could say anything else, Gold easily liberated the fruit from her hand. In the same gesture, he pulled a silver knife from his breast pocket. With a lazy slice, he fixed the problem, handing her back two equal globes. A few seeds spilled on the floor between them, but neither
noticed.

There was a lazy smile on Gold’s face, an air of expectancy. Lacey’s small smile grew, as she took the offered fruit. “Show off,” Lacey grumbled good-naturedly. Pinching a few seeds out, Lacey artfully maneuvered them to her mouth without staining her fingertips. Across from her, Gold had resheathed his knife. He hadn’t touched his own pomegranate. He kept it in his palm, and rolled it between his fingers.

The seeds were divine. Lacey made quick work of the bottom part of her pomegranate. They rode the rest of the way in silence as Lacey munched on her snack and Gold toyed with his.

When they reached the isle itself, they passed through a large wall, rising up to protect the bridge and isle from high tides, and into the marketplace. Everywhere Lacey looked, there were stalls, shops, and wagons of things to buy. Flags of purple and gold hung overhead, blowing faintly in the lesser wind inside the walls.

“Is the sun market still going on?” she asked, remembering the woodcutter and his children.

“It ended two weeks prior,” Gold murmured. Lacey nodded, turning back towards the city streets. After a brief pause, Gold added. “You might be interested to know, the children were reunited safely with their father.”

“That’s good to hear,” she said quietly, but she did not thank him. She could still see Gretel’s face, splattered with blood and twisted in quiet, grim determination.

They made a circular path through the city, spiraling upwards toward the castle gates. News of their arrival had spread, although Lacey had no clue how the news had reached the city so fast. Some homes and shops were locked and barred, windows shut against the sunlight. At others, people stood in their windows and doors, staring in wide-eyed interest as their carriage rolled by.

“Didn’t you say you come here often?” Lacey asked, growing confused by the interest.

“I wouldn’t say often,” Gold said. “When I do, I prefer less ostentatious ways.”

“This little show is all about building interest around me,” Lacey realized. “People will be speculating before an announcement is even made.” She looked at him shrewdly. “You’re pretty good at this, aren’t you?”

“Had a lifetime to learn,” he replied enigmatically. “The question is, can you uphold your end of the bargain?”

She waved at a gawking man nearby, enjoying the way he colored. “How long am I going to play this little part anyways?”

“About eight months’ time,” Gold replied. Lacey did some quick mental math. It was the beginning of April back in Storybrooke but here, autumn was quickly falling. Eight months would mean...

“Wait, I’m staying here for the rest of the year?” Lacey asked incredulously. Outside, the houses were becoming more refined, as they passed out of the market and by the homes of the rich. People here had been expecting them. There were a fair few in their carriages, all rolling slowly beside them and peering openly at them.

Gold ignored this new development. “I thought you’d be pleased,” he replied. “You’ve been more than clear about your feelings about the Dark Castle and its owner.”
“Well, when you put it like that,” she grumbled. She would never have to see the Imp again, not until he returned her back to Emma. “Tell me about the King and Queen of Corona,” Lacey said finally. “What are they like?”

“Widely beloved,” Gold answered. “King Frederick is kind and wise, a bit quiet. He doesn’t say much but he’s fair. He, like his father before him, has worked tirelessly to revitalize the economy of the Second Kingdom. He’s one of the most beloved monarchs the realm has ever known.

“Queen Arianna is from the Second Kingdom’s Smallest Realm. Their marriage combined the two, avoiding war between the families. Well, it did until it became clear she cannot bear children. Certain parties were already gleefully plotting the succession battles when a miracle happened. The Queen became pregnant.”

“You don’t say,” Lacey drawled. “Would the Imp have anything to do with that?”

“Actually, no,” Gold said. To their right, a carriage of women had pulled alongside them. Gold frowned at them and they dissolved into giggles and titters at being caught staring. He rapped the carriage wall, and the horses jolted forward, quickly rolling away from their followers.

“Dreadful things, nobles,” he muttered under his breath. “No, it’s widely speculated that the Corona Crocus had something or other to do with it, but it’s not been proven.”

“So, she miraculously bears a daughter, only for her to be stolen away?”

“That’s about it,” Gold said.

“So, let’s see, I do this,” Lacey said. “I convince them I’m their long lost daughter. Through the luck of chance and fate, after eighteen years of service to a wicked witch, I’ve been safely returned to my family. What happens when I disappear in eight months? Plunge the kingdom back into possible warfare?”

“You don’t owe anyone here anything,” Gold reminded her.

“I know but-”

“You owe a debt,” Gold interrupted her. His voice had grown cold. “You do not get to decide how you repay it.”

Lacey laughed mirthlessly, throwing her hands up in disgust. “God, you’re just as bad as he is. You don’t care about the consequences or the people you use.”

“Why, Belle, I didn’t realize I was speaking to such a paragon of morality.”

Lacey bit her tongue and pretended she had not heard him. She didn’t know why she let it bother her, but the barb had hit a little too close to home.

The carriage fell into silence as they climbed ever closer to her next great lie. When they passed by a young couple, giggling as they watched the dark carriage roll by, it occurred to her that Ella was married now. She had tried not to think of it during the drive yesterday. She wondered if the ceremony had been long and boring, and if Ella and Thomas had even noticed.

Shifting away from thoughts of the newlyweds before she could miss them, another thought occurred to her and she seized on it. “Couldn’t the Imp find out what happened to the princess?”

Gold had been pondering his pomegranate. At her sudden question, he looked up. “What?”
“Could the Imp,” Lacey repeated slowly as if speaking to a small child, “find out what happened to the princess?”

His answering look was as condescending as her tone had been. “It’d be easier to provide them the real one than hope you manage to be convincing for eight months,” Gold answered. “Obviously, there was no success in locating the real princess.”

Lacey frowned. “Does that mean she’s dead?”

Gold looked askance at her. “Perhaps,” he answered honestly. “I’ll admit it… rare that the locator spells fail. The King and Queen did all within their power to find their daughter the first few years, and it attracted numerous attention from various interested parties.”

“The Imp included,” Lacey added.

Gold nodded. “However, no one has managed to so much as find a clue to her whereabouts. I’m afraid that whoever took the Princess may be someone powerful enough to thwart the darkest of magics or….”

“She’s not in this world anymore,” Lacey finished excitedly. “Do you think maybe Emma could be the lost princess?”

“Princess Emma,” Gold snorted, “is very much her parents’ daughter. No one could get that mixture of stubborn pride and righteousness except the daughter of Queen Snow White.”

It was Lacey’s turn to snort. “Snow White?”

“I assure you,” Gold sighed, “that is her actual name. Her mother thought herself terribly original.”

He smirked, and Lacey returned it as they jostled about the carriage. “Does the top come down on this thing?” she asked, indicating the dark awning. “It’s nice out.”

As if waiting for her request, the awning started to fold on its own. Gold shot it a dark look, but Lacey was too busy staring upwards at the castle looming over them to mind it. “Wow,” she breathed, tracing the three towers towards the clouds. “It’s beautiful.”

“To each their own,” Gold murmured.

Within minutes, they arrived at the castle gates. True to their word, the guards were expecting them, but not in the way Gold had hoped.

“Your Excellency,” a senior guard greeted. “Welcome to Corona. The King is awaiting you inside. We will see to the horses.”

Already, a stable boy was hurrying forward to unhitch the great black mounts. He was tall, but his shoulders were hunched and he walked with the awkwardness of early puberty. Without meeting her gaze, he took the first two horses away towards the stables.

Gold nodded, disembarking the carriage. His dark clothes were unwrinkled from the long road, and he turned to offer Lacey a hand. She hesitated, glancing down at her juice stained fingertips.

Before she could do anything, the guard shook his head. “The lady will have to stay here,” he kept his gaze straight ahead, expertly avoiding Gold’s glare.
“My business,” he growled, “has to do with the lady. She will accompany me.”

“Sir,” the guard replied, growing visibly nervous, “I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

Gold arched an eyebrow. When she wasn’t the target of this particular look, Lacey rather enjoyed it. The guard gave a short cough but continued. “There was a… small incident this morning. The Crown Princess’ Diadem was stolen from her Royal Quarters sometime around dawn.”

Lacey had the pleasure to watch Gold’s usual urbane and aloof demeanor crack slightly at this news. “A thief?”

“Yes sir,” the taller guard answered. “We are under strict instructions. No one is to come in or out until the all clear is given. You being the exception, Your Excellency,” he hurried to add. “As it was the Princess’s rooms, you can understand the security measures.” Nearby, a man emerged from the castle gate, looking harried as he caught sight of them.

“What’s the issue?” Lacey asked, uncertain of what exactly what transpiring.

Gold’s reply was a whisper as the guard fell back into position. “The Princess’s rooms have been sealed since the abduction. If someone broke in, without being detected, it’s plausible they may be able to shed some light on how someone managed to take the child in the first place.”

“Or they were the one to take her,” Lacey added. Gold nodded, eyes intent on the waiting man. “So, what does this mean as far as our plan?”

“Nothing changes,” he decided. “I’ll find out what I need to, and if nothing hinders the reveal, we continue as planned.”

“Still think this is a good idea?” Lacey asked him.

“You doubt me?” he said with such offended ease that Lacey laughed. “Stay here,” he told her. “Keep quiet and for pity’s sake, don’t flirt with the guards.”

“I’ll flirt with whoever I like,” Lacey replied tartly, but it was too late. He was already gone, disappearing into the castle proper. The guards, having heard this proclamation, made themselves scarce.

Within a minute of Gold’s departure, Lacey found herself completely alone with only the remaining horses for company. “Cowards,” she grumbled.

With a sigh, she settled herself back into the deep cushions of the carriage to wait.

This plan quickly grew boring. Pushing aside the books and knitting needles the basket helpfully provided, Lacey huffed as she glanced around the now empty courtyard. The stable boy had taken care of the last two horses, leaving her utterly alone.

The castle’s smooth marble stone gleamed prettily in the sunlight, but there was no intricate carvings or memorable details. The architecture was stunning, but simple, and clearly very old. In the relative safety of the courtyard, Lacey could see the castle gate at the bottom of the small hill, where four guards stood cagily.

Turning back to the castle door, the one Gold had disappeared to, there was hint of gold from the small opening at the top of the door, indicating a guard stood on duty just inside. Lacey tapped a thoughtful finger on her chin.
“Excuse me?” Lacey called out, twisting around towards the stable. “Hello?”

The stable boy from earlier appeared at the entrance, looking rather flustered. “Yes, Your Ladyship?”

“Just Belle,” Lacey said with a reassuring smile. “What’s your name?”

He opened his mouth and then snapped it shut again. Lacey watched as he seemed to wage an internal debate. “Flynn, milady,” he finally said. He scratched at the back of his neck, dislodgeing what she could only assume were fleas. His face was dirty, hay sticking out of his hair and a stain she didn’t even want to think about on his shirt sleeve.

Still, anything was better than sitting around waiting. Lacey disembarked from the carriage. As her feet hit earth, she sighed happily, wiggling her toes against the firm, sun baked stones. “You wouldn’t happen to have anything to drink by any chance, would you, Flynn?”

Flynn grew flustered at the way she caressed the syllable of his name. He nodded, glancing back behind him into the stables. Lacey moved quickly towards him and by the time he turned back around, she was directly in front of him. He stepped backwards warily. “I could...I can get you something from the kitchens, if you’d like.”

“Lovely!” Before the boy could protest, she had linked her arm through his. Luckily, he was rather tall for his age, and Lacey, barely over five feet, could do so easily. “Lead the way!”

Flynn was fire engine red as he stared down at their linked arms. Finally, he gulped and with a nod, started towards the stables. “Begging your pardon, milady,” he apologized as the smell of manure and horse sweat rose up to greet them. “Fastest way to the kitchen is through here. The back door of the wash room is right behind the stables.”

“Not a problem,” Lacey assured him with a pat on his arm. “Not a problem at all.”

Chapter End Notes

And we are officially in Corona!

Let me take this moment to assure you all that Eugene (having not been in OuaT nor in the original storyline) is like Duke Sebastian entirely my own adaptation of a beloved character from the disney movies. I figure if you all have stuck with me this long, you'll be fine with this shift.

Hopefully you all enjoyed the Gold/Lacey dynamic. It's going to switch up slightly in the next few chapters cause plot. (I know, I know stupid plot) but Gold/Imp's not going anywhere!
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

All hail Ramloth, Beta Queen!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was much warmer inside the kitchen, thanks to the press of people and the roaring fires. All around them, the kitchen staff were moving in unison, ignoring their entrance. Corona’s kitchens were similar to the Dark Castle, with large hearths and huge preparing stations. Flynn guided her towards a far wall, glancing around nervously. There were no guards that she could see, and Lacey let out a small huff of delight at her success. She couldn’t wait to see the look on Gold’s face when he discovered she had easily gotten inside the castle with no help at all from him.

So busy in self congratulations, Lacey almost didn’t see the woman until she was right in front of her. Barring their way, the diminutive woman crossed her arms over her chest and glared up at them. Her entire demeanor brooked no nonsense, which sat at odds with her otherwise pleasant face.

“What have I told you about bringing home strays, Eugene?”

Before Flynn could manage to speak, the older woman rounded on Lacey. “Look, here,” she started, using a wooden spatula to poke Lacey in the shoulder. “I don’t know what this infernal boy told you, but we are not hiring! Now, shoo. Go on, before I call the guards.”

“Ms. May!”

“Not a word out of you, Eugene,” Ms. May snapped. “The whole castle on lock down and you escorting some outsider in, as if she was the long lost princess!” May huffed, putting her arms on her hips as she glared down at him. “Now get!”

Before Lacey could intervene, the newly named Eugene swelled up like a rooster. Stepping forward, he lifted his chin, stood straight and without a tremor of a stutter in his voice entered battle. “This is Belle. She just arrived,” he paused for effect, “with the Ambassador of the Ninth Kingdom himself.”

A gasp went through the room. Every servant stopped their chores as if spell-struck. One poor man in the corner dropped his broom in fright and stood trembling, too afraid to pick it up. Even Ms. May deflated, eyeing Lacey in newfound distrust.

Satisfied he had their attention, Eugene continued. “She’s thirsty,” he said, looking towards a kitchen maid to their left. Squeaking, the poor thing grabbed a pitcher of what appeared to be water. She tried to pour out a glass but ended up spilling most of it, she was shaking so hard.

“Here, Rhi,” Ms. May ordered, moving to take over. “Go help Katlyn with the dishes.”

Eugene gestured towards a stool at the butcher block island, and Lacey took the seat. He was enjoying this attention, preening like a peacock as he followed behind her. Their audience returned to work, although she felt eyes burning through her skin, some curious and some resentful.
“My apologies, my lady,” Ms. May said, settling the glass and pitcher before her. “Eugene, be usefull for once and go fetch her some cheese and bread.”

He disappeared back out the door, leaving Lacey alone with the castle’s kitchen staff. Lacey fidgeted with her glass for a moment. It was glaringly obvious May was afraid, and despite her usual enjoyment of lording her odd relationship with the Ninth Kingdom over people, this was different. These people were not lords or ladies, witches or outlaws.

“Thank you,” she said gratefully. May nodded stiffly, and an uneasy silence fell between them. She cleared her throat. “You know… I’m not exactly from the Ninth Kingdom.”

May did not look over, but her shoulders loosened ever so slightly. “No?”

Lacey shook her head. “More or less just the ambassador’s guest today,” she said in lieu of an explanation. She took a long drink. The water was cool and refreshing, and flavored slightly. “Mint?” she asked, glancing over at the clear pitcher.

Ms. May nodded, a twitch of her lips hinting at a smile. “The Queen likes it.”

“I can see why,” Lacey said. Noticing the stares she was still receiving, she wondered if this spontaneous plan had been the best of ideas. “I didn’t mean to start any trouble.”

Ms. May shook her head, the dark curls still untouched by silver bouncing. “Eugene has a good heart,” she said fondly. “Although put a pretty girl in front of him and he loses all sense.”

Lacey gave her a rueful smile. “I’m afraid I didn’t give him much choice.”

Before Ms. May could reply, Eugene appeared back in the doorway. Despite being gone for barely a moment, he now had a scraped cheek, and the makings of a black eye. He staggered into the kitchen, nearly running straight into a passing footman.

Ms. May herded Eugene to the stool by Lacey so she could examine him. He was favoring his left hand, wincing as he flexed the knuckles. “What foolish nonsense did you get into this time?” Ms. May scolded him, tilting his chin so she could see better.

Eugene shot a worried glance at Lacey. “Kitsis and Horowitz weren’t too happy about losing sight of her,” he murmured. “They’ve gone to get Captain Gainsey.”

“Let them then,” Ms. May sighed. “It’s their own fault for not keeping an eye on her in the first place. Where were they off to when they should have doing their duty? That’s what I’d like to know.”

Remembering the way the guards had scattered at her earlier proclamation, Lacey had at least a fairly good idea why they hadn’t been there to stop her and Eugene. She felt guilty though, she would never have thought they would take their frustration out on Eugene.

A maid hurried up to them with ice wrapped in a towel and Lacey took it from her. The poor thing whispered her thanks before hightailing it back to the other side of the kitchen. “Here, let me,” Lacey said. “I should have just waited in the carriage.”

“But, you were thirsty!”

Lacey laughed, pressing the ice to the cut on his cheekbone. Stunned silent, he went completely still, allowing her to dab up some of the blood on his cheek. All his bravado washed away by mere proximity to a woman. “Those jerks,” she said quietly. “Beating up on a boy.”
“A boy?” Ms. May shook her head, a rumbling laugh. “Eugene here is nearly twenty and one.”

“Really?” Lacey asked, stepping back to properly look at him.

Pride wounded, Eugene straightened, tossing his shoulders back and his chest out as he glared at her. With his dirty hair and bruised face, it was a comical sight but Lacey stifled her laugh.

Now that she was properly looking, she noted the dirt she had seen on his chin earlier was actually peach fuzz and the leanness she had taken for puberty was actually hard compact muscle.

Ms. May chuckled as she patted his shoulder. “Poor Eugene.”

“It’s Flynn,” Eugene grumbled but this was an obvious useless request.

Before Lacey could apologize, the sound of armored footsteps drew their attention to the back door. Still ajar from Eugene’s hurried entrance, it swung wide open, revealing three guards. The kitchen staff moved out of their way, but wisely kept working. Only Ms. May moved to meet them, standing between them and where Eugene and Lacey sat.

“Out of the way, May,” Captain Gainsey ordered, his hand on his sword hilt.

“Michael Gainsey, you watch your tone,” Ms. May shot back, bristling. “This is still my kitchen.”

The captain quieted, but the two guards behind him scowled at Eugene, who quickly shrank back down. It grew apparent why Lacey had mistaken him from a young boy with his hunched shoulders and downturned face. It was a survival tactic.

The captain pitched his voice low. “Look,” he said, “the Ninth Kingdom’s ambassador is here—”

“I know,” Ms. May interrupted him. “Don’t you see his guest sitting at my table? Thirsty, tired and half starved? Left outside like a common beggar, what would the Queen say?”

This seemed to leave Gainsey speechless as his eyes moved rapidly from Ms. May to Lacey and then back again. “We had our orders.”

“Poppycock,” Ms. May tsked. “Now, stop your fretting. I’d be embarrassed too, if my men were the ones who lost the diadem right from under their noses but no harms been done.”

“Ms. May….”

“Now,” Ms. May continued, heedless of his interruption, “you will take those two bullies out of my kitchen at once.”

“If the miss would simply agree to come with us…,” Gainsey said. Lacey tilted her chin upwards in challenge, gripping her glass tighter.

“If I were you, I’d take her straight to the Queen,” Ms. May suggested bluntly. “If the Ambassador isn’t already blistering their ears with the way his guest was treated, I will.”

Hiding her smile, Lacey stepped forward to join the odd quartet. “I’d be happy to explain to the Queen all about the hospitality of her staff,” she murmured.

Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Gainsey nodded glumly.

“Kitsis and Horowitz,” he called out. The two men behind him stepped closer, their knuckles bruised from where they had crashed them against Eugene’s face.
“I’m not going anywhere with them,” Lacey said coolly. Gainsey looked as if he was about to argue, but May crossed her arms over her chest and nodded in staunch support. At a loss, Gainsey looked up helplessly, only for his eyes to land on Eugene. His eyes flickered back to his men, pieces falling into place.

“Ah,” he said after a moment. “I’ll take you myself.” Lacey agreed to this with a nod, moving aside to let him lead the way. “Kitsis and Horowitz, get back to the barracks.”

As Gainsey moved past her, Lacey shot the two bullies a victorious grin. They both grimaced, and as she turned to follow behind the Captain, she felt the Imp himself couldn’t have done better.

“They’re good men, just a little overzealous,” he explained to Ms. May wearily. Gainsey motioned for Lacey to join him. “After you,” he said, gesturing towards the opposing door on the far wall. Instead of following her, he turned and caught Eugene’s attention. “You too, son,” he said wearily.

Ms. May moved as if to stop the young man, but caught herself. Eugene slowly joined them, eyes downcast as he trailed behind the Captain.

Gainsey took them out of the kitchen and to the left, arriving in the main hall. Their footsteps echoed strangely off the low arched ceiling. The architecture was simple, with warm accents and tapestries breaking up the castle’s stonework. Again, she was reminded of the Dark Castle, although here it was apparent someone had tried to make this place look warm and hospitable.

Gainsey moved quickly, trusting them to follow behind him. Moving to the left, they entered a smaller hall where a staircase led steeply upwards. After what felt like forever, Gainsey stopped short as they arrived at the top of the small staircase. Lacey plucked at her corset, wheezing as discreetly as she could. Gainsey squared his shoulders, and then knocked on a wooden door, a sun emblem carved into the face of it.

“Stay silent,” Gainsey ordered. Lacey nodded, stepping neatly to the side as Gainsey inhaled sharply. Lacey leaned against the cool stone to catch her breath.

After one short rap, another guard swung open the door. This one wore a purple feather on his cap, and he looked surprised to find Gainsey behind the door.

“Jansbery,” Gainsey said stiffly. This guard shot him a pointed look, but his eyes slid over to where Lacey stood waiting. She nodded, still too out of breath to say anything intelligible. Eugene slunk back, hiding in the curve of the stairs.

“Captain Gainsey, the royal edict clearly stated-”

“What’s all this commotion at the door?”

Both men froze. Purple Feather whirled around, disappearing from Lacey’s view. “Your Majesty!”

“Is that Captain Gainsey?”

The captain nodded, clutching his hand to his chest. “Your Majesties, please allow my apologies. There was a breach in security.”

He turned towards her, and Lacey moved to join him in the small round room. It was cool up here. No fire had been lit in the hearth on the far side of the room. The elegant marble colored stone of the tower shone almost bright white, the elegant stonework opened up onto the sky itself. The sun was directly overhead, filling the entire room with natural sunlight and the feeling of being outdoors. Lacey had to jerk her head back down to avoid staring.
Her attention instead fell on a couple sitting demurely on a loveseat, their hands clasped between them. King Frederick was a large man, a stately black beard covering his long face and salt and pepper dusted his hair. His wife was petite beside him, the copper undertones in her cheeks flushing darker as she caught Lacey’s eye.

“What’s the meaning of all this, Jansberry?” the King asked. Beside him, Queen Arianna gazed thoughtfully at Lacey, her eyes tracing her face, taking in the shade of her hair and the slope of her nose. Caught staring, the Queen smiled, but it was slightly sad. She beckoned for Lacey to enter.

Gold sat across from them. Without missing a beat, he lifted up a newly poured glass of wine up to her. She accepted it gratefully, and he gestured for her to be seated.

Jansberry dragged Eugene into the room. Bristling, Lacey moved to stand, only to find a gentle restraining touch on her own arm. Gold shook his head slightly, indicating with a tilt of his chin for her to remain silent.

“This boy disobeyed the royal edict,” Gainsey said tonelessly. Eugene glanced upwards, large brown eyes panicked as they met hers. Eugene began to protest but before he could, Jansberry backhanded the younger man’s already bruised face.

“Enough, Jansberry,” King Frederick ordered. He climbed to his feet. “You embarrass us in front of our guest.”

Jansberry’s eyes flickered to where Gold sat, sipping his wine as if nothing at all was amiss. “My apologies,” Jansberry panted, his hand falling back to his side.

“No,” the King said, turning to Gainsey. “What is all this about?”

Gainsey straightened, legs and arms snapping back into place as he addressed his monarch. “Your Majesty,” he said, voice steady. “It came to my attention that a guest of His Excellency, the Royal Ambassador Gold, was left unattended in the courtyard of the castle proper.”

“Unattended?” the Queen inquired. Her tone was polite but there was a clear note of disapproval.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Gainsey said. “I’m looking into what happened, but it appears she was thirsty. Fitzherbert here, a stable hand, brought her to the kitchens.”

“I asked him for something to drink,” Lacey tried to explain. “It’s not his fault.”

“Young man,” King Frederick said, ignoring her completely. “Is this true?”

Eugene nodded.

“Why not bring out a cup of water?”

Eugene did not blush or tremble, but his shoulders tightened. “A lady should not be left unattended,” he said quietly.

The Queen stood to join her husband. Moving quietly, she cocked her head as she took in Eugene. “My darling,” she murmured. “We have a gentleman in our stables. Tell me, Eugene, was it? How does a stable hand learn such ideas of nobility?”

Eugene wavered, completely overwhelmed. “Your Majesty,” he said, shaking his head slightly.

Forgotten on the couch, Gold leaned over to her. “Can’t even leave you alone for a minute.”
She stood abruptly, causing the entire room to turn back to them in interest.

“All of this,” the Queen said pleasantly, “and yet still no one has introduced the lady who has caused such a commotion in our court.”

“My apologies,” Gold sighed, standing. He dusted his pants off, although there was no sign of dirt or lint on them. “Allow me to introduce Belle.”

“Is this the one of whom you spoke?” the Queen asked. Lacey had the insane urge to curtsey or something equally banal. Gold nodded but did not elaborate.

“Enough of this,” the King decided. “Jansberry, take the young man out.” Before they could move to obey him, the King turned back to Gold, nodding respectfully. “Ambassador, we appreciate your visit, but as we said before, we have other matters to attend to. If there is nothing else?”

Gold, looking down at his wine, made a soft humming noise. “How about the return of the Princess’s crown?”

Overheard, a cloud moved and cast the entire room into shadow.

“Explain,” the King said.

“My, my,” Gold murmured, “Now, you’re interested.”

“Ambassador,” Queen Arianna said, “please.”

Gold shot Lacey a look. Like the Queen earlier, he seemed to be sizing her up, searching for something, but Lacey didn’t know what. She stared back at him in confusion, feeling wholly out of place in a way she had not felt since Ella had first taken her hand. It was obvious his earlier plan had been rejected, but he wasn’t quite done with them yet.

“All items in the Princess’s room were part of an enchantment,” Gold said after a moment. “It’ll be simple to track the crown and its thief.”

“And in return?”

Gold nodded. “In return, Lesak requests a singular Corona Crocus.”

“Done,” Queen Arianna decided. Her husband shot her a horrified look but she refused to meet his eyes.

Gold’s brows rose, and this time King Frederick opened his mouth to protest. “Dear heart, no,” he whispered, large hand enveloping her elbow. He leaned down, twisting her to face him. “It’s not worth it.”

She pressed a hand to his cheek, smiling up at him. “It’s all we have left of her,” she whispered up to him. “If she ever comes back….” There were tears in both their eyes. Lacey looked away.

Above them, the clouds shifted, and a single ray shone down, illuminating the space between the two parties. Gainsey and Jansberry remained silent, Eugene all but forgotten. The King’s head fell to his chest in a sigh. Slowly, he straightened, then turned and gave a single nod to Gold.

“Good,” Gold said, putting his wine down. “We’ll be going then.”

He strode past the royal couple, past Jansberry and Gainsey until he had reached the door. “Coming?” he asked her, holding the door ajar for her.
Lacey gritted her teeth. With one last glance at the King and Queen, she moved to join him. “What the hell just happened?” she whispered as she neared him. “What happened to the first plan?”

“Later,” he murmured back, lips barely moving. “After you.”

Lacey stilled, turning back to see Eugene staring after her. His eyes were round, and Gainsey was glancing at him, a look of resignation on his features.

“What happens to Eugene?” she asked, ignoring Gold’s prompting.

“Who?”

She glared at him.

He sighed. “The penalty of violating a royal decree is death.” Lacey made a noise of distress, but Gold caught her elbow in a painfully tight grip. “He broke the law,” he said.

It was unspoken, the fact that it was her fault. Yet, as Gainsey strode forward, and Eugene shrunk back, eyes wide, Lacey refused to allow it to happen. “He comes with us,” Lacey’s voice rang out. “If you ever want to see your daughter’s tiara again, he comes with us.”

The King and Queen turned back around in surprise. Lacey’s chest heaved, and Gold’s grip disappeared from her arm as if magic. She did not look back at him, but kept her furious gaze on the monarchs. She stepped forward, tilting her chin upwards. Overhead, the sun broke through, and the entire room was bathed in warm light.

“He comes with us,” Lacey repeated. “As a reward for his service to the Ninth Kingdom.”

Silence followed.

“As Lesak commands,” the King finally said. He turned away. “If the boy comes back, his life is forfeit.”

Eugene came stumbling towards her, and Lacey pushed him out the door in front of her. She avoided Gold’s long suffering sigh, and the trio left the room behind them. Eugene, dizzy with relief, started up a running monologue of thanks and praise for their goodness, but Lacey ignored him, trying to catch her breath. Her heart was thudding unpleasantly in her chest, and sweat had broken out on her upper lip.

“Well, well,” Gold murmured behind her, following her noiselessly down the stairs. “How the tables do turn.”

“They’d have killed him,” Lacey growled, not turning around. “I wasn’t going to leave him to die.”

“No,” Gold grunted. “Now, he can die exiled far from the only home he has ever known. These people aren’t like you and I, they don’t know the world is a big place. They don’t understand.”

Lacey whirled around to face him. He was waiting, one step above her. She lifted a finger, aiming it at him as below them Eugene’s relieved chatter and hurried steps drifted back up to them. “Why didn’t you follow the plan?” she demanded. “And don’t give me some bullshit about me ruining it.”

They held each other’s gaze for a moment, Lacey breathing heavily. Finally, he nodded. “Two reasons. First,” he batted her finger away, “the theft of the diadem. An enchantment was placed upon the rooms of the infant princess after her disappearance. It will be easy enough to track.
Second,” here, he wavered, and then with a sigh. “I may have misjudged the situation.”

She let it sink in.

“Sorry, what was that again?” she asked, raising her hand to her ear. “You were… wrong?”

Gold sighed. “Their distrust of the Ninth Kingdom was...stronger than I had anticipated. Their grief has not abated and they lack the usual...healthy respect the rulers have for the Ninth Kingdom. They still hold out hope for their daughter’s return.”

Lacey shook her head. “Eighteen years. That’s a long time to wait.”

His eyes narrowed and his tone grew cold. “A parent does not simply stop missing their child, Belle.”

She bristled at him. “And you would know that how exactly?”

“I lost my own son a long time ago.”

With that, he pushed past her, leaving her silent and shaken on the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that did not go at all as anticipated.

With the King and Queen's firm, thanks but no thanks, Gold, Lacey and now Eugene are off on a quest to retrieve the lost princess's crown. As usual, nothing is going to go as planned because well, it's the Gate.

Also, I'm not exactly picking on Adam and Eddy because I love the concept of OuaT, they're just...Adam and Eddy. So they get a shoutout. As does kickass reviewer and all around paragon of awesome, DeweyMay.

Thanks for reading you guys. Next time, we're back on the road and headed back to the Infinite Forest.
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

Love to Ramloth, for finding the joys in the story among all the typos.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the hostess of the Hill House opened the door to find them back on her doorstep, she nearly fainted.

“Hello!” Lacey chirped through a forced smile. “Three bedrooms, please!”

The woman darted a worried look beyond Lacey into the yard, paling as she saw Gold and Eugene tugging the horses towards the stables. Overhead, a storm was building, static electricity heavy in the air. It was making the animals nervous. They reared and snorted against their reins.

Trembling, the hostess shook her head rapidly, making an odd gesture over her bosom. Her husband joined her at the door. Once he caught sight of Lacey, he carefully shunted his wife back inside. “My lady,” he said, eyes flickering towards where the three horses were being led. “You honor us with your return.”

His voice was polite, but the curious way he watched Eugene wrangle the horses spoke volumes. Lacey huffed, bringing his attention back to her. “As I just said to your wife,” she said, dropping the cheery tone entirely. “We require three bedrooms for the night.”

He did not move to let her inside, but instead surveyed the sky overhead. “A storm is coming,” he said cryptically.

“Yes,” Lacey growled, feeling her fingers tighten into balls at her side. “Hence us needing rooms.”

He lingered in the doorway, before he finally nodded. “Dear,” he called out. “Three for supper tonight.”

The answering moan was not encouraging.

Due to the lateness of their arrival, dinner was not ready after sundown. Lacey and Eugene stayed curled up by the fire as the storm unleashed itself over the valley. Their host, who they learned was named Sprat, had less luck. Forced out to fetch chickens for their supper, he was drenched in rain, blood and feathers and had to excuse himself to bathe while his wife prepared dinner.

Gold retired to his room with a headache as soon as they finished stabling the horses, demanding that no one disturb him. Their hosts, already relieved at his absence, warmed up considerably when they discovered Eugene was from Corona.

“Tell us,” Sprat said, speaking as usual for his wife. “How are the King and Queen?”

“Very just,” Eugene said solemnly.
Lacey snorted. “They tried to execute you,” she reminded him. Mrs. Sprat looked horrified, leaning back and making her tell-tale gesture over her bosom.

Eugene hurried to reassure them. “I didn’t do anything terrible,” he hurried to explain. “I let Lady Belle inside the castle when it was under lockdown.”

“It’s just Belle, Eugene,” Lacey said as she reached for another piece of bread. The roast chicken was cold, and the mead was too salty for her taste.

“Someone stole the Royal Diadem,” Eugene added.

Mrs. Sprat made a noise of startled surprise, and her husband grew grave. “Have they no shame?” he asked, shaking his head. “Who would do something like that?”

“Probably the same people that took the princess in the first place,” Lacey pointed out. “Not exactly hard to do it when you’ve done it before, right?”

The three faces staring back at her in horrified astonishment quickly corrected her. She held her hands up, eyes widening slightly. “Geez, relax. It’s not like I took her.”

“Of course, you’re far too young,” Sprat said after a moment, patting his wife’s hand. Lacey shot him an outraged look even as Mrs. Sprat sighed in relief. She held up the pitcher of mead, but Lacey quickly covered the top of her glass with her hand. “Eugene, tell us, what’s Corona like?”

The rest of the meal passed in Eugene’s glowing praise of the city. Lacey sat back, content to warm herself at the fireside as they talked of the market and the square, the castle proper and the outlying buildings.

Eugene proved himself a charming storyteller. With a meal in his stomach and the heat of the fireplace warming his bones, the awkward youth from the castle fell away to a glib wit. Lacey dozed quietly, listening to him regale the rural innkeepers with tales of the majesty of court life.

“What’s marble rye?”

“Have you ever seen a Corona Crocus?”

Eugene shook his head. “They’re grown in the central courtyard. Only the King and Queen are allowed inside there.”

Lacey’s interest piqued, she re-entered the conversation. “Tell me about these Crocus. Why are they so special?”

Sprat guffawed. His wife elbowed him, but it only caused him to laugh harder. “Why, the Corona Crocus is magical, miss.”

“Milady,” Eugene corrected.

“I’m not a lady, Eugene,” Lacey sighed.

“I told you,” he grumbled. “I prefer Flynn.”

“Nothing wrong with Eugene. That’s a good solid name,” Sprat hurried to assure him with a pat on his shoulder. “Here, have another drink!”
Mrs. Sprat threw her hands up, standing and shaking her head, she made her way back to the kitchen.

As the two of them took to retopping their mugs, Lacey muffled a yawn. “I should go to bed,” she announced, standing with a weary sigh. She glanced at the leftovers on the table. “Should I take a plate to Gold?”

Eugene didn’t hear her, too busy laughing at some ribald joke their host had just made. Lacey sighed, leaning down and nudging a piece of cold chicken and a piece of bread onto a plate. She snagged a cup, poured some of her untouched mead into it and headed towards the stairs.

“Night, boys,” she called out, but they ignored her, too busy realizing they shared a love of all things equine. She left them to it. After all, Eugene deserved a decent night of fun.

She made her way to the second landing, where the guest rooms were clustered tightly together. Gold had taken the same room, the one on the far right of the stairs and away from the others. She knocked on the door with the hand clutching the goblet, waiting for an answer.

None came.

Rolling her eyes, Lacey knocked again. “I brought you dinner,” she called, eying the door knob. “Come open the door.”

When Gold failed to reply again, Lacey balanced the plate as best she could against the door, trying for the handle. Only to find that it was locked. “Fine!” she huffed, placing the plate and goblet to the side of the door. “Be that way.”

With that, she stomped off to her own room, slamming the door shut behind her.

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“Milady?”

Lacey groaned, kicking her way deeper under the wool blankets. She was having an interesting dream, one with mountains and talking goats.

“Milady?”

“Go away,” she called out, twisting deeper into the warm pocket of the lumpy mattress. “Ten more minutes.”

“Milady,” came the worried voice, “he said he’d leave us both behind if we weren’t downstairs and ready to go by the time the steeds are ready.”

Lacey groaned.

“I have coffee, milady.”

Lacey sat up, rubbing at her eyes. Pulling the sheets closer around her, she made sure she was at least fully covered if not presentable. “Come in,” she grumbled. “It better be hot.”

The door swung open, revealing Eugene in the meager light of the early morning. He edged in, pale faced and sweaty. Lacey recognized the symptoms of a hangover immediately and had to stifle a laugh. She patted the bed. “Sit down,” she sighed. “You look like you’re about to be sick.”

“Already have been,” the young man said, seating himself gingerly. He put his head between his
thighs and sighed as Lacey took the coffee from him. He was so miserable, he hadn’t even noticed she was still undressed. She doubted he would have even come inside the room if he had been feeling better. “I’ve never had that much to drink in my life, milady.”

“Welcome to the hangover club,” Lacey said, patting him on the back. “Where’s Gold?”

“Downstairs and ready to go,” Eugene sighed. A silence passed between them as Lacey enjoyed her coffee. “Milady?”

“It’s just Belle, Eugene.”.

“Does the ambassador truly have the powers of Lesak at his command?”

Lacey shook her head, pulling the sheet higher up over her breasts. “He’s all talk.”

“Jack- I mean, Mr. Sprat said even the minions of Lesak have power to do his bidding.”

“I’m sure Gold loves everyone to believe that,” Lacey murmured, stretching her arms out. The blanket gaped slightly but she didn’t correct it, Eugene was far too busy trying not to be sick to even notice. “However, I’ve been with him for a while now. I’ve never seen him do anything more magical than fall asleep sitting upright.”

“If you’re quite done?” Gold stood in the doorway, frowning at them. “The innkeep needs a hand in the stables,” he ordered Eugene. “Go.”

Eugene jolted to his feet and disappeared out of the room. Lacey climbed out of the bed, keeping the sheet wrapped around her. Gold didn’t even have the nerve to sneak a peek, his eyes following Eugene down the hall. “He’s hungover,” she said. “Give him a break.”

“If he’s to be of use to us,” Gold grunted, “he needs to learn to decline a drink.”

She leaned against the doorjamb, a provocative smile playing on her lips. Gold was completely buttoned up, looking well rested and impenetrable. She had the oddest need to shake that up slightly, and what better than good ole fashioned flirting. “Oh, like you’ve never been hungover?” Lacey asked, lowering the coffee mug to dangle at her side.

Gold arched a brow. “Not that I can recall.”

“Your memory must be going then,” Lacey teased, leaning closer to him. “I’m sure you had a few benders back in your day.”

He snorted, and stepped away. “If you’re quite down with your fun, you should get dressed. Some of us have agendas that do not involve a bed.”

His eyes finally landed on her. The message was clear. Sadly, he anticipated her tossing her coffee at him. He expertly dodged it, causing the missile to crash against the far wall, breaking into pieces. Her following curses were loud enough to cause Mrs. Sprat to drop the platter of sausages downstairs but Gold ignored them.

“Ten minutes or we leave without you,” he declared, his tread echoing as he went down the stairs. Lacey slammed the door shut, ignoring the mess in the hallway. It would serve him right for her just to take her sweet ass time, she fumed, his schedule be damned.

Still, ten minutes later she was sitting on her horse, following Gold as he led them back into the Infinite Forest. Eugene rode beside her, glancing worriedly between her scowl and the holes she
was drilling into Gold’s back with her eyes.

“Everything okay, milady?” he asked. Lacey mumbled something dark incoherently under her breath. Eugene wisely didn’t comment, but fumbled in his pocket for a moment before pulling out a pomegranate. "Found this in the kitchens," he said helpfully, nudging it towards her. "You mentioned you liked them."

Lacey took it from him, a begrudging smile on her face. "That was nice of you, Eugene," she said earnestly. Gold's rush to get them on the road had meant she had skipped breakfast, and with thermos to speak of in this land, she was also caffeine-less. "We can split it for lunch."

Eugene looked queasy but nodded regardless. He opened his mouth to reply when Gold suddenly called out “Fitzhubert!”

Eugene spooked, but he nudged his horse up to join Gold’s. Lacey couldn’t hear what they were saying but after a moment, Eugene nodded. Without a look back, Gold cantered off. Still not keen on horseback, Lacey carefully caught up with Eugene who was looking miserably down at his horse’s mane.

“What was that about?” she demanded, pulling her steed up short. “Where’s he going?’

“He said he was going to ride ahead,” Eugene said morosely.

"Why?” Lacey asked, shielding her eyes from the morning sun to look ahead. Gold was quickly disappearing ahead of them, which made no sense. If he had wanted to leave them behind, why not do so at the Hill House?

Eugene muttered something else, his cheeks darkening.

Lacey leaned towards him. “What?”

He ducked his head again, and the faint murmur of his voice was lost in his chest.

Lacey exhaled, reaching out and yanking her reins away from him. “For God’s sake, Eugene, what?”

“He said he doesn’t care for the company of young lovers,” Eugene exclaimed. He swallowed, muscles in his throat working violently as he avoided her eye. “He instructed me to take you back to Hill House until his return. I should have defended your honor, milady but I-”

“I’m going to kill him,” Lacey decided, bending her knees to press her horse into action. She had no idea what had gotten into the usually unflappable Gold, but she didn’t like it. This whole shit show had been his idea in the first place.

Eugene surprised her. Before she got more than a yard, his horse cut hers off, bringing them both to a halt again. “Eugene,” Lacey said through her clenched jaw. “If you don’t get out of my way, I’ll start with you so help me God.”

He didn’t move. His face still bore the bruises from the Corona guard, plus his hangover made him look pitiful. He eyed her warily, but did not move from the path. Lacey sighed, shoulders lowering as she nodded.

Eugene looking relieved, moved his horse to join alongside her. He artful way twisted the reins, his horse responding to his every slight touch while her’s snorted every time she so much as shifted her weight. "Come on," he said with a sigh. "He gave me some gold for the rooms."
"Oh, no," Lacey said with a set jaw. "We're going after him."

"Milady!"

Lacey leveled him with a sharp glare. "Milady," she said fiercely, "wants to go ahead. Do you have a problem with that?"

Eugene opened his mouth and then closed it, before sighing again. "No, milady," he said miserably. "He'll have my skin though."

"He can try," Lacey muttered. The trees were thick along the road, their branches reaching up to block out the sun. Her skin crawled, she had little love for this forest. "You ever been in here?"

Eugene asked, as they disappeared under the canopy of trees.

Eugene shook his head, eyes locked straight ahead. "No, but I hear the trick is to keep looking straight," he told her. "The trees can't decieve you if you know where you're going."

They rode along in silence for a bit, Eugene staring straight ahead. Gold had disappeared which if Lacey was being honest, was probably for the best. The man just got on her last nerve, but for some reason, she continually sought him out. It was like picking a scab. She knew she shouldn’t and yet…

Beside her, Eugene looked miserable. He kept sending little glances her way, as if making sure she wasn’t going to gallop off to join Gold without him. "Eugene," Lacey sighed. "Don't worry. I won't let him turn you into a toad or anything."

He ducked his head in embarrassment. "It’s not that, milady. It’s just...you saved my life," he said wretchedly. "Yet, when your honor was questioned, I couldn’t even find the courage to defend you. I failed you."

Lacey waved this off. "The ambassador," she said curtly, "is just frustrated at the current situation. He’s used to doing things his way."

Eugene looked up at her hopefully. "Do you think you could speak to him...let him know that we didn't- I mean, that I…"

Despite her annoyance at the situation currently, Lacey laughed. Her horse twitched unhappily beneath her and she quickly stilled, gripping the reins slightly tighter. "Don’t worry, Eugene," she said, shooting him a grin. "I'll handle it."

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Lacey missed cars. She missed air conditioning and GPS and highways. Hell, she missed semi trucks and radio commercials and she would even take a traffic jam. Anything, anything other than horseback in this damn endless impossible forest.

Stopping abruptly, Lacey declared “I need a break” before sliding off the side of her horse. Ahead of her, Eugene hurriedly dismounted, tying his reins around a nearby tree. His horse snuffed at him, obviously displeased with this decision.

He hurried to help her down, and she slid down with his help, reins still clutched in her hand as her feet hit the ground. Free of her weight, her mount immediately veered off towards a grassy patch, and she had to jerk her arm back to avoid being tugged along. "Stupid horse," Lacey growled. "Figures Gold would give me the one with the attitude problem."
“Oh, these aren’t horses, milady,” Eugene said, taking the reins from her. “These are kelpies.”

Lacey narrowed her eyes at him. “They’re what?”

“Kelpies,” Eugene said helpfully. “Perfectly harmless though! They’ve been domesticated. Ambassador Gold told me all about them last night when we were putting them up in the stable.” He patted his side saddle. “I have some dried meat for them if they can’t find food on their own.”

Lacey stepped as quickly away as possible from what she had thought was a horse. “I hate kelpies,” she said, shivering. Her mount flickered her ears at this, tossing a baleful glare at her. Now that she was looking, Lacey could see the red in the amber eye, and the snaggle of sharp teeth as the creature worried at the bit. “The Imp would domesticate kelpies,” she grumbled.

“The Imp?”

Eugene had tied off her mount as well, but had left enough room for the kelpie to wallow in the grassy patch, snorting happily as she scratched her back. Lacey watched it mistrusting, eyeing the sharp teeth.

“Lesak has many names,” Lacey explained tiredly. “I knew him as the Imp before Nyx, or Lesak, or the Dark One.”

“The Dark One’s just a fairytale,” Eugene snorted, collapsing against a nearby tree trunk. “Everyone knows that.”

Lacey settled down beside him, snagging an apple out of Eugene’s bag. She missed the magical basket. They had left the carriage at Corona, for use upon their return and Gold had not been amused by her insistence on bringing the basket along on horseback.

She bit into the apple, savoring the tartness before tossing it over to Eugene. He caught it deftly, and took a large bite, smacking happily as he grinned at her over the remains. “Men,” she grumbled, reaching over to snatch it back from him. “Think they own everything.”

“Milady!”

“I was teasing,” Lacey muttered, tearing a small bite out of the apple. “Lighten up, Eugene.”

Nearby, the kelpies were fidgeting, their eyes bent on something just beyond the trees. Lacey glanced over to find Eugene had stood, and his hand was on his hip. “What-?”

He shushed her, drawing a knife. “There’s someone over there,” he whispered. “Stay here.”

Lacey ignored him. She clambered to her feet. “It’s probably just Gold,” she said, wiping her sticky hands off on her dress. “We caught up to him is all.”

Eugene looked unsure. “Milady, maybe it’s best if you-”

“Gold!” Lacey called out, pushing some branches out of the way.

“Milady!”

Gold stood just to her right, his back to her as he bent over something. Lacey stepped off the path, and Eugene followed alongside her, hands wrapped around her arm. She shook him off, shooting him an annoyed look as she made her way over to Gold.

“Well hello there,” she greeted snidely, crossing her arms as she sauntered towards him. “Fancy
meeting you here.”

Gold stiffened, and then slowly straightened.

It took about three seconds for Lacey to realize it was not Gold.

“Ah,” the figure said, turning to face them. “Why, hello, there children.”

Lacey took a step backwards, careening into Eugene. The woman before them was old. She had lines on her face, etched deep and her eyes were pale and watery blue. With her shaggy white hair and jowls, she reminded Lacey of a sheepdog she had once known.

“Sorry,” Lacey said, shaking her head. “I thought for a moment you were someone else.”

“Oh?” the crone asked, shuffling forward.

“Belle,” Eugene said under his breath, “Belle, please, we need to get back to the path.”

“Chill,” Lacey said, glancing over her shoulder at him. “It’s an old lady, what’s she going to do? Gum us to death?”

“Belle? My what a pretty name!”

Lacey twisted back around, and found the old woman was close enough to touch now. She shifted backwards, until Eugene stood beside her. “Uh, thanks,” she said uncertainly. “Sorry, we were just-”

“You aren't by chance the Princess Belle who destroyed the Sea Witch of the Seventh Sea?” the old woman continued on.

Lacey stilled.

“Or the Maid Belle who slayed the Blind Witch of the Woods?”

Lacey's skin went cold. “Who are you?” she demanded. “How do you know all of that?”

The hag simply smiled her toothless grin. “Why, word of your deeds has spread to even the farthest of lands,” the woman told her, coming ever closer. “Belle the Believer, Lesak’s new little toy, sent out to do his dirty work. Even the fairies know to beware...”

The familiar pull of magic appeared in the air, and Lacey knew instantly what kind of creature they had stumbled upon. She grabbed for Eugene’s wrist, and began to back away from the crone.

“Come, now, you look surprised!” the witch cackled. “As if I didn’t hear my sisters curse your name in their last breath, as if the power that connects us all has not sung of your demise. You thought their deaths were victories but they were simply preludes to your own doom.”

Lacey would have laughed at the irony of it all if she had been able to breathe.

“Belle?” Eugene whispered. “Belle, what’s going on?”

Lacey kept moving backwards, pulling Eugene alongside with her. If they could get back to the kelpies, she would never say a bad word about those demon horses again.

“Oh,” the witch tsked, following them. “Where are you off to? The path is long gone, children.”
Eugene glanced wildly towards where they had just been, and Lacey saw the wicked grin seconds before the spell struck.

Lacey whirled Eugene to the left, and they narrowly avoided the bolt of light. Lacey landed on top of Eugene, both gasping as the air was knocked out of them. Overhead the tree’s canopy swirled as another stream of light flashed by them, burying itself into the trunk of a nearby tree with a terrible crash.

“Eugene,” Lacey panted, pulling at his jacket. “Run!”

Chapter End Notes

Well, gang, here we are on the road of the latest adventure!

As you can see, Gold has some.... issues with Lacey's latest and greatest companion. It's been fun developing Lacey's relationship with a male companion, especially one as young and idealistic as Eugene. (Sorry, I mean Flynn ;D )

We also meet our newest villain- Mother Gothel briefly although she's going to set a plot in motion as far as Lacey’s destiny in this world. Word travels fast in the magical community and now that the Imp, the witches and the faeries know of the Believer in their midst, things are bound to get interesting.

Next chapter we will meet a new face, see an old one and Eugene goes through some...growing pains.
In the end, there was nowhere to go.

They kept running, but no matter how far they ran, the witch had followed right behind them. Lacey clutched at the persistent stitch in her side, breathing through her nose as best she could. Around them, the forest had grown silent as if every living thing had disappeared. The eerie silence meant only one thing, the witch had found them. Again.

“Go on, milady,” Eugene panted as he waved her forward. “I’ll distract her!”

“Don’t be an idiot! She’ll kill you!” Lacey hissed through clenched teeth. She pushed herself off the tree she had been leaning against, chest heaving with the effort to stand upright. The initial surges of adrenaline were wearing off, and exhaustion was beginning to take hold. “We can’t keep running,” Lacey insisted, wincing as another sharp pain went through her side. “We have to come up with a plan!”

“Milady, there’s no time!” Eugene insisted. His face was shiny with sweat, twigs in his hair and dirt smeared on his hands from where he had fallen. For the first time since she had known him, he did not look like a child. “Go. I’ll be right behind you.”

Before Lacey could argue, a cackle floated on the still air to them. “Children,” the hag crooned as she neared their hiding spot. “Why all this trouble? Aren’t you tired of this silly little game?”

Lacey raised a finger to her lips, indicating silence. She just needed a moment to think-

Eugene shook his head, a steely glint in his eyes. He took a deep breath and sprinted away, singing some terrible racket as he went.

“A Eugene!” Lacey whispered as loudly as she dared, but he had already disappeared into the thicket and she had no idea where the forest had taken him. She stayed stock still for a moment, weighing her options when she heard a bird chirp overhead.

A squirrel whizzed by her, and some odd lizard, glowing like a ruby, peeked its head out from underneath the log she was sitting upon. All around her, the forest was awakening.

Which meant the witch had taken the bait. Trying to ignore the cramping of her muscles, the sweat running down her back and the soreness of her feet, Lacey contemplated her options. It was a surprisingly simple decision.

Lacey hurried off in the direction Eugene had gone, hoping like hell she wasn’t too late.

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Grasping a tree for support, Lacey stopped to catch her breath. The sun was going down on the
horizon, casting yellows and oranges across the forest canopy. The night air was growing chilly, and Lacey’s only current desire in life was something to drink. Preferably whiskey.

“I hate forests,” she wheezed. “I’m never stepping foot in another one as long as I live.”

“Well, that shouldn’t be very long, child.”

The hag looked as if she had been waiting there, not a scratch or a hair out of place to indicate she had been chasing people through the forest for the entire afternoon. The witch’s hair gleamed in the dying light, the silver hair turning red and orange as if it had caught flame.

There was no telling if she had already met Eugene. Her clothes were blood free, and no grisly souvenirs hung from her neck. Lacey let her boneless legs collapse underneath her. “Give me a sec,” Lacey said. She grunted as her bottom hit the dirt, scooting closer to the tree trunk to prop herself up. She would have to get the old crone bragging if she wanted to find out if Eugene was still alive. And perhaps in the interim, keep herself alive long enough to figure a way out of this mess. “Okay, where were we?”

“I,” the hag spat, “was about to end your sorry little life.”

Lacey laughed, startling both herself and the witch. She couldn’t help it. “It’s like you all have the same handbook or something,” she said. “By the way, you haven’t seen where the boy disappeared off to? I have a few choice words to say to him before I die.”

The witch simpered at her. “Don’t fret. I’ll take care of him after I finish with you.”

There was only one hand left to play, and Lacey knew it. “Lesak won’t take kindly to your interference,” she told the witch smugly. “In fact, I’m sure he’d be downright displeased.”

The witch laughed, which Lacey took as bad sign. “Lesak?” she spat, a sizzling gob of phlegm burning through nearby dry leaves. “He’s nothing.”

“Well?” Lacey said quickly, digging her heels into the ground to achieve better leverage. It also blocked the witch’s view of her hands. “He’s more powerful than you will ever be.”

“You talk as if you know of these things,” the witch said with a bitter grin.

Lacey’s left hand slowly closed around a small fallen branch. “I know more than you think,” Lacey replied.

“This is the creature that killed two of my sisters?” the witch laughed hoarsely. “I had heard tale of the great stranger to our lands, but you’re simply a girl. Regina was right, there’s nothing special about you at all.”

At the name Regina, the past came rushing back, as if it had been waiting in the wings for just this cue. A low, sultry laugh rang in Lacey’s ears, a flash of red light extinguished as dust came trickling out and Graham breathed his last.

Lacey surged to her feet, brandishing the stick out before her as Gretel had done with the poker. “Oh, I know Regina,” Lacey said viciously. “We have unfinished business. Tell me where she is and I might just let you live.”

The witch threw her head back and cackled at this. Lacey raised her branch, moving to strike when
the witch casually twisted her hand in mid air and Lacey’s weapon turned into a rather large, rather angry snake.

Lacey dropped it, jumping away from it as it hissed, snapping its long fangs at her in annoyance. The witch continued to laugh as Lacey grabbed at a low hanging branch, swinging herself off the ground in the most unladylike fashion. She managed to twist her way into sitting on the branch, before climbing higher as the snake coiled up at the foot of the tree.

Knowing snakes could climb if they chose, Lacey debated going higher, but the soft crunch of footsteps stilled her. The witch came to stand beneath the tree, peering up at her with her lined face pulled back into a terrible smile. It was growing dark now, the sun almost completely gone. Magic pooled around the witch, swirling and humming malevolently.

With a snap of her fingers, the snake transformed back into a broken branch. “As if you could defeat the Evil Queen,” the crone chuckled to herself. “You are going to die here, child. All alone...”

“She’s not alone!”

Face contorted in determination, Eugene charged out of the forest, heading straight for the witch with nothing but his bare hands. The witch twisted, magic gathering like a maelstrom beneath her. She was going to kill him.

Without hesitance, Lacey dropped like a stone out of the tree, directly onto the witch. The collision knocked the air out of her but she had the forethought to curl up into a ball, letting the witch break her fall.

There was a screech and the gathering magic twisted around them both. Lacey sprawled onto the path, rolling quickly away from the spitting, hissing body of the hag. The magic leapt from her hands, twisting before bursting harmlessly against a nearby tree. It exploded into shards, and Lacey yelped, covering her head as twigs and splinters flew everywhere.

“Milady!”

“Eugene!” Lacey yelled, voice muffled by the ground. “Get out of here!”

“You odious oaf!”

Lacey lifted her head off the ground to find the witch clambering to her feet. The ancient crone seemed mostly unhurt by Lacey’s cannonball, although her robe was smeared with dirt and a small cut was bleeding on her chin. She was trembling with anger, her eyes slits in her face as she pulled magic once more to her.

Across from them both, Eugene was pulling himself to his feet. It was too dark to see clearly, but he was favoring his left arm and breathing heavily. He did not see the witch.

A bolt of white light struck him in the chest, and Eugene collapsed in on himself.

Lacey called out, her voice anguished but the witch was already laughing, turning on her.

Lacey groaned, collapsing back onto the earth. She hid her face. She wouldn’t give the witch the satisfaction of seeing her scared. She prepared for pain.

Instead…
She heard the sound of leaves crunching underfoot, and then a heavy snort forced her attention from the small ball she had curled up into. Instead of the witch, there was a white stallion above her, blocking the witch from reaching her. It was a regal creature, with a streak of brown running down its muzzle. The large brown eyes however, currently flickering in intelligent confusion, were instantly familiar.

“Eugene?” Lacey breathed, pushing hair out of her face. The horse snorted, tossing its head at her incredulously.

“How are you doing this?” the witch snarled at Lacey. “A horse? He’s supposed to be dead!”

“Can’t have you killing off my help, now can I?”

Lacey had never been quite so glad to see the Imp as she was at that precise moment. “About time!” she muttered under her breath, peeling herself off the ground.

He ignored her. Instead, he was looking at the crone in some interest. “Gothel, it’s been a few decades. You look wretched.”

“You!” the now named witch hissed. “How dare you step foot in my domain!”

The Imp waggled a finger at the ancient witch, before he snapped his fingers and pointed his long index finger in her direction. Something came shooting out of the hag’s skirts, and the Imp caught it almost lazily.

“Stealing the diadem was rather foolish, Gothel,” he said in disappointment. “You must have known I’d have enchanted it for my own curiosity.”

“This doesn’t concern you,” Gothel spat, another burning phlegm hissing into the dirt.

The Imp sighed grandly, twitching his shoulders. “Fraid it does,” he said. “You see, I’m rather in need of a Golden Crocus.”

The witch laughed. Lacey hovered beside Eugene, uncertain. The Imp, glistening in the moonlight, looked vaguely worried, but it passed like a cloud over his face. Lacey must have imagined it, because now he was grinning again, a hand lazily twisting around in the air. “And they say I’m mad.”

“You know nothing!” Gothel exclaimed with another fresh wave of laughter. “The Golden Crocuses are long shriveled and dead!”

There was a definite switch of mood. The Imp’s patience snapped as he stepped furiously forward. “I’ll have your head if you are lying to me, Gothel,” he warned, and the magic around him grew thick and heavy enough to make it hard to breathe. Eugene grew skittish and Lacey had to murmur some soothing words to him, petting his muzzle absently.

The witch’s smile grew cold. “Used up to save the Queen when she was with child,” she said knowingly. “Why, did they promise you one for the return of the diadem? They must be truly desperate to try and fool you.”

The wind changed. It was slight, but it carried the unmistakable signature of a spell. Before Lacey could cry out a warning, the Imp twisted his wrist in a forcible counterclockwise motion and a spell broke over him, falling harmlessly around him.

The witch shrieked in fury at her failure, but now it was the Imp’s turn. He pulled the magic to
him, a swirling ball of light that illuminated the entire area in glowing greens and blacks. “Go,” he hissed at her, without taking his eyes off Gothel. When Lacey didn’t move, his eyes snapped to hers in a golden glare. “Now!”

A magical boost propelled her upon Eugene’s back, who flexed nervously underneath her. Eugene stepped to the side, unsure of himself and his new rider. Another small tendril of magic cracked against Eugene’s flanks, and before Lacey could even get a firm grip with her thighs, he had taken off.

With the boost of momentum, Lacey fell forward, barely managing to grab onto the white mane. Eugene whinnied, his ears twitching as Lacey yelled her apologies. She scooted forward, wrapping her hands around his neck and leaning forward to avoid the low-hanging branches of the trees.

Eugene raced through the shadowed forest, expertly dodging stones and roots, jumping over logs and taking them ever deeper into the Infinite Forest.

Lacey could barely focus on anything beside keeping a grip on him, memories of another night on horseback in a forest coming to her unbidden. She pushed those thoughts away, but still the faint ghost of Graham’s death and Regina’s laughed followed her.

She had never thought about it before, that she had the power to possibly end the creature’s life that had sent her here, the bitch who had taken Graham’s life while laughing.

Caught up in this plan of revenge, Lacey nearly missed the sound of rushing water growing louder until Eugene splashed directly into a river. She shrieked as the cold water soaked her ankles. Wincing, she tried to tuck them up as high as they could without falling off the saddleless horse, only to find the sound of water growing louder as Eugene kept galloping forward.

A waterfall loomed out of the trees, a rocky cliff spanning nearly five stories high as Eugene headed recklessly forward without pause. Lacey pulled at his mane. “Eugene! Eugene, turn around! Turn around!”

Heedless of her tugs and screams, he bent his neck down lower, and whinnied. Lacey closed her eyes, laid as flat as possible across his back and braced for impact. They were going too fast, they would crash into the back of the rocky waterfall and probably be knocked unconscious.

A freezing spray enveloped her, icy needles spearing through her clothes and chilling her bones and then…

She sat upright, fists still curled into Eugene’s mane as he slowed to a canter, and then a trot before snorting and wiggling his back in a clear get off.

Sliding off him, Lacey clung to his side, her legs like jelly underneath her. “Eugene,” she said, looking around. “Where are we?”

High mountainous hills surrounded them on every side, creating a sort of hidden valley. There were trees, untouched by man, growing tall and free, fruit hanging on every branch and the scent of flowers, sweet and potent wafted on the slight breeze.

Eugene snorted, hooves scuffing at the rocky shore. His muscles rippled as he twisted and turned, trying to see himself. It was obvious he was more concerned with the fact he was now a horse, then where they were. Lacey patted him absently, walking forward into the tall green grass.

Ahead of them, almost directly in between the two moons, was a large tower of some sort that climbed almost as high as the waterfall itself. Lacey started towards it, pushing her wet hair out of
her face, only to find something holding her back.

Eugene had dug his heels in the mud of the shoreline, his teeth clamped on the hem of her skirt. He tossed his head at her, and with a shake of his head made quite clear his thoughts on her going off exploring. His ears were flat back on his skull as he glared at her.

Lacey sighed. Removing her sodden dress from his teeth, Lacey crossed her arms over her chest and looked up at the sky. “We need shelter,” she told him pointedly. “That’s shelter.”

It was amazing how expressive a horse’s face was. Eugene looked at her askance, before twisting around to look the way they had come.

“The Imp- sorry, Lesak, will take care of Gothel,” Lacey explained to him. “We’re safe. However, after that little stunt you just pulled, if we don’t find shelter, we’re going to freeze to death. Come on.”

Without waiting, she moved forward, hoping like hell she wasn’t leading them straight into a witch’s trap. Her steps squished, her clothes dripping and her teeth chattering. Behind her, the stable boy turned horse followed closely behind, making small snorting noises under his breath in annoyance.

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The twin moons were almost overlapping by the time they reached the tower. Lacey swatted a branch out of her way, pushing ahead the best she could while behind her a very irritable horse dragged his hooves. As the branch swung back into place, it smacked against his forelegs and he huffed in annoyance.

“Well, if you had let me ride you,” Lacey said in exasperation, “you wouldn’t be getting smacked by branches every ten feet, now would you?”

Eugene’s ears were uneven, and he snuffed at her. Lacey shook her head and continued plodding through the thick overgrowth that surrounded the tower’s base. Finally, she pushed through the last of the vines and her hand hit stone.

“Here we are,” she said in some relief. She pulled at the vines and leaves, exposing more of the odd stonework. Everything was mismatched, uneven, but solidly in place, almost as if it had been magicked together.

She paused and Eugene let out another snort.

“Shush,” she grumbled. “Or I’ll turn you into glue.”

This threat obviously did not mean anything to Eugene as he wandered off back the way they had come. Lacey ignored him, and began to walk around the tower, looking for an entrance. Round and round she went, but by the time she arrived back where Eugene was waiting for her, she had seen nothing but more stone upon stone.

Eugene nickered at her and she shot him a dirty look. “Well, if you’re so clever, you find the door,” she told him.

“Hello?”

Eugene pricked his ears forward, his entire body going stiff as he looked directly upward. Lacey joined him, moving a little further back from the base of the tower. Above them, there was a
silhouette in a window that had not been there before. Lacey glanced sideways to find Eugene grunted at her, tossing his head.

“Is someone there?”

The figure above them was a shadow against the bright light spilling out of the tower behind them, but the voice was that of a young girl.

“Hello?” Lacey called back, stepping sideways where the moon was brightest. Eugene hurried after her, gently closing his teeth over her corset and attempting to drag her back into the shadows. He obviously had quite enough of magic for one day.

The figure disappeared from the window, and the bright light disappeared as the shutters banged close again. Lacey shot Eugene a dirty look. “Look what you did,” she said, “you scared her.”

Eugene’s ears dropped, and he looked back up at the once again dark castle nervously. Lacey stomped back over to the base, looking at it shrewdly. “Okay, so someone’s home,” she said more to herself than Eugene. “The question is how did she get there?”

“Well, you could ask nicely.”

Eugene let out a high-pitched squeal, dancing away and revealing the Imp. Lacey exhaled forcibly, before striding over to meet him. “You took your time,” she told him archly. “We’ve been wandering around this valley for most of the night.”

“Oh?” He wandered over to Eugene, whose ears were stiff and twitching. Lacey joined them, but was careful to stay out of reach of Eugene’s tail which was switching fast and hard. “Well, that counterspell didn’t do quite what I meant for it to do, but it’ll serve.”

“You turned him in a horse,” Lacey reminded him, following him as he made a slow circle around Eugene. “Undo it. It’s freaking me out.”

“I did no such thing,” the Imp said, lifting a finger in protest. “Gothel cursed him. I simply kept him from dying a very painful death. Apparently my counter-curse mixed with her original curse to create something very different indeed.”

“Undo it,” Lacey repeated. Eugene calmed enough to bend his head to the ground and exhale loudly, causing some dirt to blow up around their feet.

The Imp regarded Eugene for a moment more before shaking his head. “Can’t.”

“Can’t? What do you mean, can’t?”

“It’s an enchantment, dearie,” the Imp said in a patronizing tone. “One cast by a dual spell combination. It’s not as easy as all that.”

“You mean… he’s going to be a horse forever?”

Eugene let out a loud whinny at this, but was still watching the sorcerer nervously. The Imp didn’t seem bothered but turned to them both abruptly, causing Lacey to stumble to a stop before she careened into him.

“You know about Enchantments,” he said pointedly to her. “Or have you forgotten all about the cricket fellow?”
“Jiminy?” Lacey said dully. “He was…” Her eyes widened as the realization sank in and she quickly turned to Eugene with a smile. “You’ll be back to normal when the sun rises,” she told him in relief.

“Aha aha aha,” the Imp sang, and Lacey winced.

“But you’ll go back to being a horse when the sun sets,” she finished with a frown. Eugene’s briefly relieved expression clouded and he turned a soulful look to the Imp who ignored him. “It’ll be okay,” Lacey hurried to assure him. “I knew a man who was enchanted once, and the Blue Fairy was able to-”

“Do not speak of that insect in my presence,” the Imp said snippily. “Bad enough she found out about you in the first place.”

She ignored him. If Jiminy’s enchantment had lifted, it meant Eugene’s could be as well. “Don’t worry,” she told him softly. “We’ll figure something out.”

The moons were glowing faintly and the stars were out in spades tonight. All around them, the valley was quiet with a peaceful restfulness that was only broken by the sound of the waterfall in the distance. Lacey glanced back up at the tower, where not even a faint crack of light could be seen from the room.

“There’s a girl up there,” Lacey said quietly, joining him. He glanced over at her, but she kept her attention fixed on where the light had come from earlier. “Do you think…?”

He didn’t speak. So, Lacey continued.

“Is Gothel gone?”

She darted a look at him and saw the shake of his head. “No,” he said with a sad titter. “I distracted her with a little game of cat and mouse but she’ll get wise eventually.”

“And when she does, she’ll come here,” Lacey finished.

He nodded. “Which means we’ll need to be quick.”

“We?”

Before Lacey could protest, the thick smoke that she knew and hated began to swirl into existence, and consumed them both. By the time it faded away, Lacey was coughing weakly, eyes watering as their surroundings came into focus.

Lacey turned and fixed the Imp with a glare. “Don’t do that!” she told him furiously. “I know the smoke isn’t necessary for the spell, so knock it off already!”

He opened his mouth to respond, his yellow teeth sharp and crooked, but stopped abruptly. They were in a quaint little room. A staircase directly across from them twisted round and round and out of sight, a door to their left smelled of baked bread, and before them stood a girl in her barefeet.

She had the same dark skin of the people of the Second Kingdom, with large green eyes. Yet, the most fantastic thing about the teen was the massive coils of thick black hair that spun from her head, laying over every inch of floor. It had a blue shine to it, thick and dark and gleaming in the candlelight from the candelabra above them.

“Is that…?”
The Imp nodded. “My, my,” he said under his breath, tilting his head to regard the young girl more closely. His eyes fluttered close, tongue peeking out as if he was tasting the air. “No wonder no one could find her,” he said with relish. “This tower shouldn’t even exist.” His eyes snapped open. “Is that blood magic? Surely not, it would be suicide if she used her own…”

The youth quailed under his stare, stepping back quickly until she put a large loveseat between her and them. “Who...who are you?” she asked, her lovely voice trembling as much as she was.

“Ignore him,” Lacey said hurriedly. “I’m Belle, he’s...” The Imp swelled up like a bullfrog, “Well, he’s not important.

“Please,” the girl said beseechingly. “Please leave. I won’t tell, I promise.’

Lacey smiled as pleasantly as possible, already reveling in the knowledge that she’d soon be back in a proper bed. “No one’s going to hurt you,” Lacey reassured her. “We’re here to take you home.”

“Home?” the girl said, her voice breaking on the syllable.

“Yes, we’re here to take you home. Back to Corona.”

The girl’s eyes filled with tears and she shrank back away from them, her arms folding over her chest as she curled in on herself. “But... but I don’t want to go there,” she murmured in distress. “I don’t want to leave. This is my home.”

“Oh, goodie,” the Imp sighed. “This should be fun.”

Lacey, despite herself, was inclined to agree with him.

Chapter End Notes

And the Imp is back!

Also, Eugene has entered the world of the Enchanted. As everyone may remember with Ariel and Jiminy, during the day he is as he truly is and at night, he is...a horse. Unlike Jiminy, he doesn't get to talk. This was my little call out to the character Max because as much as I love Tangled, it's a very different take on the Rapunzel fairy tale so I'm combining some elements of the movie and some of the fairy tale to create this version. (which is a super headache so I hope you guys are enjoying it)

Next chapter, Lacey explains rappelling.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

Love to Ramloth, Beta Queen!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Outside, a rather frantic Eugene neighed loudly. The Imp was busy inspecting a bookshelf that displayed a collection of large children books, brightly colored thin things by the look of them. Lacey strode over to throw open the window she had seen earlier.

The height was dizzying and Lacey pulled back instinctively. Her appearance at the window soothed Eugene slightly, although she could only faintly make him out in the darkness far below.

“Shh!” she called down to him. If he continued shrieking, he’d bring Gothel down upon them and while she did not doubt the Imp could take the old witch, it’d be nice to avoid that particular scenario at the moment. Eugene quieted, although he continued to pace. “Just hang on, okay?”

Returning her attention to the matter at hand, Lacey found the young woman cowering where she had left her, hands clutching a large frying pan. “Breakfast already?” Lacey joked painfully. “Okay, then. I take my eggs over easy.”

The girl stared at her in bewilderment.

“Okay,” Lacey muttered. “No jokes, got it.”

“Are you quite done?” the Imp drawled. He had meandered over to the kitchen area, and was poking through various vegetables that were heaped on a table. “Rather fond of lettuce, isn’t she?”

“Who are you?” the girl asked tremously. “Why are you here?”

“I’m Belle,” Lacey repeated. “And he’s...” She gestured at the Imp. “Well, he’s no one important.”

“Charming,” the Imp grumbled. “I’ve only saved your life, found the diadem, and located the heir of Corona, but no by all means, have your fun.”

“Hey, I found the heir of Corona,” Lacey corrected curtly.

He rolled his eyes at her before switching his attention to a coil of hair by his feet. Bending down, he picked it up, only for the lost princess to squeak. With a tug, she pulled the locks from his grip. Lacey hopped out of the way as another bundle whizzed under her own skirts. Soon, the princess had coiled the massive amounts around her like a protective wall.

“Okay,” Lacey drawled, “and I thought I had hair issues.”

The Imp was staring in some fascination, but he did not move from the kitchen area. “Well, Gothel has certainly been busy.”

“You know Mother?”
The girl relaxed ever so slightly, but made no move to come closer.

“Of course,” the Imp said gaily. “Me and your mother go way back. Why, she might be almost as old as I am.” He lifted a finger and winked at them both. “Almost.”

“What’s your name?” Lacey asked her, moving slightly closer. She avoided the clumps of hair, setting her feet down gingerly where the dark curls did not lay collecting dust on the floor. It seemed highly unhygienic to her personally, but to each their own.

“Rapunzel.”

“Rapunzel?” Lacey repeated.

“Is that her name or did she sneeze?” the Imp asked darkly.

“My mother named me,” the girl said hotly, crossing her arms. She stamped her foot, displaying an element of childish temper that sat oddly on her teenage features.

“It’s a beautiful name,” Lacey reassured her. “Isn’t it?”

The Imp muttered something under his breath but it did not sound positive.

“Are you friends of my mother’s?”

“Something like that,” the Imp replied. He was inspecting a large mural on the wall, peering closely at the unsophisticated strokes and bright colors.

Lacey smiled tightly, mentally braining him. “We are, actually, and we’re here to take you to her.”

It wasn’t a lie. Not technically. The girl before her was clearly the same age as the lost princess, and she took after her Queen Arianna so much that the resemblance was uncanny.

“Where is she?”

The Imp grew bored. “Enough of this idle chit chat. We’re leaving now.”

“Don’t forget Eugene,” Lacey said quickly.

“I’m not taking him,” the Imp protested. “He’s a horse.”

“He’s enchanted!”

“What’s a horse?”

They turned to the girl at the same time. She stared at them, her fear from earlier vanished as she idly played with some strands of hair that hung like opened curtains around her face.

“Uh, Rapunzel,” Lacey said quietly. “You don’t know what a horse is?”

The girl shook her head.

“Perfect,” the Imp sighed. “A nincompoop.”

“Not helping,” Lacey sing songed. She felt a headache fast approaching. “It’s not important. Your mother can explain.”

Rapunzel’s face darkened. “Mother doesn’t explain,” she said sagely. “I’m much too stupid to
learn anything, she says, and Mother knows best.”

Tugging her gown back up onto her shoulder, the girl looked so guileless that Lacey could almost believe she was eight instead of eighteen.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Lacey hedged.

“Oh, but it is!” Rapunzel hurried to assure her. “I’m hopeless, ask Mother.”

“Your mother,” Lacey gritted, “isn’t around at the moment, but believe me I’ll talk to her when I see her.”

Before she could suggest moving things along, Rapunzel gave a horrible squeak and jumped up onto the table. The Imp had snuck up behind her, and was inspecting her hair curiously. He had a large wad of it in his hand, his face practically buried in the thick blue-black strands. Rapunzel whimpered in pain as he yanked her hair up to the light.

“Hey!” Lacey exclaimed. “Stop it!”

“Interesting,” he muttered, and before Lacey could stop him, he reached out and plucked a hair straight off the girl’s head. The girl gave an unholy shriek and then promptly burst into tears, her hands going to her head in terrified horror.

“Look what you’ve done!” Lacey yelled, trying to be heard over the loud wails of the princess. “You’re scaring her!”

The hair remained black and inky, and the Imp dusted his hands off. “Not magical,” he said disappointedly. “So, why bother keeping her?”

“I don’t know,” Lacey said. “Maybe because she’s the heir to the throne of Corona?”

The Imp sneered at her. “Gothel has no interest in the throne. What would she do with it?”

“I’m not having this conversation with you,” Lacey growled. “Just whoosh us to the castle before she wakes the entire forest.”

Outside, the sound of a horse neighing angrily was barely audible over Rapunzel’s scared wails. “Oh, now you’ve got him started,” Lacey said angrily, stomping back over to throw the window open. Eugene was prancing frantically outside, tossing his head and crying out in time to Rapunzel’s. “Knock it off, Eugene!” Lacey yelled down at him. “Stupid horse.”

“Horse?”

Rapunzel’s tears vanished, and before Lacey could close the window, she was beside her, peering down into the darkness. “Ooh,” she murmured, wiggling to get a better look. Lacey had to grab the young girl by the hips to prevent her from falling out the window. “Is that a horse?”

Eugene neighed. Loudly.

“Would you get back in here?” Lacey pulled her back but the petite teen dodged around her and returned to the window.

“Hello horse!” she called down, giggling when Eugene whinnied a greeting back. “Oh, he’s not at all scary looking. Is he nice?”

Lacey looked to the Imp for help but he was busy perusing a wardrobe in the back corner. “How do
I keep getting stuck babysitting?” Lacey asked herself. “Hey,” she said, abandoning Rapunzel, who was cooing down at a pleased Eugene. “Where’s Gold?”

“Gold?”

“Yeah, your Ambassador. The one who ran off to find the crown on his own this morning.”

“Oh, he’s around.”

Lacey threw her arms up. “Like talking to a wall,” she muttered darkly. “Okay, you two. I’ve had enough. Time to go.”

“Go?” Rapunzel said, turning around. “Go where?”

“To your mother,” Lacey gritted out. “Ready?” she asked, turning to the Imp.

“B-But… I can’t leave!” Rapunzel cried.

“Would you do something?” Lacey demanded, waving a hand at the now crying brat.

“What would you have me to do exactly?” he asked her, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I don’t know!” Lacey said. “Maybe take her voice away? Lock her in a dungeon? Transport her back to Corona where they can deal with her?”

His eyes sparkled mischievously. “No.”

“No?” she sputtered. “What do you mean ‘no’?”

He pulled out the tiara and tossed it to her. She barely managed to catch it, the weight of it twice as heavy as Emma’s tiara. This one was heavy gold, with three large amethysts set like the towers of the castle to which it belonged. There was little else marking it, no intricate work or carvings. It was a simple thing, a child’s.

“You remember the deal?”

“The crown for a crocus,” Lacey repeated. “What about her?”

“What about her?” he asked. “She wasn’t part of the deal.”

Lacey gaped at him. “You can’t just leave her here!”

“She doesn’t want to leave!” he pointed out. “Why force her?”

“She’s living in a tower!” Lacey exclaimed, gesturing around. “One with no doors!”

Now that she said it, Lacey realized it was true. “Where are the doors?”

“Doors?” Rapunzel hiccuped. “There’s no doors! Bandits could get in!”

“So, how do you get out?”

“O-out?” the princess stuttered. “I don’t want to go out!”
“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” Lacey muttered. “Enough. You,” she pointed at Rapunzel, “are coming with us. And you!” She pointed at the Imp. “You’re sending us, all of us, back to Corona.”

“Forgetting something, aren’t you?”

Lacey’s fingers twitched from the unholy itch to strangle him where he stood. “No,” she growled. “No more deals!”

“Magic comes with a price,” he sang, wagging a finger at her.

“You magicked us up here in the first place!”

“That’s different,” he said, placing a hand on his hip. “I was curious.”

“I’m going to—”

Before Lacey could finish her threat, the Imp continued. “Why, actually,” he murmured, looking out across the lightening horizon. “Really should be going.”

“We can’t just leave her here!”

“We?”

Lacey stared at him. “No,” she said. “Oh, no, no no no no no!”

He was grinning at her. “Actually, perfectly safe place for you, come to think of it. I’ll take care of Gothel, and you, you and your new little friend here can keep each other company! I’ll come back for you when I finish with the witch. Shouldn’t be but a day or two.”

“Don’t you dare!”

It was too late. With a waggle of his fingers and a curl of his lip, the Imp disappeared. Without smoke.

“Get back here this minute!” Lacey screeched, rushing to the spot he had just vacated. “You- You-! You absolute-! You get back here this instant or so help me-!”

It was to no avail. As the sun broke over the horizon, slowly drenching the room in pinks and oranges, it found only a sullen teenager and a cursing thirty something locked in a tower.

When it became apparent there was nothing to do, Lacey collapsed onto the odd couch and put her head in between her knees. She was trapped. Ninety feet in the air with a child trapped in a teen’s body and a witch still running around plotting her very painful and imminent demise.

“Belle!”

Rapunzel was back at the window, frowning down at the world outside. “Um, Belle?” she said quietly, obviously a little spooked by Lacey’s fit. “There’s a... a man outside.”

“It’s just Eugene,” Lacey groaned.

“Oh.”

“Belle! Belle, are you there?”

Peeling herself off the couch, Lacey stumbled to the window, nudging Rapunzel out of the way.
Down below, she could see the speck that was Eugene, back in his human form. “Stop yelling,” she shushed him. “Before the witch hears you.”

“Where’s Lesak?” Eugene demanded.

“Gone,” Lacey said wearily. “Look, Eugene, we’re trapped up here and-”

Her eyes fell on the strand of hair that had floated outside the window. The breeze was playing with it, lifting it slightly as it danced further and further outside the confines of the keep. “Rapunzel,” she said slowly. “Grab on to something, would you?”

The teen looked at her in confusion. “What?”

“Brace yourself,” Lacey said, and she bent down and grabbed the huge coil of hair closest to her. It was heavy and thick, and before she could think better of it, Lacey dumped it out the window.

Rapunzel shrieked, barely grabbing on to the window sill as half her hair went spilling down the side of the tower. Eugene jumped back with a start, falling onto his back as the heavy locks dangled all the way -

“It reaches the ground!” Lacey crowed. “Okay, new plan.”

A few hours later, as the sun fully cleared the western sky, Lacey stood on the window sill, clutching a large amount of Rapunzel’s hair in one hand and clinging to the tower with the other. The teen had been oddly compliant, standing stock still as Lacey raced around the tower, looking for something for her to anchor herself with.

She had finally settled on a large heavy loom, making Rapunzel help her push it to the doorway. Currently, Rapunzel stood dubiously underneath it, staring up at where her hair was wrapped around it. “Belle…”

“It’ll work, trust me,” she assured the young girl. “Had this date once. Boring man, but he was a trust fund baby so hard to say no, you know?”

“A what?”

“Uh. A prince. Anyways, the entire dinner all he talked about was physics and how momentum-”

Rapunzel’s eyes had glazed over. Lacey stopped talking. “You know what, never mind but it should work.”

Tying the last bit of hair around her waist and trying to ignore the nerves in her belly, Lacey took a deep breath.

“What in the blazes do you think you’re doing!”

Lacey peered down. Where Eugene had been standing, there was now another figure, this one on horseback. “Gold?”

“Get down from there at once! You’re going to kill yourself!”

“Where have you been?” Lacey yelled back down to him.

He said something aside to Eugene, who hurried over to the base of the tower, blocking where Lacey had hoped to descend. “Step away from the window!”
“I’ve been rock climbing before!” Lacey shouted back. “Same principle!”

Gold had dismounted from the horse, and disappeared around the side of the tower. Beside her, Rapunzel peered over the window sill as best she could, standing a few feet into the room behind Lacey. “Who’s that?” she asked.

“Another man,” Lacey sighed. “They’re everywhere today apparently.”

Rapunzel made an interested noise. “So, we’re not going to… rappel down the tower?”

Lacey sighed. It had taken her an hour to explain rappelling. An hour she would never get back apparently. “We will as soon as-

A sudden banging noise nearly made Lacey fall out the window. Rapunzel steadied her, holding her hand as she climbed down off the window ledge. Lacey edged closer into the room, looking around for the sound before she looked down.

A large carpet, thick but worn by the small princess’s feet and the sun from the window, covered a large swath of the stone floor. Lacey picked up on edge, listening as the sound grew louder. “Help me,” she ordered Rapunzel and, though confused, the girl did as she was asked.

Soon, they had it rolled up on the side of the room, and the sound of footsteps had grown distinguishable in the tower below them. There was no trap door, and Lacey waited with bated breath as the sound of someone climbing suddenly stopped.

A knocking emanated from a small patch to their right, and Lacey knelt down beside it. Reaching out, she felt the surface of this particular stone, one corner raised slightly more than the others. Pressing down on it, she felt it give, the sound of a lock springing free barely audible.

Scooting backwards, she watched the very annoyed, very out of breath Gold pop into the room, scowling up at her.

She grinned back at him. “Hey stranger,” she said cheerfully. “Nice of you to stop by.”

He glared at her. “Jumping out of a window,” he muttered. “You’re insane.”

“And you’re charming,” Lacey shot back, holding out her hand for him to take. He muttered something else but finally took her hand and let her help pull him up into the room. Rapunzel stood off to the side, less frightened of this newcomer but still wary.

“This is Rapunzel,” Lacey said proudly.

Gold looked at her askance. He looked back at Lacey who smiled brightly back at him, pushing her hair out of her eyes. “Do you have the tiara?”

Lacey held it up. Gold nodded. “Good, let’s go. We should make Corona by nightfall and then you and I are going to have a little chat about what it means to follow orders.”

“Like hell we will,” Lacey answered but she moved to the staircase. “Come on, Rapunzel,” she called. “Time to go.”

“She’s not going with us,” Gold said, despite the fact that Rapunzel had not moved an inch from where she stood.

“Course she is,” Lacey replied. “She can’t stay here.”
“Oh, yes she can.”

“Gold!” Lacey exclaimed. She darted an uneasy look at the lost princess who was listening attentively. “We’re taking her back to her mother.” She winked awkwardly, hoping Gold would catch on to the small white lie. “You know, the one waiting for her in Corona.”

Gold crossed his arms. “How do you propose we do that? She’s got almost ninety feet of hair. How she supposed to walk through the forest with all this?”

“We could cut it?”

This was the wrong thing to say. It took Lacey another hour to calm Rapunzel down after that little suggestion. Apparently, Gothel had done quite a number on the kid.

“If I cut my hair,” Rapunzel sobbed, clutching at it in large handfuls, “I’ll die! Mother said! Mother said!”

“Belle…”

Lacey shot Gold a dark look. She had just gotten the kid to calm down enough to stop wailing, when Eugene’s head popped up through the door. “Hey!” he said irritably. “What’s the hold up?”

When his eyes landed on Rapunzel, he darkened and went mute. Rapunzel too colored, although she stopped crying. Climbing out of Lacey’s lap, where she had curled up, she crawled over to the trap door and sat on her heels to regard Eugene with interest.


His ears went beet red. “It’s Flynn,” he squeaked.

Gold threw his hands up. “Look! He can stay with her, and we can go back to the castle. Problem solved.”

“The witch is still roaming around,” Lacey reminded him, climbing to her feet. She dusted herself off. “We can’t leave them here.”

“He can’t return to Corona,” Gold pointed out.

Eugene looked up at this, his color draining.

Lacey sighed. “No, but he’s a horse come nightfall right? We go in at night and leave before dawn. It’ll be fine.”

“You’re a horse, too?” Rapunzel asked, peering at him in interest. “I like horses.”

Eugene went beet red.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay on this, I’ve been insane busy anddddd my muse has completely left me. So, I was sitting on this last chapter in the hopes it would come back. It hasn’t.
“Done!” Lacey announced, sitting back proudly to admire her handiwork.

From where she was seated on the floor between Lacey’s legs, Rapunzel reached a tentative hand to her head, gently tracing the intricate starts of her new french braid. It had taken Lacey nearly an hour, and her fingers had cramped up twice, but Rapunzel’s black hair dangled just off the floor, thanks to Lacey’s creativity. A crown of braided hair wrapped artfully around Rapunzel’s head before descending into a braid. The hair was pulled so taut it gave the young girl a slightly permanent surprised look, though she had assured Lacey it didn’t hurt at all multiple times throughout the process.

“How does it look, Just Eugene?” Rapunzel asked her new friend, turning to look at where he was loitering against the mantle. There was no flirtation in her voice, just an honest curiosity. Rapunzel regard Eugene as a very trustworthy, knowledgeable source as both man and horse. He gawked back at her, too busy admiring her to answer. At least, he had stopped blushing every time she looked at him.

“Looks fine,” Gold replied, not bothering to look up from the book he had retreated to. Rapunzel ducked her head in embarrassment, still clearly shy around the older, gruffer man. “Can we go now?”

Lacey scowled at him over Rapunzel’s head, “Yes, now that I’ve single-handedly fixed the problem of what to do with all this hair, we can go.” Lacey stood, stretching her arms overhead before letting out a yawn. “God,” Lacey said, rubbing her eyes as exhaustion returned harder than ever. “I haven’t slept in-”

“Twenty four hours,” Gold interrupted as he turned the page. “Same as Eugene and myself and probably the young miss here as well.”

As if reminded, Eugene opened his mouth a in jaw-cracking yawn. Rapunzel brightened, hopping up in excitement. “You could all stay here with me!” she suggested. She pointed to a small staircase that went up into an overhead loft. “You could sleep for a bit and perhaps Mother might return. We wouldn’t have to go anywhere after all!”

Lacey put her hand over her face, and resisted the temptation to groan. Gold, meanwhile, was nodding in agreement. “Wonderful idea. How about you three stay here? I have the lone steed. I would make better time back to Corona on my own.”

“What about,” Eugene shot a look at Rapunzel who was following this with unveiled interest, “the… you know… witch?”
“The Imp- I mean Lesak- has it under control,” Lacey assured him, moving towards the window. Outside, the late morning air was crisp and smelled of pine and fresh air. Lacey would have killed for even just the smell of a decent cup of coffee. Below, the kelpie was flicking his tail in boredom; there was no sign of any other creature in the glen or its surroundings. “I think we should stick together,” she told the group behind her. “We only got this far because we worked together.” She paused, and turned back to level Gold with a dark look. “Well, most of us at least.”

He opened his mouth as if to protest, but Rapunzel cut him off. “Please,” she murmured with an imploring look. “Please stay. I’ve never had any visitors before and I’m sure Mother would be happy to help you.”

“Doubtful,” Eugene muttered. Lacey and Gold exchanged a taken back look over his head causing the young man to bristle. “What?” he said, holding his hands up. “In a couple of hours, I’m turning back into a horse, I haven’t slept since we left Hill House, and the current plan is to return to a kingdom where I’m threatened with death if I so much as cross the border.”

Rapunzel seized his arm, grinning at Lacey while Eugene froze completely. “See?” she said to Lacey. “You must stay here. For Just Eugene.”

Eugene nodded as best he could. He was rapidly going red either from embarrassment or not being able to breathe properly. “Maybe she’s right,” he managed, his voice squeaking slightly. “We could stay here while Lesak is handling the witch.”

“Enough already,” Lacey declared. “Gold, we’re going with you. Last time you left us to ride off into the distance we nearly got killed.” She turned to the stable boy. “Eugene, we’re not going to let anything happen to you, trust me. And Rapunzel,” she took a deep breath, “I don’t want to hear another word about staying. You’re coming with us, so put some shoes on and let’s go.”

“Shoes?”

Though neither Gold or Eugene had moved, their attention diverted from arguing long enough to look at Rapunzel. Her bare feet peeked out under her hem, though she did not so much as glance down at them.

Lacey hiked up her own skirt to point at her toe. “You know, slippers, shoes, boots. You name it.”

Rapunzel shook her head. “I don’t have anything like that.”

“You don’t have shoes?”

Rapunzel shrugged. “I don’t think so. I have some dresses but nothing like those.”

Gold had been surprisingly quiet. “Belle…” he started carefully but Lacey lifted a hand, too incensed to respond tactfully.

“She’ll ride,” Lacey gritted. Her experience in the woods barefoot had been due to poor footwear, fate and luck. Rapunzel… Rapunzel’s “mother” had withheld shoes, trapped her in a tower, emotionally abused her in every way imaginable, and kept her powerless and helpless in even the smallest of ways.

Rapunzel clung harder to Eugene. “Belle, please, I’m… I’m scared.”

“It’s alright,” Eugene replied. “We won’t let anything happen to you, I promise.”

“No, we won’t,” Lacey seconded. She shot Gold a look as if to dare him to contradict them.
He simply sighed, and set his book down. He didn’t look as if he had been up all night, though Lacey felt it in every one of her goddamn miserable bones. “Fine. Eugene, if you could help get the young lady situated so we can begin our journey?”

Eugene looked over to Lacey, and she nodded at him. “Come on,” Eugene murmured to Rapunzel as he moved towards the trap door. The girl didn’t budge at first. She stared at Lacey as if she might relent but Lacey didn’t meet her eyes. After a moment, the girl’s shoulders deflated and Eugene guided her out of sight.

“That was cruel,” Gold said softly, and Lacey’s head jerked up, smelling a fight.

“Cruel?” Lacey spat back. “Me rescuing her from captivity is cruel?”

“She doesn’t see it that way,” he replied. “This is all she’s ever known. You barged in here last night, probably scared the child half to death, and then decided you knew best.”

“I do!”

“You sound like her mother,” Gold pointed out. “What makes you qualified to make such a decision?”

Lacey scoffed. “She’s the lost princess,” she said. “You know that, I mean, just look at her! She’s the same age, looks just like her parents, and is being held captive by the witch that just stole the royal tiara.” She lifted it from her pocket to wave it in his face. “I may not be from around here, but I know I’m doing the right thing.”

Gold’s face remained neutral as the footsteps of Eugene and Rapunzel receded further and further away. “I do not doubt her true parentage,” he conceded, looking around the room. “Nor do I disagree that Gothel has been holding the child captive for her own reasons, but tell me, Belle. What do you hope to gain from all this?”

“Gain?” Lacey repeated. “I’m not gaining anything, I’m just doing the right thing.”

“Since when?” She gaped at him, but he continued before she could respond. “Gothel has taken care of her. She is perfectly healthy, has everything she might need at her fingertips, and out of harm’s way, which is more than most heirs to the throne can say. Who’s to say this isn’t the best place for her?”

“Who’s to say?” Lacey said slowly. “Who’s to say?”

Anger was buzzing in her ears, loud enough to drum out whatever tripe he was sprouting now. Lacey’s knuckles were white around the tiara, fingers digging into her own arm as she tried to see past the haze of red filling her vision.

“She’s being held captive by a monster,” she said furiously, cutting off whatever he had been saying about prudence and caution. “Emotionally abused by the very creature that robbed her of her life, who she calls ‘Mother’ and relies on for everything. That girl needs help, and if you and your master think I am going to sit by and pretend everything’s okay, ride back into the capital and hand over this tiara knowing all the while their daughter is alive and whole, you have another thing coming, you bastard.”

His jaw tightened but he did not rise to the bait. “If you would just think before you acted,” he said pointedly, “perhaps we might have been able to come up with a better plan of action.”

“Excuse me if I don’t just sit, dawdling my thumbs while people’s lives are on the line.”
“Lives that you put there,” he said archly, his eyes now ablaze with indignation. “Eugene has been exiled, threatened with death, and cursed thanks to your inability to stay in a carriage and wait as you were instructed. He’s a mere boy, his whole life was ahead of him, and now he’s a fugitive. The girl was safe here, damn you. Gothel had no interest in harming her, or she would have done so long ago. She’s a pet, a pampered pet safe in her tower, who would have remained here safely until her real parents could collect her.”

Lacey’s self-righteous fury wavered as his words sank in. “Oh yes,” he said as he paced closer. “You think I would let a golden opportunity like this slip through my fingers? We could have negotiated for anything for the location of the lost princess, and instead now, if we withhold her, we are no better than Gothel. We are duty bound to deliver her safe and sound lest we risk an outright war with the Second Kingdom. Not to mention we are responsible for her safety out there in the woods, traveling with one steed, little food, and no sleep. As soon as Gothel realizes her little pet is gone, she will not rest until she has slaughtered every last one of us and gotten her prize back.”

“The Imp—”

“The Imp is not here,” he hissed, grabbing the tiara out of her numb fingers. “You have me and an Enchanted stable boy, so you had better hope we manage to last the day or all our deaths will be on your head.”

“Oh?” Lacey said in a low voice, barely more than a whisper. “So, we should have just pretended we didn’t know? Left here there even though we sat there in front of her parents who have been grieving eighteen years and told them we would do what we could?”

“Life is not always as easy as right and wrong.”

“What if it was your son?” Lacey dared.

He did not have a reply for this. Without a sound, he turned his back on her and disappeared down the trapdoor. Outside, the kelpie neighed as Eugene and Rapunzel arrived outside. A cloud shifted, and the midday sun reached into the window, casting a bright light upon where Lacey stood all alone.

She was buzzing with emotions, heightened no doubt by lack of sleep, adrenaline, and the knowledge that Gold might be right, damn him.

Swallowing roughly, Lacey looked around the room. Blankets and pillows draped over chairs, books piled in every corner, art supplies in the oddest of places… but in her mind, Lacey saw a dungeon.

She could almost feel the chill of her old rooms in the Imp’s castle. The sterility of it, the lack of anything remotely comforting. It had been a prison, but she had known it was a prison. She had known something outside of it. This tower may not look like a cell, it may have the makings of a home, but the girl who had lived in this cage had been as trapped as Lacey had been in her locked cell.

She headed down the stairs, not going too terribly quickly as she did not want to overcome Gold on the staircase. She may not handled this entire thing correctly, but she was not going to apologize for doing the right thing.
Having grown up in cities, Lacey’s idea of a hike was going from downtown to the suburbs in a cab. Nowadays, she was growing used to forest trails, though as another jaw-cracking yawn split her face, she would kill for a kelpie.

Up ahead, their lone rider was too busy staring about her in wonder to notice. Rapunzel had nearly fallen off the kelpie twice until Eugene had tied his belt into the reins and looped it around her. He currently walked beside the lost princess, and despite the occasional yawn, he didn’t seem too terribly fatigued.

“It’s the enchantment,” Gold told her, noticing her gaze. “As it progresses, he’ll need less sleep until eventually,” he shrugged. “He won’t sleep at all.”

“Ariel slept,” Lacey pointed out, still slightly irritated. Gold had remained quiet all day, only speaking to her when they had breaked for lunch. Cold meats and cheeses from the tower and a bubbling brook had only made her the more sleepy. “She was a mermaid I met back in the Seventh Kingdom.”

“If I remember correctly,” the ambassador said, “the mermaid wore an enchanted bracelet? She wasn’t enchanted herself?”

“She is now,” Lacey said grumpily. “So, enchanted objects bearers aren’t Enchanted themselves?”

He shook his head, but did not clarify. Lacey frowned at him, waiting for him to respond but as usual, it seemed he had gone mute as soon as something interesting came up.

“Tell me more about the Enchanted,” Lacey said as they continued down the path. He looked at her askance, but she kept looking forward. As pissed as she was at him, she was so tired any distraction was a welcome one, even talking to Gold.

“Well,” he started, casting about for a good starting place, Lacey wagered. “What would you like to know exactly?”

She huffed. “I don’t know. I didn’t even know there was such a thing until I met a guy who could turn into a cricket.”

“He couldn’t ‘turn into a cricket’,” Gold sighed. “He was enchanted to turn into a cricket.”

“Okay, so you can’t just,” Lacey clicked her fingers together, “change whenever you want?”

He side-eyed her, shaking his head. “Enchantments are typically punishments,” he explained. “Most people consider it a fate worse than death.”

Lacey shook her head. “Ariel was enchanted to be human,” she told him, “so, she could marry her prince.”

“By day a mermaid, by night a princess?” Gold said, rubbing his chin. “An interesting choice. I suppose the King and Queen approved the marriage?”

“They didn’t get a say,” Lacey told him crossly. “They were in love.”

“Love?” he laughed. “Oh, well, only love would make a mermaid so crazy that she would agree to
live half a life for the rest of her days. She’ll spent half of her life in a tub, and the other half up all night with the children while her dear prince distracts himself with.”

Lacey kicked him. He was so stunned, he stopped dead and glared at her in astonishment.

“Did you just kick me?” he asked incredulously.

“Yeah, and I’ll do it again if you don’t shut up about things you don’t know,” Lacey told him crossly. “Ariel loved that boy with every fiber of her being, and he loved her just as much if not more. It’s stupid and weird, and not at all reasonable, but it’s true.”

He continued to gawk at her. “Why not just say that instead of acting like a five year old and kicking me?”

Lacey shrugged, starting to walk again. “Seemed like the thing to do at the time.”

He grumbled something, but he joined her, though at a slightly safer distance. “If you are to be believed,” he continued. “The mermaid’s Enchantment would be one of a few to have a happy ending.”

“The Blue Fairy undid Jiminy’s curse,” Lacey told him. “The cricket guy’s name was Jiminy.”

At the name of the Blue Fairy, Gold’s face darkened. “Reul Ghorm,” he spat. “Always in everyone else’s business.”

“You and your master sure hate her,” Lacey whistled. “She seemed like a fine fairy to me.”

He glared at her, but wisely did not say anything.

Up ahead, Eugene scooped up a pinecone off the trail to hold up to Rapunzel’s wide eyed amazement. The girl’s braid dangled down over the horse’s rear quarters, gathering dust and leaves as they went. Neither of the them seemed to remember they weren’t alone, and Lacey was fine to leave it like that. Rapunzel was enjoying herself, though time to time her shoulders slumped or quivered as emotion overcame her. Luckily, Eugene seemed to know just what to say to distract her, and the journey had been pleasant, although tiring.

“What about Eugene?” Lacey said softly. “Gothel tried to kill him and the Imp intervened somehow but… I’m not sure what happened exactly.”

“Then, young Eugene’s case is slightly different,” Gold assured her “Less of an Enchantment than a freak accident.”

“He turns into a horse,” Lacey deadpanned. “It’s better than a cricket but still.”

“If a spell contamination occurred, an Enchantment is possible,” Gold mused. “Unlikely, but not impossible.”

Rapunzel must have said something, because up ahead, Eugene broke out braying in laughter before clapping a hand to his mouth in embarrassment. Rapunzel did not notice, but he turned back to Lacey with a scared look. She could only give him a reassuring smile in response. Thankfully, Rapunzel, realizing she had lost Eugene’s attention, used her braid to flick his shoulder. The boy nearly broke his head, he whipped his neck back around so quickly.

“I see you two are as close as ever,” Gold said blandly, stepping neatly around a fallen tree branch. Lacey had to lift her skirts to get over it, and it still caught her hem, nearly making her fall flat on
her face. Gold kept walking, though she could practically hear his smirk.

“For your information,” Lacey growled, hurrying to catch up with him. “I don’t rob the cradle. I prefer older men actually.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but words seemed to fail him. He swallowed roughly as she grinned back at him. Before she lost the advantage, Lacey moved to walk ahead of him to join Rapunzel and Eugene.

“Mind the road apple.”

Lacey turned back to him, about to ask what in the world a road apple was when her foot sank in the recent droppings of the kelpie, still steaming fresh.

Gold walked straight past her, smirking broadly as she frantically shook the excrement off her foot.

“Thank God,” Lacey groaned, slipping her feet into the small creek. They had stopped at an apple tree, which Gold assured them was not cursed, bewitched or an illusion. Behind her, Eugene was tending to the kelpie. Rapunzel helped him, combing out the kelpie’s mane, and giggling when the creature turned to nudge her, hoping for more food.

“She’s got a handkerchief full of ham she’s been feeding it,” Gold sighed, coming to stand beside where Lacey sat. “Going to ruin it.”

“It’s a kelpie,” Lacey reminded him. “A girl sneaking it snacks isn’t going to do much beside endear her to it.”

He looked disgruntled. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to domesticate kelpies?” he asked, more to himself than to her. “And a teenager has managed it in less than one afternoon!”

“Good, let’s hope we find more,” Lacey sighed, wiggling her toes in the mud. “I don’t want to walk anymore.”

“We’ll make it back to Hill House by tomorrow afternoon,” Gold said, looking up at the sky. It was still early evening, the sun still overhead despite the growing chill. “We should make camp here tonight.”

“Camp?” Lacey said, turning to look at him. “Eugene turns into a horse come sundown and you said he won’t get sleepy. Let’s just keep going before Gothel finds us.”

Gold gave her a pointed look. “The kelpie needs rest as do you and the girl. We’ll stay here for the night.”

“If you’re tired, old man, just say so.”

“I believe I recall you saying something about preferring older men?”

Before Lacey could even the score, Gold declared he was going off to find something to eat.

“It’s nearly dark,” Eugene said, looking up at the sky nervously. “Shouldn’t you… I don’t know… stay with us?”

“We have enough food,” Lacey said, gesturing towards the kelpie’s saddlebags.
“If we make it to Hill House without any trouble,” Gold corrected. “I won’t go far but you three stay by the fire and make sure it doesn’t go out.”

“What about the witch?” Eugene said.

“What’s this witch you keep talking about?” Rapunzel asked.

“Just an annoyance,” Lacey said. “Make it quick, Gold.”

“As my lady commands,” he drawled. Lacey flung a pinecone at his head, which he easily ducked. “Eugene.”

“Flynn,” he corrected, though not with much spirit.

The shadows were starting to lengthen around them. “When the sun falls, you will change back into a horse. This will be your first actual transformation, and I warn you, it will not be pleasant.”

Eugene nodded, though it seemed he had something lodged in his throat.

“Relax into it, don’t fight it, and it will be less traumatic,” Gold told him, and to Lacey’s and Eugene’s surprise, he gripped the boy’s shoulder. “Stay with them, and if anything should happen, run. Don’t fight.”

Eugene nodded hastily. Rapunzel tapped Lacey’s arm politely, leaning up to whisper. “Should we be frightened?”

Lacey tried to smile, but her cheeks refused to cooperate. “No,” she lied. “We’re going to be just fine.”

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When night fell, Eugene transformed.

He had sat at the edge of the woods, watching for Gold to return until the sun had faded away from the small glen entirely. When the last rays disappeared from his back, the boy gave a sort of strangled, surprised noise and jumped to his feet.

Rapunzel hid her face in Lacey’s chest, but Lacey did not turn away. She owed it to Eugene to watch, to see, to understand in a way she had never really done with any of the others. She had not been responsible for their Enchantments.

It was thankfully quick. Eugene’s lanky frame stretched out, his arms grew long and thick and his back arched as his head lengthened. His eyes, already wide with surprise, rounded and moved apart, and his hair grew long as his clothes disappeared under a thick coat of hair.

“Is it… is it over?” Rapunzel whispered. Her fists were clenched under her chin, her voice slightly muffled from where she was pressed against Lacey’s breasts. Lacey idly patted her hair, before moving towards Eugene.

He stared down into the creek at his reflection in the moon’s dim light. He startled slightly when Lacey touched his shoulder. After a moment, he relaxed enough to let her stroke his mane without a fuss. Rapunzel stayed by the fire to watch from a safe distance.

“You okay?” Lacey asked him. He nickered in response, his muscles shifting in a horse equivalent to a shrug. Lacey chuckled. “You did great.”
He tossed his head towards where Gold had disappeared and it was Lacey’s turn to shrug. “He said he’d be back,” she told him. “It’s only been an hour. I’m sure he’s fine. Come back by the fire and lay down.”

The kelpie was tied at the water’s edge, enough to stand in the shallows but not where it could swim off. Eugene trotted by it, snorting at its stare. Rapunzel was enthralled by Eugene’s transformation, but did not move any closer. He shuffled over to her, nudging her head gently to reassure her. A brilliant, relieved smile broke out over Rapunzel’s face and she threw her arms around him in a hug. His equine eyes went wide with surprise over her shoulder.

“Rapunzel,” Lacey said, handing her a tin cup from the bag. “Go and fetch me some water, will you?”

The girl peeled herself away from Eugene, and hurried to be of help. Lacey watched her go before looking up to Eugene. “Fair warning,” she said softly. “I know you like her, but you have to remember she’s spent her whole life locked in a tower with no one but a witch filling her head with lies.”

He stared back at her, and in the distance, Rapunzel snuck the Kelpie more ham.

“She doesn’t know about men and women, the birds or the bees, and if you aren’t going to be okay with just being there for her...”

Eugene pawed the ground and shook his head. Lacey let out the breath she had been holding. She reached her palm to him. “Okay, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I just don’t want to see either of you get hurt.”

The horse looked over at where Rapunzel stood in the water. Her skirts were spread out around her, fingers stretched out to touch the ripples, utterly entranced by the dark blackness of the water in the nighttime. She was beautiful and sweet, and Lacey understood how someone like Eugene who had been bullied and looked down upon his whole life might be drawn to such an innocent.

Lacey did not need to remind him she was a princess and he was an exile. Or that soon, he would have to say goodbye to Rapunzel forever.

Some things went without saying.

Chapter End Notes

Had this chapter sitting in my folders for when the time was right, but I was recently honored to be nominated as one of the rumbelle fandoms best writers and well, since the Gate won last year, I thought perhaps a update for this work would be a suitable thank you.

*waves* hope you all are well!
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

Long time, no update! Thanks to a few wonderful readers and The Gate's personal cheerleader (Prissy!), I re-visited the story for NaNoWriMo and am thrilled to say that I have written 8 additional chapters to finish the Rapunzel arc. I will be uploading every Wednesday for the next few weeks. I truly hope you all enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Rapunzel had never been in a lake before, much less even seen one, she had far too excited to come back to shore on her own. She had willfully ignored Lacey’s attempts to call her back to the shore so Eugene finally went to fetch her out of the lake. Unsurprisingly, the two somehow started splashing one another. When they finally stumbled back out of the lake, they were both soaked from head to tail. Lacey was not sure where Gold had wandered off, but she trusted he could take care of himself.

Luckily, despite it being fall, the evening weather was still balmy. Still, the two teens huddled close to the fire while Lacey leaned up against a log, congratulations herself on being the only one with enough sense not to get wet. Rapunzel’s braid was dripping steadily, the dirt at her feed already turning into mud. Eugene’s fur was so saturated with water it appeared a dark gray. Despite this, both of them were in high spirits as they settled down to eat.

There was not much in the way of dinner beside the few provisions they had taken from Rapunzel’s tower, mostly smoked meats and some dried fruits. As they ate, the woods creaked and rustled around them, and while Rapunzel jumped occasionally (usually towards Eugene much to his delight) the sound was comforting to Lacey. It meant Gothel was not lingering nearby.

Something rustled in the trees overhead and Rapunzel jerked her head this way. “Probably just a squirrel,” Lacey assured her.

Eugene nodded in agreement, nudging Rapunzel in an attempt to get her to relax. “A squirrel,” Rapunzel repeated. “Those are the animals with the odd tails?”

Eugene nodded before peeling his lips back to reveal his two front teeth. Glad to see Eugene in high spirits, Lacey laughed along with Rapunzel as Eugene continued his squirrel pantomime.

“What else lives in the forest?” Rapunzel asked as her curiosity got the better of her. “Are there unicorns?” Eugene gave a brief snort of affirmation to Rapunzel’s delight. She clasped her hands together in barely repressed glee. “Have you seen one?”

“I don’t think they have too many unicorns wandering around Corona,” Lacey said.

Eugene shook his head, spraying water everywhere. Rapunzel, already wet, laughed to Eugene’s delight. He proceeded to shake all over, water droplets spraying everywhere. Lacey moved to protect the fire. Gold had started it before he left, but Lacey had no earthly idea how to start one and didn’t fancy having to try because of some horseplay.

“Corona,” Rapunzel repeated. “That’s where we’re going?”
There was no telling how much Gothel had told her captive about the world but Lacey doubted the witch had dared to so much as allude to Rapunzel’s true home. So, Lacey proceeded carefully. “That’s right. You know, Eugene’s from Corona,” Lacey told her. “It’s also where the King and Queen live.”

Rapunzel’s eyebrows raised in interest. “Did you like it there, Eugene?”

Eugene nodded proudly.

Rapunzel considered this for a moment. “Then, why leave?” she asked him.

Eugene’s ears drooped as the reality of banishment and Enchantment settled back on his shoulders. Rapunzel wrapped her arms around his snout. “Oh, don’t be sad,” she pleaded. “I’m sure you miss your home terribly but we’ll be there soon. And you can introduce me to everyone. Are they all like you?”

“No,” Lacey answered for him. “Eugene is...special.” Cursed was the word, but Lacey did not intend to frighten Rapunzel anymore than she already had. “The Sun Court is beautiful,” Lacey continued, changing the subject back. “It sits on a lake that goes on for as far as the eye can see.”

If Rapunzel’s curiosity was keeping her fears at bay, Lacey had every intention to continue to sate it. Rapunzel shifted until she sat, cross-legged, facing Lacey. “Are there many people in Corona?”

“Thousands,” Lacey replied. As Lacey spoke about the city she had only glimpsed from a carriage, Eugene huffed, unable to add anything. He was clearly annoyed at his lack of voice and resorted to whickering and whinnying whenever Lacey said something he disagreed with.

It was rather odd that Eugene had not retained his voice like Jiminy had. While Ariel had traded her voice for her Enchantment, Eugene had not had much of a choice at all in his predicament.

Rapunzel was entranced as Lacey finished describing the bits she had seen from the carriage. “Oh, it sounds marvelous. Is the castle very grand? All the stories say castles are very grand.”

“Stunning,” Lacey agreed. “Three towers rise up into the sky, with great windows to let the sun into the halls.” Lacey lifted her hands into a rectangle to frame the sky so they could look up to the moon through her fingers.

“Just like in my tower!” Rapunzel exclaimed. She held up her hands to mirror Lacey’s, though her fingers curled into a round circle instead. “I have a window to watch the stars,” Rapunzel said. “I also have the one in the wall too to watch the sunsets. I’ve always liked to sit and stare out my windows.”

“Doesn’t it ever get boring?” Lacey asked her. “Just...being by yourself up there?”

“Oh no!” Rapunzel insisted. “I have all sorts of things to do there. I can paint and read and sing and dance and bake-”

“Yea, but...you’re alone.”

“No,” Rapunzel said with a shake of her head. “I have Mother.” She paled. “Oh, I bet she’s very cross.” Rapunzel looked over her shoulder at the way they had come. “Very cross,” she repeated as she began to wring her hair between her hands.

Before Lacey could break Rapunzel’s reverie, Eugene leaned down and exhaled in Rapunzel’s ear. Startled, Rapunzel gasped before breaking out into giggles. She batted his head away from her
affectionately. The stable boy-turned-horse whinnied, clearly pleased with himself.

Lacey returned back to the matter at hand. “So, are you excited to see Corona?”

Rapunzel considered this for a moment. “It does sound lovely,” she agreed. Her attention shifted back to Eugene. “Would I like it?”

Her question was serious so Eugene hesitated for a moment, giving it due thought before he nodded.

A small, secret smile spread over Rapunzel’s features. “Then we’ll go, all of us together! Right now!”

Lacey had to hide her own pleased expression. Too easy. “Well, we’ll have to wait for Gold.”

Rapunzel frowned. She wasn’t quite as comfortable with the taciturn man as she was with Eugene and ‘Belle’. “Where is he?” the teen asked as she turned one way and then the other in case he was hiding behind a tree. “Do you think...a squirrel might have gotten him?”

Choking back laughter at the idea of Gold being attacked by a squirrel, Lacey craned her neck to check around the campsite but nothing seemed amiss. The kelpie was snoozing calmly with the river whispering beyond it. “I’m sure he’s fine. He couldn’t have gone far,” Lacey said as she settled back onto her elbows.

Rapunzel’s black blue hair glistened in the firelight where it lay drying. Between the water and the wringing, it was twisted and tangled, half in and half out of the braid. With nothing else to do, Lacey gestured for Rapunzel to join her. “Rapunzel, come over here and let me see if I can put it back up for you.”

“Oh,” Rapunzel said with a small smile. “That would be...nice. It’s a lot easier to walk when it’s braided.”

When Rapunzel moved to sit join Lacey, Eugene pouted at the loss of his fireside companion but he did not bother to come over and join them. Undoing the tangles and knots of the braid took a moment. Rapunzel’s hair was thick and coarse and smelled strongly of campfire already. There were twigs and leaves and burs-

The softest stir of magic tickled her nose. It was the only warning Lacey received before -

“You’re making a mess of it.”

Rapunzel shrieked and Eugene trumpeted in alarm. Lacey slapped her hand over Rapunzel’s mouth before her scream brought Gothel (or who knew what else) down upon them. Eugene hastily retreated from the fire. Still not quite having the hang of being a horse, he immediately gotten himself caught up in some low hanging branches.

During all this, The Imp sat nonchalantly on the log with a grin, clearly enjoying giving them all a nasty fright. After calming Rapunzel down, (she wasn’t any more comfortable with the odd wizard than she had been in the tower but at least she wasn’t halfway up a tree) Lacey moved to help Eugene. His mane had gotten tangled up in a pine tree just outside the ring of light from the fire.

“You big baby, it’s just Lesak,” Lacey told him though this fact did not have a calming effect. Eugene nearly knocked her over as he tossed his head in a renewed attempt to get free. “Stop that!” Lacey reprimanded. “I can’t help if you’re flailing- Stand still!!”
It took Lacey a moment to sufficiently calm Eugene down to where she could free him. He refused to come back to the fireside, lingering at the edge of the clearing. Satisfied he wasn’t going to go running off into the night, Lacey gave him one last part of reassurance and returned to the fire.

Rapunzel was right where she had left her and did not look the worse for wear. She had her hands clenched tightly in her lap while The Imp sat over her. He was now surrounded by strands of Rapunzel’s still wet hair, coils were already laid neatly on the ground in little rows.

Lacey stopped dead in her tracks. “Are you braiding her hair?”

The Imp shrugged. “It’s soothing,” he said. “Same principle as spinning. Besides you would have made another mess of it.”

“B-Belle?” Rapunzel stammered.

“It’s alright, Rapunzel,” Lacey assured her. “He’s not going to hurt you.”

Rapunzel’s shoulders lowered slightly as she forced herself to relax. With every brush of The Imp’s fingers, another strand of Rapunzel’s hair was dried and curled, far better than any curling wand Lacey had ever used.

Biting back the urge to make some kind of blowout joke (knowing it would be lost on them), Lacey settled back to watch the most terrifying creature in Fae work his magic (figuratively speaking). There had to be a reason for his arrival, besides being generally annoying, but The Imp did not volunteer his reasons and Lacey knew better than to ask. But she did anyway. “So, what do we owe this honor?”

“Why, I,” The Imp sang, “came to check up on you. Our mutual...friend...has not discovered your theft yet but it’s only a matter of time. It is in your best interests to get out of the woods as quickly as you can.”

At their feet, Rapunzel was drifting as exhaustion started to catch up with her. The teen leaned her cheek up against Lacey’s knee and her eyes slid closed. Lacey snorted. “Well, that’s easy then. Just magic us to Corona-”

“Can’t,” The Imp snipped. He nodded his head at Rapunzel. “Blood magic was used to bind her to this forest. I cannot just,” he snapped his fingers, “whisk her out of the forest. She must walk out on her own free will.” He grew serious. “If someone had simply stayed in the tower where I had left them, I could have kept our little problem busy while reinforcements were raised to rescue you both.”

It didn’t help that this perfectly logical solution should have occurred to Lacey. It probably would have if she hadn’t been so infuriated at the entire situation. “You might have mentioned that,” Lacey replied, “instead of just leaving us up there like birds in a cage.”

“If you would just see reason-”

“Ouch!” Rapunzel clapped a hand to her head as The Imp’s talons caught in her hair.

“Sorry,” he thrilled, but there was no real apology in his voice. “Quite tangled.” He started again, but more gently this time.

“I usually brush it twice a day,” Rapunzel said from the safety of Lacey’s lap. “But I didn’t...bring my brush with me.”
Lacey smoothed the hair at the crown of Rapunzel’s head in what she hoped was a reassuring manner. The Imp continued to pull and weave hair into spools upon the ground. There was so much of it that it looked as infinite as the endless sky above them.

All too aware that Rapunzel was listening, Lacey was careful as she continued the conversation, “Where is... she’ anyway?” The last thing she needed was for Gothel to show up while they were sleeping or as she squatted behind a bush-

The Imp waved his free hand out towards the darkness. “Around I suspect. I’ve set a few distractions, sprang a few traps, should keep her busy for a bit. Long enough for you all to get out of the forest.” He frowned down at Rapunzel’s hair. “This could take a whole.” He lowered his voice. “We could always just cut it?”

In a blur of motion, Rapunzel bolted to her feet, every inch of her shaking as she clutched her hair to her chest. Eugene clicked his teeth together as he came up around the fire, unsure what had startled Rapunzel but full ready to take a bite out of The Imp despite his terror.

“Guys! Knock it off!.” Rapunzel stood, quivering head to toe, but she wasn’t fleeing. “Rapunzel, no one is going to cut your hair. So, just come sit back down and let him finish braiding it,” Lacey urged her.

Rapunzel hesitated for a moment longer before she sat back down. The Imp rolled his eyes, but he started his work again. After a while, when he had run out of room, The Imp deposited a large (thankfully already dry) section in Lacey’s lap for safekeeping. He began work on a lower section, humming happily to himself as he went. Across the fire, Eugene eyed them all fiercely, unable to do much but glower without opposable thumbs.

All this drama over something as trivial as hair, a lot of hair true, but still it was just hair. Lacey settled back down beside Rapunzel with a sigh. “I get your attached to your hair, but really, it’s...easily ten feet long. How do you even deal with all of it?”

Rapunzel shrugged. “I just….have to,” she said in way of an explanation.

“Have to?” Lacey repeated. “What does that mean?”

Rapunzel shuddered. She wrapped her arms around her chest, holding herself together. “Mother says...if I ever cut my hair, I would die.”

Lacey shook her head. “Wait, what?”

The Imp tapped his finger against his chin. “Interesting,” he murmured. “Did she give any reasoning behind this notion?”

“Oh, come on,” Lacey grumbled as she gestured to the piles of hair. “It’s not like it’s true.”

“And how do you know?” he shot back. “Are you an expert in magic?”

“You said her hair wasn’t magical,” Lacey reminded him. “Back in the tower-

The Imp huffed. “You never listen. Her hair is not magical in itself, but magic has worked through it.”

“Magic?” Rapunzel repeated as she raised a hand to gently touch the strands framing her face. “But...I’ve never seen magic!”
The Imp giggled to himself. “Her mother’s a witch and she’s never seen magic!”

Lacey elbowed him as hard as she dared but the damage was done. Rapunzel twisted out from between his legs to glare up at him. “Mother is not a witch!” she chastised him with a wag of her finger, all fear of him forgotten in that moment.

The Imp grumbled in annoyance at his once-again spoiled work. “If you continue to choose ignorance, far be it from me from breaking your little bubble—”

Lacey intervened before the two started to bicker in earnest. “Rapunzel,” she said clearly. “We don’t always know everything about our parents.”

The girl set her jaw. “Mother isn’t a witch. He’s a liar.”

“Careful,” The Imp held up a finger in warning. “I’ve killed men for less than that.”

Eugene snorted, his right ear flickering in warning. Rapunzel had no such qualms. She shook her head. “You take it back right now.”

The Imp cackled. “Not wanting to believe something doesn’t make it true!”

“You butt out,” Lacey warned him. “Now, Rapunzel. Do you know something about your Mother that you aren’t supposed to know?”

The Imp exhaled in annoyance. He was fidgeting with the lace at his cuffs and his left foot had started to bounce as he grew bored. Before he could lash out, Lacey deposited the large, uncombed section of Rapunzel’s hair back into his lap. He opened his mouth to say something scathing but he seemed to think better of it and began to comb.

With that bomb defused, Lacey was able to turn back to the one that had already detonated. There was little in the way of damage control, but perhaps she could at least prevent another explosion of emotion. “Rapunzel,” she said, “Perhaps you and Eugene can talk more about his Enchantment in the morning?”

Rapunzel dried her eyes. “What’s an Enchantment?”

Lacey nodded over to where Eugene stood. “It’s when someone is one way by day...and by night another. Eugene wasn’t always like this.”

“You weren’t?” Rapunzel asked, clearly disappointed.

Eugene shook his head.

“He was struck by a spell,” Lacey explained. “A spell your Mother cast.”

Rapunzel considered this but just as Lacey began to hope she understood, she shook her head. “It couldn’t have been Mother. She’s away looking for food for the winter—”

“Oh, is that what she tells you when she goes away?” The Imp chuckled. “And you believe it!”

Lacey grounded her heel down on his foot. “Rapunzel, I was there. Your Mother tried to kill us—”

Rapunzel clapped her hands over her ears. “No! Mother wouldn’t!” Rapunzel insisted to herself. “You’re lying!”

Eugene seemingly had enough. He snorted, communicating exactly what he thought about this
whole thing before he trotted off to join the kelpie down by the river.

The Imp regarded Rapunzel with narrowed eyes. “You can either sit back down and stop throwing a tantrum,” he warned her. “Or I’ll banish you to the nearest swamp.”

Rapunzel’s anger drained out of her at this threat. With a sullen pout, she sat back down with her arms crossed, actively ignoring all of them. The Imp shook his head. “Teenagers,” he grumbled. “They never change.”

Lacey was inclined to agree with him but she made a point to never agree with him.

The Imp finished combing out tangles, far too quickly to not be magically assisted. He began to weave the hair together and the movements seemed to be relaxing Rapunzel despite herself. Around them, the forest creaked and moaned. The fire crackled and popped at their feet, and the rush of the river gurgled and slurped in the distance.

The girl’s eyes grew heavy and Rapunzel soon slipped off into sleep. “Wow, she’s really out,” Lacey remarked, impressed. “I wish I could fall asleep like that.”

“Careful what you wish for,” The Imp trilled as he waved his fingers at her with a grin. “Sleeping spell.”

Lacey couldn’t help but grin. “Think you can keep her asleep the rest of the time?”

“If only,” he said, though judging by the way his eyes flicked over Lacey, it was not Rapunzel he was talking about. “By the by, you do still have the diadem...don’t you?”

Lacey hadn’t even thought about it. Cursing under her breath, she scrambled to her pack laying almost forgotten at the far side of the log. Her heart started an uncomfortably quick race as she pawed through the various pieces of travel gear. When her hand finally found cool metal and precious stones, the tension washed out of her all at once.

“Good,” The Imp said as she brandished it at him. “I have reason to believe Gothel wanted it for far more than a trinket.”

“What does Gothel need with a diadem anyway?” Lacey said as she settled back down by the fire. “Especially this one? Seems a lot to risk going back to the scene of the crime for some jewels.”

“There are some that would consider crown jewels worth the risk but I wouldn’t expect it of Gothel. If I had to warrant a guess, it would be something to do with the spell on the child. Perhaps something to boost the spell or anchor it?”


The Imp tapped his chin. “Blood Bond is not an inaccurate way to explain Gothel’s spell. While blood magic binds her to Rapunzel, such magic can still be broken by certain factors. Now, if Gothel was heedless enough to dare and use a piece of the girl’s hair to strengthen their connection….yes. That would make sense.” His gaze was far off, it was as if she wasn’t even there. “A thread to tie them together, to strengthen the spell...a child is easily managed but a teenager is a different story.”

Utterly at a loss, Lacey prodded him. “Care to share with the class? What’s all this blood magic anyway?”
He rolled his eyes. “Blood magic,” he explained in a put-out voice, “originated from ancient rites. In the earliest records, when two souls entered into a pact, they would cut their palms and clasp hands.”

“We have something like that. It’s more a spit and shake kind of thing—”

The Imp snorted. “Typical. As if salvia is the same thing as blood. Blood is the carrier of life. Mixing blood was to link one’s fate with the other. Come what may. Gothel used her own blood in the spells to mask the girl inside that tower. It explains why you two found the tower when no one else could in eighteen years.”

“By sheer dumb luck?”

He twisted a large section of Rapunzel’s hair up into the air, where it hung as invisible hands held it in place so he could move to another section. “Eugene’s Enchantment was a cross-contamination of Gothel’s magic. Animal instincts are powerful things. What you call sheer dumb luck was actually the magic calling out to it’s like.’

‘But blood magic must be done with two willing participants. An infant cannot give consent...but if the girl’s hair was indeed used in the spell, it would tie them together. Layered on to a blood spell….yes, it is extremely likely that the girl could indeed die if the hair was severed….”

He crooked a finger and the diadem came shooting out of the bag. Lacey had to duck to avoid being struck as The Imp caught it in mid-air. “Now, interweaving jewels...it would be risky but it might provide a safety. Stones strengthen. Especially those with ties to the parties already in the spell. But why bother with the risk...unless?”

The Imp considered the diadem. The emeralds reflected the firelight back into his golden gaze. Between the glow and the breeze, the effect was oddly soothing. Lacey hid a yawn. “Unless what?” Lacey prompted him.

“Unless it is not the girl who would perish if the tie was severed….”

Another yawn followed the first. Lacey shook her head, trying to shake the exhaustion creeping over her. She had not slept the night before, and it had been a long day…

Lacey’s eyes were growing heavy and something warm and soothing was slipping over her. Lacey couldn’t remember quite what they had been saying. “I…..” she tried but another yawn stole her words.

The Imp waved his hand, and what Lacey had assumed was the breeze brushed over her once more, this time bringing the unmistakable sensation of magic. Lacey blinked, trying to fight back on the spell but there was no use. The Imp’s face was illuminated in the firelight, pensive and somber as the sleeping sleep claimed her.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there you have it folks! What more could you hope for than Rumple braiding Rapunzel’s hair by the fireside? Well, besides more information on Rapunzel’s hair itself that is?
Thanks for the warm welcome back!

When Lacey awoke, it was not to a sunny sky, the smell of bacon, or a handsome stranger. No, she woke up to a terrible taste in her mouth, rain pelting her face, and the smell of wet horse. Her dream disapparated as the cold truths of reality sunk in and her last memory of wakefulness flickered to the front of her mind.

The Imp.

Sleeping Spell.

Bastard.

Lacey made a deep noise of utter disgust and promptly rolled over to bury her face into the warmth beside her. If she just pretended the world did not exist, perhaps it would go on without her and she could get a few more minutes of sleep.

“She lives.”

Or not.

Lacey cracked open one bleary eye. She had her face pressed against someone’s legs A pair of legs attached to a very familiar, frustrating man. Gold took in her dirt-covered clothes, sleep crusted eyes and mussed hair but wisely did nothing but nod at her. “You must be hungry,” he said as if he didn’t know full well it had been hours since she had last eaten. “Care for some trout?”

Gold sat on the log Lacey had curled up beside last night, and despite being as damp as the rest of them, he looked no more the worse for wear. The fire was still flickering despite the steady, but fine rainfall.

Across the small circle, Rapunzel was hunched over the fire. The Imp had not cut off her hair but had intricately woven a complicated design, multiple braids were twisted into a larger braid that spanned the breadth of Rapunzel’s shoulders. The teen had fastened it into a hood of sorts; the top glistened as the rain fell, but her face was dry besides tear tracks.

Eugene was back to his human form, head bare to the elements as he tended to the fire. Judging by the darker shade of fabric from his thighs downwards, Eugene had been responsible for catching breakfast. Both teens looked wretched and did not appear to be speaking.

Gold leaned down. “They had a disagreement down by the river, this morning,” he said in a low voice. “Something about whether or not her Mother is or is not a witch.”

Lacey tilted her head up to ask him what kind of disagreement but found they were in close proximity, too close. If Lacey tilted her head up much more their noses would be mere inches apart. She moved to put a more acceptable distance between them, even at the loss of the shared
body heat. She did need to ask about what had happened. No doubt Rapunzel had gone after Eugene this morning, only to find sunrise may have changed his form, but not his feelings toward Gothel.

“We told Rapunzel that her precious mother was a witch last night,” Lacey said as she rubbed at the grime coating the right side of her face. “She didn’t take it well.”

“Shocking,” Gold drawled as he flipped his fish over in the fire. His breakfast and the smell wafted over to her, eliciting a growl from her stomach.

Wiser than she would have given him credit for, Gold stopped his teasing and tilted his head to his side where a stick and another dead fish lay as if waiting for her. The strong odor was hardly appetizing, but her stomach reminded her beggars could not be choosers. She took them from the log to move them to her lap.

“When did you get back?” Lacey asked Gold as she plucked some leaves out of her hair. “You were gone a long time.” Gold raised a brow at her and Lacey flushed. “Not that I care,” she hurried to add.

“I simply took my time,” he replied quietly. “Best not to make too much noise in the woods.”

Lacey grappled with how best to spear a fish without being sick. Its beady little eyes reflected her own white face back up at her as its mouth gaped open in horror at its own predicament.

“If I may?” Gold asked, noticing her trepidation. He leaned down and his hand brushed her arm, and if she wasn’t so annoyed at him, she would have accepted help gladly. As it was-

“I can do it,” Lacey growled. She wrested the fish away from him, and it nearly flew into the fire. At his damnable raised eyebrow, she added, “It’s just slippery is all.”

The rain made the fish even slicker and Lacey nearly stabbed her own leg as she attempted to spear it. She said a quick mental thanks for Eugene’s skills at a fisherman; she would have drowned before she had managed to so much as touch a fish.

Across the fire, Eugene let out a yawn and rubbed at his eyes. Lacey frowned as she took in the circles under his eyes. “Did you get any sleep last night?” she asked him.

Eugene’s breakfast lay forgotten beside him. “A bit,” Eugene said with another look at Gold. “It was...weird sleeping standing up.”

Gold nodded. “You’ll grow accustomed to it. Though over time, as the Enchantment takes hold, you’ll sleep less and less….until you don’t sleep at all.”

Eugene paled. “At all?”

Gold shook his head. “It will be years before that, but yes. You see, Enchanted live in a dual state. There is a constant change with the rise and fall of the moons and yet at the same time, there is a stasis. The body ceases to age, time stops for the Enchanted.”

Eugene stared at the fire, emotions flickering over his face. “I’ve heard stories...about what happens to Enchanted folk.”

“And what is that?” Gold prompted.

“That Enchanted are monsters,” Eugene said bitterly. “No better than mindless beasts.”
Lacey’s brow furrowed. “I knew an Enchanted cricket. He wasn’t mindless or a beast.”

This did not reassure Eugene. “Knew?” he said pointedly. “What did he get stepped on or something?”

“I was tempted,” Lacey admitted, remembering Jiminy’s condescending tone, “but no. His Enchantment was lifted.”

Eugene perked up. “It can be lifted?”

Gold shot her a look. “Each case differs,” he said. “I am not familiar with the cricket’s case but yours is a more...unique Enchantment.”

Rapunzel’s head swiveled back and forth as she listened in rapt attention. When Eugene caught her eye, she hastily returned her attention back to the food in her lap.

“So, the stories.... they aren’t true? About Enchanted being mindless animals, turning on their families and friends?”

Gold surveyed him thoughtfully. “It is true that many Enchanted struggle with their transitions,” Gold’s eyes flickered between Rapunzel and Eugene. “Most are driven out of their homes and communities because it is believed that an Enchanted soul is one who has angered the fates. People fear what they do not know. You, Eugene, are in a unique position to understand the realities of the Enchantment. Remember who you are; hold fast to that and you will not falter or forget.”

Eugene did not speak for a long pause but finally managed to nod. “Thank you, Ambassador Gold,” he mumbled around the lump in his throat. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I wouldn’t, however, go about telling people,” Gold advised him. “Most Enchanted keep to themselves or rely on people they trust. I would advise you do the same.” Gold turned to where Rapunzel sat, almost forgotten. “Now, do you have any questions?”

”Um. One,” Rapunzel said, careful not to so much as glance at Eugene. “What’s an ambassador?”

It was not the question anyone had expected. Gold cleared his throat. “Eugene?”

Already lost in his own thoughts, the boy’s head jerked up to find everyone was looking at him again. “Sir?”

“Would you care to explain to Rapunzel what an ambassador is?”

Eugene did not seem to want to so much as look at her but out of respect for Gold, he tried. “It’s uh...a kind of noble, isn’t it, Belle?”

“An ambassador is kind of a lackey,” Lacey replied as scooted up to sit on the fallen log beside Gold to thrust her breakfast into the fire.

Gold knocked his stick against Lacey’s arm, and she had to yank her stick upwards to avoid her fish plopping into the fire. It could have been an accident, but judging by the gleam in his eyes, he had done it on purpose. So, Lacey stepped on his foot.

“A lackey?” Rapunzel repeated as Gold and Lacey sparred silently. The girl was clearly intelligent, but her tower had not provided her with much in the way of an education. The teen tilted her head to scrutinize Gold. “You don’t look like a lackey,” she told him.
“It is because I am not one,” he said firmly. “An ambassador is a kingdom’s representative—”

“Someone who acts and speaks for someone else,” Lacey clarified before Rapunzel could ask what that word meant.

Gold continued on, “who is responsible for maintaining peace and trade arrangements between the lands so their respective monarchs can rule their individual kingdom.”

Rapunzel perked up a bit. “There are other kingdoms?”

“Course there are other kingdoms,” Eugene snorted and Lacey flicked a pebble at him. “Hey!” he said as he ducked it, oblivious in only the way teenage boys could be about how pompous they sounded when they thought they actually knew something.

Rapunzel deposited her fish bones into the fire as she worked out what she wanted to say. Lacey drew her own fish out of the fire just enough to see one side had been charred black already while the other side was still wet and slimy, definitely uncooked. “How many kingdoms are there?” Rapunzel asked after a moment’s pause.

“There are nine kingdoms in Fae,” Gold answered as he began to eat. “We are currently in the Second Kingdom, though the Infinite Forest stretches into the First Kingdom as well.”

Rapunzel pondered this. “Mother said there were no kingdoms left...”

“No disrespect to your mother,” Gold said, as politely as if he was asking someone to move off to the side, “but all the other Kingdoms are very much still there. As it is, we are currently traveling to the most influential city of the Second Kingdom—”


“The best city in the world,” Eugene added, thawing slightly as the conversation turned to his favorite topic. Lacey pulled her own fish from the fire as if to examine it. “It’s not done yet,” Eugene said to her as she moved to pull the scales away. “Give it here.”

Eugene’s own breakfast still lay forgotten at his side, untouched even though he had been the first one up. “You haven’t even eaten yet,” Lacey protested but he waved her concern away, assuring her he wasn’t hungry. Possibly because of the Enchantment but Lacey suspected something more common than that. Insomnia and lack of appetite often went hand in hand with broken hearts.

Rapunzel, inquisitive as always, was not quite done with the topic of ambassadors and kingdoms. “Are you Corona’s ambassador?”

“I am the Ambassador for the farthest kingdom to the north,” Gold responded. “Also known as the Ninth Kingdom.”

“It’s the one ruled by a sociopath,” Lacey mumbled under her breath.

Either Gold did not hear her or chose to ignore her because he continued on without comment. “Did your Mother ever tell you anything about the Ninth Kingdom?”

The bright gleam in Rapunzel’s eyes died away as shame flooded her face. “I...I don’t think so,” she answered. Her lip quivered. “Sorry,” she managed, but it was not clear who she was apologizing to.

“Not many know much about it,” Gold told her. “Would you like to know one of its secrets?”
Rapunzel nodded shyly. “Yes,” she replied. “Very much so. I’d like to tell Mother...”

Lacey had to resist rolling her eyes but nothing showed on Gold’s face. “What do you think your Mother would do with the information?” he asked her in all seriousness.

“Well, nothing,” Rapunzel told him. “It’s just...she knows everything...it would be nice to tell her something new...for once.”

“How about this?” Gold suggested. “I will tell you if you teach me something I do not know in return.”

Rapunzel gave a shocked little laugh, clapping a hand to her mouth as it escaped. “Sorry,” she repeated. “It’s just...what could I possibly know that you don’t? Mother always says-”

“Your mother sounds like a fascinating person,” Gold interrupted smoothly. “What if you tell me something about her in return?”

“About- About Mother?”

“Do we have a deal?”

Lacey’s head snapped around as something cold slipped down her spine. “What did you just say?” she asked, but Gold held up a hand, intent on Rapunzel. The young woman had her hands clutched tight in her lap, looking as if she could, she would disappear entirely.

“Rapunzel?” Gold said quietly. Beside her, Eugene did not move, all three of them intent on what was happening with the lost princess.

“Okay,” she finally whispered, looking over her shoulder as if someone was standing in the shadows behind them. “Mother...Mother hates parsnips.” The girl clamped both of her hands to her mouth and giggled nervously.

Gold nodded as if that was incredibly insightful information. He tore another piece of fish off and handed it over to Lacey. “Eat,” he said quietly as he nodded his head towards where Eugene was checking her fish.

“I’m fine,” Lacey lied. Her stomach growled it’s protest and Gold, damn him, smiled.

“Just take it, Belle,” he said and though she had grown used to her alias, it still took her a moment to comprehend that he was being...kind. She picked the fish from his fingers, still warm, sparking sensation in her own nearly numb and clumsy hands.

The rain began to ease, and Eugene leaned around to hand Lacey her fish back, warning her it was still hot. Despite one side burned black, the other side was perfectly roasted. Lacey had to double check to see how the others had eaten theirs. Her only experience with eating fish was at restaurants with the words sole, fillet, and deboned.

“To explain my home, it is best to start at the beginning.” Gold settled into his role as an educator with a surprising ease for the usual stern and surly man. At the promise of actually learning more about the clouded in secrecy Ninth Kingdom, Lacey leaned forward, fish forgotten.

“Magic is a force in this world, as prevalent in it as the air we breathe,” Gold said. He inhaled deeply in illustration. Rapunzel hurried to copy him. “There are only a select few that are able to harness this magic” He glanced out of the corner of his eye and caught Lacey hanging on his every word. Lacey hurried to try and appear bored; Gold was not fooled. “The Ninth Kingdom is one of
the few lands ruled by one who is innately magical. This presents its own complications in working with other kingdoms.”

“Lesak’s immortal,” Eugene supplied with a shiver. “He sees all, knows all and if someone dares speak his name thrice, they’ll be turned into a slug.”

Gold snorted. “Some of that is correct,” he said though true to form, he did not clarify which. “Possessing such a power provides the Ninth Kingdom with a healthy dose of respect. My role as an ambassador is to ensure that the Ninth Kingdom does not fade into stories of myth and fantasy.”

“Is it true that there is no other living soul in all of the Ninth Kingdom? Besides Lesak?” Eugene asked bravely.

Gold surveyed him for a moment before he nodded.

“What happened to everyone?” Rapunzel asked Eugene before she could remember they were not speaking.

Gold answered for him. “A war.”

“War,” Rapunzel repeated and judging by her tone, she knew that word. “Mother said a great war is why there are no other kingdoms left...she said there are brigands and mercenaries and trolls—”

Gold did not let her finish. “Your mother has seen many terrible things,” Gold said. “However, she lied to you. About a great many things. It would serve you well to start questioning what you believe to be true versus what is true.”

An unease rippled through the quartet. It had stopped raining now, and the kelpie knickered nearby, growing restless as the morning began to drag on. Through tight lips, Rapunzel said, “If Mother did Enchant Eugene, I’m sure she didn’t mean it—”

Eugene shot upwards as if the log had developed a spring. Without a word, he strode towards the lone kelpie still tied up down by the lake and out of sight. Lacey moved to follow him, but Gold put his hand on her shoulder to still her. “I’ll go after the boy. You can handle that,” he said with a nod towards where Rapunzel had started to cry.

Lacey wasn’t entirely certain she had the better bargain but she moved to Eugene’s abandoned spot and took Rapunzel into her arms. The girl stiffened at first, unused to physical affection, but she quickly melted into Lacey, arms wrapping so tight that Lacey was surprised she could still breath. “He won’t...he won’t talk to me!” Rapunzel sobbed into Lacey’s shoulder. “He says- he says Mother is evil and cruel and I tried to tell him that’s not true but—”

While Lacey rather agreed with Eugene in all of this, she knew exactly what it was like to be ripped from everything one knew and land in a world where everything was different and strange. It took some adjusting. Lacey murmured what she hoped were soothing words as Rapunzel told her all about her early morning fight with Eugene.

Smoke drifted over, burning Lacey’s eyes. She tried to readjust but Rapunzel was half in her lap. Lacey nudged her feet closer to the fire to try and shift the logs, but in doing so, a spark flew out and landed on Rapunzel’s dress. Lacey carefully kicked at it to extinguish it, only to encounter something solid beneath the dress that had not been there before. “Wait- when did you get shoes?”

The girl drew backward in guilt. “Umm.”

They were boots, the leather soft and worn and just the right size for the girl’s delicate feet.
“Rapunzel,” Lacey said warningly.

“They were here when I woke up,” the girl admitted. “Mother said never to accept things from strangers but my feet were so cold and they were so beautiful—”

“They could have been cursed!” Lacey scolded.

“You’re one to talk,” Gold said as he returned from the river. He carried a bucket, teeming with river water and set about dousing the campfire. “No need to worry. They are a gift from the Ninth Kingdom. Now, we should get moving if we are to still make Hill House by nightfall.”

“Come on, then.” Lacey shifted to stand but only Rapunzel clasped her tighter.

“Belle, I...I don’t think I want to go to Corona after all. I should probably just go home.”

“Because of Eugene?” Lacey guessed.

Rapunzel flushed. “He said...I don’t know what I’m talking about. Which is true, Mother says so all the time but...”

“But Eugene isn’t your Mother,” Lacey said. “He’s your friend.”

Rapunzel’s lip wobbled. “He’s so mad at me,” she managed as more tears eked out of her eyes. “And if Mother really did do that to him—” her words grew incoherent.

“Talk to him,” Lacey counseled. “Don’t argue with each other...just listen. You’re both going through...a lot right now and it’s easy to get lost in your own problems but...sometimes you have to put that aside and be there for other people. Friends only want what’s best for each other.”

“We’re...friends?” Rapunzel said as she lifted her tear-stained face up to Lacey.

Lacey nodded. “Yea, we’re friends.”

“I’ve never had friends,” Rapunzel murmured to herself. She smiled shakily and finally nodded. “Okay,” she said quietly. She was still afraid, but she tilted her face upwards and took a deep breath as if drawing bravery from the world around her. “Okay,” she repeated. “Let’s go.”

To Lacey, at that moment, the young lost girl appeared every bit a princess.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully you enjoyed learning a little bit more; again, all too aware that this is an exposition-heavy arc but it’s for a reason, I promise.

Next week, we learn even more about the ways of magic as we return to Hill House.

As always, thanks for reading!
Their journey back to Hill House was quiet. Rapunzel had been adamant to walk in her new shoes, and once Lacey was satisfied the miraculous appearing boots would not blister her feet, Lacey bullied Eugene into riding the kelpie.

Within minutes, the boy’s head had nodded forward and he was asleep. Gold stilled the kelpie long enough to loop his own belt around the reins and secure Eugene from toppling off before he encouraged the creature to begin its trot again. They had returned to the path, where it was well worn and clear of most obstacles. Despite their earlier argument, Rapunzel had taken Lacey’s words to heart. She stayed by Eugene’s side as they walked as she continued to sneak food to the besotted kelpie.

“Those things eat people,” Lacey said as the terror beast huffed its breath over a delighted Rapunzel’s upturned face. “One of them nearly killed me.”

“Domestication does wonder for their temperaments,” Gold said blandly from beside her. They had fallen in a pattern of walking together, and though she was still cross with him, Rapunzel’s pleasure at her newfound shoes had melted Lacey’s frigidness enough to tolerate Gold for the remainder of their journey.

Dried out, the autumn temperatures were pleasant for a stroll through the woods, and Lacey could almost admit she was enjoying herself. “We should arrive at Hill House shortly,” Gold said. “If Gothel doesn’t find us first,” he added as an afterthought.

“Why do you have to be like that?” Lacey grumbled.

“You are not naive, Belle.” It was almost a compliment. “I meant what I said; our possession of Gothel’s pet does not bode well for us.”

“First, we are not in ‘possession’ of anyone,” Lacey corrected. “Second, Rapunzel is a victim, not some kind of pet.”

“You do not know the ways of this kingdom or its inhabitants,” he insisted. “All we need to know is that Gothel cared for the child.”

“Out of the kindness of her heart?”

“Doubtful,” he agreed. “Perhaps because having a captive princess was a sign of power or perhaps a different reason entirely. We may never know.”

Motive didn’t matter; it was still kidnapping.

Up ahead, Rapunzel clapped in delight. The noise startled Eugene awake from his afternoon nap. “We’re here!” Rapunzel cried back to them as Eugene hurried to untie himself from the undignified
“Belle, come and see!”

“It’s a just some house on a hill, kid,” Lacey grumbled but she did as she was asked.

In the late afternoon sunlight, Hill House glowed invitingly. They had only been gone a day or so but it felt as if they were returning from a much longer journey. For the first time, Lacey was actually glad to see the place.

When they arrived at the top of the hill, a familiar figure emerged from the barn to meet them: Jack Sprat, lean and tall in the afternoon light.

With a nod of greeting, the innkeeper took the reins from Eugene and stilled the straining kelpie with a soft word. “Didn’t think to see you again,” he said in lieu of a traditional greeting. "Two of those beasts of yours wandered back here a day ago riderless.” He looked from face to face as if searching for the reason behind this mystery. “We took you as dead.”

Rapunzel hung back behind the group, too enthralled with the house and the barn to take much notice of the strange man, but his eyes didn’t miss her. Sprat took in the thick, dark braid that dangled to her feet though he didn’t comment on it.

Ignoring the unspoken question about what had happened to them in the Infinite Forest, Gold simply knocked the dust from his boots. For a man who had been in the wilderness without shelter for two days, he looked barely mused.

Now, Lacey, on the other hand…. her hair was a singular twist of knots and dirt, face shiny from sweat and clothes ripped and torn from sleeping in the dirt. She was only mildly relieved to see Eugene looked about as good as she did, though Rapunzel had an effortless glow that teenagers had no business having.

Lacey’s legs felt like noodles after the journey. All she could think of was the well-worn mattresses in the house and perhaps a bath if there was any hot water available. Rapunzel was not fatigued at all. She moved over to the house, forgetting her shyness to peer into a window by cupping her hands around her eyes to better see.

“You two do have a tenancy to pick up strays,” Sprat remarked. He craned his neck to get a better look just as there was shriek from inside the house and a clatter of dishes breaking. Rapunzel jumped back from the window and retreated back to the party. “Now, who would you be?” Jack asked of Rapunzel as she returned to the group.

“No one of concern,” Gold answered for her. “Fitzherbert, see to the kelpie and make sure the others have been well tended in our absence.”

Quick as always to follow Gold’s snapped orders, Eugene moved towards but Sprat caught him by the shoulder. There was a genuine warmth to the innkeeper as he turned Eugene back towards the house. “I’ll handle this. You go on in and help Minerva clean up whatever that racket was, and get something to drink,” the innkeeper instructed him. “Looks like you could all use something strong.”

Eugene wavered, clearly wanting nothing more than to do just that but Gold stood less than ten feet away. “But I-”

“Go on, son,” Sprat encouraged. “Show this young lady here the house. I’m sure Minerva can scare up something sweet for you both.”

At the word sweet, Rapunzel’s face lit up. She grabbed Eugene’s arm. “Let’s!” she cajoled and at
the promise of sweets, Eugene buckled. He ducked his head as they both hurried right past Gold and disappeared into the house.

For his part, Gold just stared Jack Sprat down for a moment before he too turned towards the house. “We’ll be needing four rooms,” he said before he caught Lacey’s eye. Without prompting, he added, “and a bath to be brought up to the ladies.”

“Don’t have four rooms.”

The world went strangely quiet as Gold twisted back around to level Sprat with a perfectly calm, perfectly rational and perfectly dangerous gaze. “Excuse me?”

Sprat shrugged. “Two other visitors this evening have the bedrooms, and the rains leaked clear through the roof on the back part of the house. Haven’t gotten a chance to fix it yet so ‘fraid nobody can sleep in there for now.” He tapped his chin. “The bridal chambers are available, but they wouldn’t fit four. I suppose I could clean out the butler’s hole. There’s a bed in there.”

Lacey’s cheeks twitching dangerously as she tried not to enjoy Gold’s obvious annoyance. He wasn’t used to not getting his way but there was little he could do but grin and bear it. “Well, well, Gold,” she murmured. “Guess we’ll have to share.”

Gold ignored her as he took in the sun’s slow slide down to meet the horizon.

Lacey abandoned her teasing. “Look, it’s what? A half a day to Corona?” If they stayed for dinner, they could leave by twilight and make it to the Sun Court by sunrise. “We leave now and maybe Eugene could slip in...unnoticed,” she said under her voice as Jack was shamelessly listening from where he stood.

Gold shook his head. “We’ll take what’s available,” he said and Jack nodded.

“Really?” Lacey echoed but as usual, no one paid her any attention.

“Go on in then,” the innkeeper advised. “Tell Minerva to make them up and I’ll be in shortly to settle your accounts.”

Sprat led the beast into the barn to a chorus of eerie neighs and whickering. Despite Lacey’s growing familiarity with the kelpies, a chill still went down her spine at the unworldly noise and the memories it conjured of the events that had brought her here.

Regina, a voice at the back of her head whispered, this is all Regina’s fault.

She and Gold had not gotten to speak much about Gothel’s attack...besides the obvious about Eugene being enchanted into a horse. Rapunzel’s addition to the group had changed their focus onto dealing with two traumatized teenagers, but the threat of the witch had lingered over them, discouraging further discussion. Here, in the safety of the countryside, Lacey let herself relax enough to speak honestly.

“Gold, do you know a Regina?”

Gold smirked and the sun caught the silver in his hair. “I’ve known a fair few,” he replied in his trademark droll humor.

Lacey curled her upper lip. “Ha, ha, you’re hilarious,” she grumbled. The barn grew quiet besides Sprat’s movements as he tended to the kelpies. “She’s a witch. Gothel said something about sisters, including one named Regina.”
Gold cocked his head at her. “And why would you want to know?” he inquired. There was nothing in his tone that warned her not to ask, but it was also clear he wouldn’t answer her honestly either.

Cutting her losses, Lacey shrugged it off. “Nothing,” Lacey lied. “Like I said, Gothel said something about her sisters. Seeing as how I killed two witches now and stolen a princess out from another, I figure it’s only a matter of time until I piss off the next one.”

Gold’s following silence was not encouraging. She was exhausted, filthy, emotionally drained and tomorrow she was delivering a lost princess back to her parents in exchange for some magical, mystical flower and then in all likelihood, she was going straight back to the Dark Castle where The Imp would no doubt enjoy annoying her for the remainder of her year in Fae.

Gold, however, surprised her. “Fae is all about balance,” he said, still facing the horizon. “With magic, there is a certain status quo that must be maintained or there is a risk of a power shift.”

It was a familiar lesson: All magic comes with a price. Still, Lacey had been here for a few months and had encountered magic nearly every step of the way. Gold must have caught the thought drifting over her face for he shook his head. “Enchanted creatures such as the boy or the mermaid are not wielders of magic, but objects through which magic works itself through. Or like the girl in which it manifests itself to the naked eye.”

“What about a fairy?” Lacey asked, knowing it to be a sore subject. The Blue Fairy had been essential in the happiness of Ariel and Pinocchio, but The Imp had been more than clear on his feelings for her. The only other fairy Lacey had met...had been blown to smithereens shortly after their meeting. By The Imp.

“Faeries,” Gold harrumphed. “Most of their...magic,” Lacey had to bite back a smile at his disapparating tone which signaled the ambassador held the creatures in the same regard as his employer,” comes from pixie dust, which despite the name is mined by dwarves deep in the mountains of the Fourth Kingdom.”

The Gate had been buried in a mountain range, and in her travels so far, no one had once mentioned mountains in their lands. “Mountains?” Lacey asked as nonchalantly as she dared, hoping he’d reveal more.

Gold favored with a look that told her what he thought of her innocent act. “Yes, tall rocky things,” he said with a sweeping wave of his arms to indicate the general shape.

Lacey rolled her eyes. “Yes, thank you, I know what mountains are,” Lacey said as she pulled his arms down. It was a casual touch, she hadn’t even anticipated doing it but the mood shifted slightly. A slight air of anticipation hung in the air between them. Returning to the safety of the topic at hand, Lacey tried to make sense of her own experience with faeries in Fae thus far. “So, you were saying faeries are magical...”

Gold lifted a brow at her, clearly regretting his decision to engage. Lacey took another gamble. “Or you know...if you’re tired...we could always go inside and see what Rapunzel and Eugene are up to?” Lacey said with a grin. “I’m sure your old friend Minerva will be thrilled to see you again.”

At the mention of the overly nervous Mrs. Sprat, Gold shook his head and started to stroll forward away from the house toward a small orchard nearby. Smothering the full blown grin on her face, Lacey hurried after him past the pigsties.

He scooped down to pick up some pebbles at his feet. “Fairy’s power is derivative of magic in material form,” he said. He held his hand out towards her and Lacey moved to cup her own hand
beneath his. Slowly, he let the pebbles dribble out of his fingers and they clinked together in her palm. “Whoever has the most dust, has the most power.”

Lacey closed her fist around the pebbles. “The faeries I’ve seen have had wands. How does that work with the dust?”

“Imagine this,” Gold said. He gestured towards a tree on the top of a nearby hill. “If I picked a stick up from the ground and threw it at that tree, what would happen?”

Lacey shook her head. “It wouldn’t even go that far,” she said with a shrug. “And if it did hit it, it’d just bounce off.”

“Exactly. Now, what if I had a bow and arrow?”

Unbidden, Nottingham’s face sprang out from the recesses of her mind. Lacey’s fingers curled instinctively at her side; the pebbles fell from her hand to scatter upon the ground.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re an open book?” Gold asked her in exasperation. “Look, what happened back in there in the First Kingdom...in the forest? You did what you had to do.”

They had never really talked about it. Gold had been instrumental in getting the party back to safely to the castle, but Lacey had been so furious with him at the time, she had never even bothered to properly thank him before he had vanished from the castle. Not that it mattered, a voice in her head reminded her. He was The Imp’s lackey and did whatever that sociopathic wizard told him without question. Gold was not to be trusted.

Lacey banished Nottingham’s death back to the shadows of her mind. He had deserved what he had gotten, she reminded herself. It had been them or him. It was an easy choice.

The same voice reminded her if it had not been an enchanted bow, it would have been Ella’s death on her conscience. She ignored that too, refocusing on the topic at hand. “So, the wands amplify the magic. So, where do wands come from then?”

“According to legend, fairies originated in a magically inherent wood in the mountains where pixie dust is mined. The roots of these trees over the centuries absorbed enough magic to be innately magic itself. At some point, one of the little insects discovered the ability to cast magic through pairing the wood with the ground stone. After that, there’s been no living with them.’

“So, there’s a just...a infinite amount of pixie dust in the ground? Do they just dig it up or-?”

“The fairies hoodwinked the dwarves to be their workforce in exchange for protection,” Gold explained. “Which gave the dwarves control of the mountains for good.”

At the idea of dwarves and faeries working together, Lacey’s mind provided her an unbidden image of a dwarf wearing a get up similar to the ones the fairies wore, and Lacey burst out laughing. “So...there could be...” she sniggered and had to clap a hand to her mouth,” dwarf godmothers?”

Gold didn’t do anything so childish as roll his eyes, but his exasperation was clear. “Do try not to say things like that out loud in other people’s hearing,” he said with a shake of his head. “Dwarves are not innately magical creatures.”

He said it as a universal truth, but this was not her universe. “Wait, so fairies are innately magical like the witches?”
“As you know,” he stressed, though it was clear to both of them that she did not. “Faeries are not humans. They are magical creatures born with inherent magical ability.”

“Such as….?”

“Faeries can shrink or grow on command.”

“And fly,” Lacey added with a knowing nod.

Gold simply pointed at a crow nearby and with a perfectly straight face asked, “So, that crow is magical?”

Heat flooded her face. Frustrated and embarrassed but before she could lash out, Gold began to laugh. It was not aimed at her, more inclusive as if they had shared a joke. It was unexpected and genuine.

Lacey’s annoyance drained out of her and she smiled back, slightly guilty. “So, selkies are magical?” she guessed and was rewarded with a nod.

“Mermaids are not, however,” he clarified without her having to ask. There was a soft smile on his face. Lacey wondered if he even knew it was there. He began to rattle off creatures, and if these facts were common knowledge in Fae, he did not comment on her ignorance.

Phoenixes were magical. Ogres were not. Trolls were; however, most of them were too stupid to know this.

Dragons were; Centaurs were not and unicorns were born from magic though they had no magical ability themselves.

It was clear Gold enjoyed teaching, though he didn’t have the patience for it. Lacey simply fell silent by his side as he talked, soaking up the knowledge. Her exhaustion and sore legs faded away in the light of his enthusiasm for the subject. His passion was captivating. The sun blurred his hair into a chestnut brown and the direct light blurred the wrinkles from his face, the lean man beside her became younger and carefree as they walked. Lacey moved closer and closer to him lest she miss a word.

They drew underneath the branches of the apple trees, and Gold reached up to snap one free. The fruit dropped into his palm and before Lacey could imitate him and pick one of her own, he held it out to her.

During their stroll, he had somehow slipped past her walls, and something reckless in her wanted to lean forward towards him, just to see what he would do. Caught off guard, Lacey almost forgot to take the offered apple.

"It's not poisoned," Gold teased. He offered it to her again with a pointed nod and Lacey hurried to take it. Her fingers brushed across his but he slid his hand away before she could let her touch linger. He then continued walking before she could so much as thank him.

Lacey hung back, trying to understand why she felt equally relieved and frustrated. She took a large bite of her apple and the accompanying crunch echoed in the air. Gold did not look back but gestured towards a tree that overlooked the valley below. They sat down beneath it to rest their legs and enjoy their snack. The sun was still high enough in the sky to not be dinner yet, but a smell of baking bread wafted up to them where they were.

"Go ahead," Gold said as he settled back against the tree.
"Go ahead and what?"

"You want to understand more about magic," he said, pointing out the obvious. "What do you want to know?"

Lacey was still not certain if Gold knew the whole truth of her origins, so she was careful not to let on too much. "So, unicorns are like the rocks and the trees," Lacey said. "They can’t...do magic like a dragon can when it summons fire....or when a fairy changes size...So, does that mean someone could use a unicorn to do magic like they use the wand and the dust?"

“A unicorn’s power...or magical ability is immortality,” he said and his voice was soft. “Thus, until more recent times, no one truly knew if it was possible.”

“And they do now?”

A shadow flickered over his face and in an instant, Gold was miles away though he still sat right beside her. “It’s a terrible thing to slaughter a unicorn,” he said softly. “But yes, it is known now to be possible.”

Not having a response for this unexpected gravity, Lacey changed the conversation back to the thing she really wanted to know. “So, how do witches fit into all this?”

He chuckled and it brought him back to her. “You don’t give up easily, do you?” he asked with a sidelong glance.

Lacey only grinned at him in response and took another bite out of her apple. The juice trickled down her jaw and she wiped it away with her sleeve as Gold settled back. “Fae is about balance,” he repeated. “There are Nine Kingdoms. Do you know why?”

Resisting the urge to point out she obviously didn’t, Lacey settled for just shaking her head.

“In Fae, there are nine specific centers of magic. In each of these lands, a mortal is born with the ability to harness this magic,” he explained. "Each born with a natural tie to the power of their native land, they are born as much a child of magic as the parents who bore them.”

Lacey twisted her face in thought. "So...the magic is born as a person?"

Gold wavered. “It’s more complex than that. They are born who they are but magic has a way of...changing a person. Magic has a way of extending things beyond nature’s laws. Mortals are not meant to live forever, and it takes a toll. As I warned Eugene, magic has an air of statis about it. It appears to be immortality...but it simply an illusion. Most magic wielders cling to life and power, too afraid of what will happen on the other side. Their fear and green have manifested in terrible deeds to be sure, and it is why magic always comes with a price."

“So I’ve heard,” Lacey mumbled.

“Even the purest soul, over time, would be tainted, tempted, stretched beyond their truth.” His voice trailed away. "No one is meant to live forever.” With a look towards the horizon, he made a gesture to stand.

The subject of magic was usually taboo, but here on this hill in an orchard, Gold had opened a book to her and Lacey was determined to read as much of it as she could before it closed. She waved a hand at him to wait a moment. “Nine witches,” Lacey said to herself. “Okay, well two of them are gone….and Gothel’s here...”
He tilted his head. “Are you attempting to name the sisterhood?”

Caught, Lacey grinned. “They know me,” she pointed out. “Shouldn’t I know them?”

He regarded her with a thoughtful look as she tried to keep her face perfectly innocent. Finally, with a sigh, he conceded. “It’s hardly a secret. In no particular order,” he said before he began to count them off his fingers. “Maleficent, Elsa, Morgana, Regina, and Fiodha.”

Lacey repeated the names, fixing them in her memory. She stumbled over a fair few of them, Gold correcting her until she had them right. “Okay, so. Ursula was from the Seventh, that blind bitch was from the second—”

“First.”

Lacey shook her head. “No, I was in the Second Kingdom.”

Gold sighed. “True, You encountered her in the Second Kingdom but that is only due to the great land wars between the First and Second Kingdoms a century or so ago. The Infinite Forest once existed wholly in the lands of the First Kingdom. Gothel is the true wielder of the Second Kingdom’s magic. She has been here long before the Blind Witch was even born.”

"But-"

"Over time, men have shifted these borders for their own gains, but they miss the forest for the trees. Magic does not care for the rules of man,” Gold said with a chuckle. “If in the next century Fae is broken apart into seventy different kingdoms, there will still only be nine.”

“Okay, but that’s only eight.”

“The ninth name is one you familiar with,” he said and that was that.

Far from discouraged, a million other questions tripped off her tongue. "Are some more powerful than others? Are their magics different? Are females more inclined to magic? Why did some not look quite human?"

Lacey had lost count of her questions when Gold held up a hand. “I’ll answer three of those questions,” he said and held up three long fingers. “Just three.”

Lacey went to argue but he raised his other hand in warning. She huffed and nodded her agreement before settling back to listen.

“One,” he said lifting a finger. “Magic does tend to favor females.”

A cloud had passed over the sun, and the wind was growing cold.

"Two, like any skill, magic is learned but there is a level of innate skill involved. And to answer your last question, the magic of each land is different, as different as every wielder. There is no true constant in magic, and its effects on its wielder depend wholly on the relationship between the two.”

"So, Ursula wasn't born half octopus/half human?"

Gold shrugged. "That was before my time," he said simply. "The Seventh Kingdom has long been a dual kingdom, a land wholly reliant upon the sea. The magic would be as dual as the land itself. Perhaps she was a mermaid or a human, and over the millennia she was twisted into the creature
you knew. We may never know."

"Both Ariel and Eric treated her like some kind of god."

Gold nodded. "Few ever meet the wielders, but they know of them. Facts become stories and
stories become legends. A healthy fear of such power is a good thing," he added in a pointed aside
to her.

Lacey nodded, but one last question was on her mind. "And how does the Imp fit into all of this?"

More clouds appeared in the sky, a threat of rain in the wind. Within seconds, Gold was himself
once more, and the man who had spent the afternoon talking to her about magic was gone. "Time
to head back," he said and without another word, he headed down the hill without her.

Lacey sat there for a moment watching his retreating back and wondering what else she did not
know.

Chapter End Notes

So, a bottle chapter, as Gold and Lacey spend some time one on one. And dare I
say...is Lacey developing an interest in the prickly ambassador? (Hint: Yes.)

Also, so much new information! This chapter is a continuation of this arc's exploration
of the background of Fae, specifically how magic impacts it. It's been interesting to
return to magic after our time in the First Kingdom where magic did not play a large
part. I was particularly excited to introduce the sisterhood, all of whom we will meet in
this story.

Hope you all enjoyed! There will not be a post next week as I will be traveling the
high seas for the holiday. We'll be back in 2019! Happy Holidays Everyone.
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

Guess who 100% forgot they hadn’t posted the last couple of chapters they wrote?

A super late (in more ways than one) birthday gift for PrissyGirl.

Despite the number of people staying at Hill House, dinner was a quiet affair. The two other travelers had their meals brought up to their room; no doubt warned away by Mrs. Sprat who was still apprehensive about the Ninth Kingdom visitors. This left their party of four and the Sprats to take their meal together in the parlor.

During Gold and Lacey’s afternoon walk, Rapunzel charmed Mrs. Sprat entirely. The two sat giggling at the far end of the table all through dinner. The innkeeper’s wife had rebraided Rapunzel’s hair into a fishtail design which highlighted the blue in the black tresses. It no longer dangled at the girl’s heels but ended shortly behind her knees. It was tucked in her lap as she ate. Lacey could not wait to tease The Imp that a housewife had out braided him.

Mrs. Sprat was pushing pies and meats onto Rapunzel’s plate having noticed the hollow cheekbones and prominent collarbones under the girl’s flimsy shift. The teenager, basking in the glow of this maternal undivided attention, shoveled everything offered into her mouth. Lacey was both impressed and jealous of Rapunzel’s ability to eat everything before her, but mostly relieved Rapunzel was enjoying herself.

Eugene had taken the seat beside Rapunzel. It appeared they had made up, though Eugene was no longer hanging on Rapunzel’s every word. With the chatter at one end of the table, the rest of them were able to eat in relative silence. Lacey sat towards the end of the table across from Gold. Sprat had the head of the table, his attention fixed on his dinner plate as he ate with considerable gusto.

Despite the still early hour, the storm clouds darkened the world outside and only the firelight and candles illuminated their faces in the dim room. Throughout the meal, Eugene kept glancing out the window, jiggling his leg and spilling half his broth every time he lifted it to his mouth. Finally, Gold leaned over to him across the table. “Relax. You have an hour before sunset,” he said in a voice low enough that only Lacey could overhear.

“How do you know?” Eugene demanded.

It dawned on Lacey that living as an Enchanted creature was hard enough, but one that turned into a massive animal had its particular drawbacks. “Wait, where is he going to sleep?” Lacey hissed at Gold, but Sprat overheard it.

“Eugene insisted I set him up a makeshift space up in the barn loft,” Sprat said with a shake of his head. “Afraid it isn’t anything much, but he should be comfortable.”

Eugene nodded. “That’s where I used to sleep back at the castle,” he assured them. Eugene ate with considerable more gusto after that and even drawn into a conversation about baking. Lacey listened to the comfortable buzz around her, but her own thoughts kept straying back to what she
had learned that afternoon.

Every so often, Lacey would look across to Gold, taking in the taciturn man who worked for a madman. She kicked herself for not asking him how he had come to be the right-hand man of a wielder of magic in a realm where no one else dwelled, but she had a feeling he would not have told her anyway.

As the meal wound down, Mrs. Sprat stood to clear the table. “Belle!” Rapunzel exclaimed as she scooted her chair closer. Eugene had to scoot backward and nearly tipped his chair over. Too excited to notice, Rapunzel clasped her hands over Lacey’s forearm. “Minerva is going to show me how to make pie!”

Her infectious enthusiasm was hard to resist. “That sounds fun,” Lacey said.

Rapunzel’s eyes went wide as saucers. Lacey had already learned that this was not a good thing. “You can learn too!” Rapunzel exclaimed with a joyous clap of her hands.

“Uh,” Lacey said, casting about for an excuse. Her eyes landed on Gold. “Actually-”

Gold was too quick for her. He took one look at the situation unfolding and stood. “We leave first thing in the morning,” he said to the table. “I advise everyone to get some rest. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

From the kitchen, Mrs. Sprat called for Rapunzel, and the girl darted out of sight before anyone could drag her upstairs to bed. Eugene began to clear the table. He grabbed the pitcher of wine off the table, and with a knowing grin, poured the rest of it into Lacey’s glass, before hurrying off.

Sprat leaned over to toast her with his glass. They settled into a peaceful silence as they listened to the clatter drifting from the kitchen. “You leave tomorrow?” Sprat asked over Rapunzel’s delighted laughter from the kitchen.

Lacey nodded. “We have pressing business in Corona.”

Tomorrow, they would return to the Sun Court with both the stolen diadem and the lost princesses, and The Imp would get his flower. That is if they made it to the city without Gothel showing up. They may be out of the forest but they weren’t out of the woods.

“Shame. I haven’t seen Minnie this happy in ages.” Sprat sat for a moment, mulling something over. “You know, Minnie and I are...getting on in years. We’ve been talking about hiring a hand for the house...”

He did not need to say Eugene’s name, his message was clear. Lacey did not know how much of his story Eugene had told the man last time they had stayed up drinking, but it was clear there was an affection between the old couple and the stableboy.

From the kitchen, there was a great clatter of broken dishes and shrieks. Lacey half stood as Eugene went running by them. His face was twisted as he darted out of the house, the front door banging behind him. Sprat moved to go after him, but Lacey held up her hand.

Outside, the shadows had thickened and the sun a blur melting into the horizon. They had been so busy enjoying the relative safety of their surroundings, they had all lost track of time. “He came down with a...stomach thing during our travels,” Lacey lied with a sympathetic frown on her face. “Dinner must have...” She mimed an upset stomach by placing a hand over her mouth and billowing her cheeks. “Best leave him. He’s...kind of embarrassed about it,” she said with a
pointed look at Rapunzel who had trailed after Eugene.

The girl had a soap suds on her cheek, and a broken dish clutched in her hands. She stared out the open front door with an expression which could easily be mistaken for affectionate longing instead of worried concern.

Sprat nodded knowingly, though he seemed disappointed to lose his drinking partner for the evening. “Still...someone should check on the boy.”

Rapunzel took a step forward but there was no way in hell the girl was going outside on her own. “I’ll go,” Lacey said. She did not wait for anyone to offer to join her but marched straight out of the door. She closed it pointedly behind her, leaving the Sprats and Rapunzel staring after her. It was still light enough to see the way to the barn, and the Hill House had lanterns burning on either side of the door so she could find her way back.

Eugene has already turned by the time she arrived at the barn. He was huddled in the furthest stall; the stall door closed and locked behind him. The message was clear: no visitors.

Lacey unlocked it and pulled it open. Eugene huffed at her from the far corner. Lacey simply wiggled her fingers at him. “Opposable thumbs,” she sang before coming over to him. He butted his head into her palms and snorted. “Hey,” she said and pressed her forehead to his. “It’s going to be okay.”

It worried her he was out here by himself. Out in the wilderness, they had all slept under the stars. Now, Eugene was sleeping in a barn with the kelpies. The night was still balmy, and the shelter shielded him from the wind, but Lacey did not like the idea of him being out here and alone while they were all ensconced in beds with fires. “I’ll stay with you,” she decided with a nod up to the lofts above.

With a toss of his head, Eugene neighed a negative.

Lacey shrugged. “And how you going to stop me?” she asked. He stomped his back leg, flexing the powerful muscles with a clear message before baring his teeth at her. Lacey narrowed her eyes. “You wouldn’t.”

He snorted again, fixing her with one large brown eye to warn her that he indeed would. He tossed his head back towards the house and whinnied in concern.

“You want me to stay with Rapunzel?” He bobbed his head and Lacey had to force a smile to keep her face from falling. ”Fine,” she conceded. “But are you sure you’re okay out here?”

Eugene twisted his head back against her, and though he nearly knocked her over, the message was clear. “Okay,” she said with a sigh of her own. “Listen...Eugene...about tomorrow. I’ve been thinking...with everything Gold told us...maybe it’d be best if you stayed here? With the Sprats?”

He lifted his head but no thoughts registered on his face. For a brief, terrifying moment, it was if he was talking to an actual horse instead of Eugene.

“I mean, you like Sprat,” Lacey hurried to add, “and it’s clear he likes you. He mentioned they probably use some help around the place and...it’s not like you would need much in the way of boarding.”

Eugene swung his head away. Lacey trailed after him, careful not to fall too far behind so he could not see her or be put in the way of his rear legs. “I know what I said about...getting you back to Corona but...with the Enchantment and everything...”
Eugene’s response was an angry toss of his head and a sharp whinny.

Not perturbed by this little temper tantrum, Lacey pressed her point. “Just think about it, okay? I don’t...I don’t want anything to happen to you.” She laid what she hoped to be a reassuring hand on his shoulder only for him to shrug her off with an incredulous trumpeting noise that echoed off the walls of the barn. Down the way, the kelpies grew restless as the tension in the barn grew.

“Hey!” Lacey protested but she got to the safety of the stall door regardless. Eugene tossed his head, his tail twitching angrily as he eyed her in challenge. “Fine!” she said and held her hands up that she understood. “Point taken.”

She turned to head back up to the house, only for Eugene to come up behind her and gesture with his right foot for her to shut the stall door behind her. She shook her head and continued to back up without looking away from him. “You are not a horse,” she said and emphasized each word so he would hear it. “I haven’t forgotten that, and neither should you.”

She walked away, purposefully leaving the gate open, and did not look back. Tears blurred her eyes as she followed the lights back to the Hill House, but she brushed them lest anyone see them. Tears were no help to Eugene, and they were no help to her.

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If Lacey had hoped to go up to her room and go straight to sleep, she was sorely disappointed. Gold had taken the spare room otherwise known as the Butler Closet, leaving Belle and Rapunzel to share the Bridal Chambers.

The large feather down bed looked inviting enough but Rapunzel was currently perched at the end of it, making funny faces at herself in the mirror. Lacey stopped dead in the doorway, pinching the bridge of her nose as she counted to twenty in her head.

“Belle!” Rapunzel said without taking her eyes off her reflection. “Come look!”

“It’s a mirror.”

“A mirror,” Rapunzel repeated. “How wonderful!”

Rapunzel went cross-eyed and stuck out her tongue. When her reflection followed suit, she dissolved into delighted giggles.

Lacey rolled her eyes and retreated to the window. The room had a view of the forest and the barn. It was growing windy outside as a storm rolled in, clouds covering up the stars. Rapunzel was still utterly entranced by her reflection. She dissolved into another fit of giggles as she pulled her braid over to her face and used it to make a rather long handlebar mustache like Jack Sprat’s.

Outside, rain began to patter against the windows. Hopefully, Eugene stayed dry and warm, but Lacey was selfish enough to be relieved she hadn’t stayed out in the barn with him. It would be nice to spend the night in a proper bed after their hellish sojourn into the woods. Knowing Gold, he’d be at their door at the crack of dawn, herding them out the door, which meant it was time for bed.

Grabbing the blanket from the chest by the windows, Lacey tossed it over the mirror, cutting Rapunzel’s fun short.

“Hey!” Rapunzel protested.
Lacey flipped down the covers on the bed. “Playtime’s over,” she said pointedly. When Rapunzel wavered between the bed and the mirror, Lacey arched a brow. “It’s time for bed.”

Rapunzel mumbled something, barely coherent but the tone was clear, Lacey ducked her head to better hear her. “What was that?” she asked. “I know you weren’t arguing with me-”

“I said don’t want to leave,” Rapunzel repeated, lifting her chin to a stubborn tilt. “I like it here.”

“Too bad,” Lacey snapped. “You’re going to Corona tomorrow come hell or high water.”

Rapunzel flinched and the annoyance seeped out of Lacey. With a sigh, she raised her hand to rub at her face. None of this was easy, but with all the stress of Eugene’s Enchantment and the frustration that was Gold, Lacey had lashed out at the one person who didn’t deserve it.

Lacey sat down on the bed and patted the space beside her. Rapunzel didn’t move, eyeing the bed warily. Lacey exhaled slowly. “It’s not...I was being an asshole. I’m sorry.”

“Asshole?”

Lacey’s groan turned into a laugh. “Ask Gold to explain it to you tomorrow. What I meant...was I’m sorry I was being mean.”

The clouds lifted from Rapunzel’s face. “You weren’t!” Rapunzel assured Lacey. She gathered Lacey’s hands in her own. “I was being stupid. A silly child playing silly games. Children should listen. Mother says-”

Lacey broke her hand’s out of Rapunzel’s nervous grip and shifted to better face the girl where they sat on the bed. “You’re not a kid.” Rapunzel’s braid coiled between them, a barrier. “And you don’t have to apologize to me. I was just in a bad mood and I took it out on you.”

Rapunzel’s face creased, uncertain. Lacey tipped her head at her. “Have you ever been apologized to?” she asked.

Rapunzel nodded. “Mother apologizes all the time,” she told her. “For not being a good mother and not teaching me right from wrong, or sometimes she’s sorry I’m so stupid-”

“Those aren’t apologies,” Lacey interrupted. “That’s...something else.”

“But-”

“An apology is when someone does something wrong or hurts you, but sincerely regrets it,” Lacey continued. It dawned on Lacey that she had not spent a lot of time trying to get to know the girl. She had been more focused on getting her back to her parents, and in the process had probably traumatized the girl nearly as much as Gothel had. “Like....I’m sorry I took you from your home without....giving you a choice. I was...I am trying to help you. Rapunzel, your mom-”

Before Lacey could try and explain, the girl’s face wrinkled at the new word. “Mom?”

“Yea, it’s another word for mother-”

“You call your mother mom?” Rapunzel asked, missing the point entirely.

“No, I-” Lacey sighed. “I called my mother Mama,” she admitted. She had to immediately clear her throat, the mere mention of her mother something she had steadily avoided since she was thirteen.

“Mama,” Rapunzel repeated, her voice hopeful and sweet. Lacey’s stomach twisted but Rapunzel
did not catch her use of the past tense. She merely sighed and waved the word away. “It doesn’t seem right,” Rapunzel decided. “Mother probably wouldn’t like it anyways.”

Lacey settled back into the pillows, and Rapunzel retreated to her side of the bed. Her feet reached out to rest against Lacey’s. Her cold toes sending little frissons of ice up her spine but Lacey gritted her teeth and bore it. There was a silence stretching between them, exhaustion lingering on both their shoulders, and it would be so easy to say goodnight, to tell Rapunzel everything would be okay and slip back into sleep but Lacey hesitated.

“Tomorrow’s a big day,” Lacey reminded her companion. “I can see...I can understand why you wouldn’t want to leave here.”

“I like the Sprats,” Rapunzel admitted. Her smile didn’t fade away but grew fond as she reached out to take Lacey’s hands. “Eugene could stay too. He told me he liked it here...and the Sprats wouldn’t mind, I’m sure.”

“Rapunzel.”

The girl purposefully didn’t hear her. She began to speak quickly to drown out Lacey. “And I can still find my way home from here, so I could visit Mother soon, tell her where I am, and-”

“Rapunzel,” Lacey repeated more firmly. “Listen to me, your mother isn’t who you think she is.” She searched the girl’s face for clues that she understood, but Rapunzel’s face was shuttered again. For someone with a rosy view of the world, Rapunzel was surprisingly good at keeping her thoughts to herself when she wanted to. “She’s using you.”

Rapunzel’s flipped over with a huff, bringing the sides of the pillow up and over her head. “That’s not true,” she said to the ceiling. “Mother loves me even though I’m a silly girl who can’t do anything for herself and- and-,” her voice faded away. “She loves me,” she repeated to herself as if trying to convince herself. “She loves me.”

Shadows hung heavy in the corners of the room. The moon coming through the window was the only light. If Lacey closed her eyes and ignored the smell of pine that permeated the place, Lacey could almost remember another room from a lifetime ago. How had it gone? The song...the tune lingered in her head, a gentle hum but the words refused to come to her. She had spent too long trying to banish them, perhaps they had finally gone with her eighth-grade math lessons and the telephone number of her first boyfriend.

Feeling foolish, Lacey began to hum the tune her mother had used to sing to her. It was a soft, whimsical melody, and her voice was rough at first, the notes odd and uneven, nothing like the confident voice she remembered. Lacey cleared her throat and tried again, and it came easier this time. The pillow beside her fell back to the bed, and though Rapunzel did not turn, she was listening.

The melody faded away as quickly as it had come, leaving Lacey with the shadow of her mother. Not ready for her to go quite yet, needing the reassurance she had always felt in her presence, Lacey tried again.

Her voice was not the pure soprano that had sung her to sleep as a child, a voice still untouched by the tumors eating away at the new mother.

No child’s only memories of their mother should be in hospital rooms, dialysis machines humming louder than the melodies...scarves over her head...Humpty Dumpty jokes made through cracked lips-
The words were scattered, and Lacey had to guess at a few but the melody had come back to her. Rapunzel’s fingers curled around Lacey’s, but there were no more tears in her eyes. Lacey, feeling foolish as her voice cracked on a note, braved her way through it. Singing a lullaby to an eighteen-year-old in a bridal chamber of a bed and breakfast was not something she had ever quite imagined herself doing, but none of her time in Fae was imaginable.

In the darkness across the Second Kingdom, the rain continued to fall across the countryside. In a castle on a lake some miles away, a queen hummed her own lullaby as she did every night to the child that had been lost to her. A king pretended he was asleep, though his heart ached to hold his wife in his arms once more.

In the Infinite Forest, a woodcutter tucked his children into bed. Their nightmares had not faded, but their clothes were new and their stomachs were full. He dimmed the lantern, saying a silent thanks to the mysterious benefactor that had bought all lumber at triple the price that day in the market. And a curse for the woman who had led his children into the arms of death.

Near the border, a young man exiled from his people by his betrayal pressed on in the darkness, his heart heavy but his mind only on the woman he sought, love pushing him further away from his people and his past and into some future he didn’t yet know.

Closer at hand, the Sprats curled around each other and whispered words of love. The other two visitors at the Hill House slept soundly, one dreaming of money and the other dreaming of a life beyond the sea. The last bedroom was empty, locked from the inside.

In the woods, a being of ancient magic and power looked to the Hill House. The rain fell away from them, dissolving into steam. There was much to do and not much time to do it.

In the stables, the kelpies stirred uneasily, their natures stirred by the violence of the storm, but the boy turned horse did not hear them. Finally asleep, he dreamt for the first time since had left Corona. He dreamt of bright green eyes and the sound of laughter. It eased his loneliness. Lost in his own fantasies, he did not notice the figure standing over him until it was too late.

Chapter End Notes

Another transitional chapter- though one that will kick off the end of this arc. I have chapter fifty written and then we will go into the next "Kingdom" which I am personally super excited about as it will have a super fun twist I've been dying to introduce since I started this story in 2014 (holy shit).

A familiar face will resurface next chapter. Any guesses on who that might be?

Something to note in this chapter: the reference to Lacey's own mother and how that has played a role in her life, Rapunzel's relationship with her "mother" and how Lacey and Rapunzel view each other.

A key part of this story is how Lacey interacts with the women she encounters: Emma, Ariel, Gretel, Ella, Marian and now Ella. I've prided myself on making each of them their own woman and how their interactions shape Lacey. Rapunzel has forced Lacey to take on a "maternal" role that she had no interest in playing but Lacey has lost people and is determined to not lose anyone else. Which ultimately blinds her to what the people around her really want.
There was a frost on the windows in the morning. The temperature had dropped while they slept and even with the fires roaring in the hearths, there was a chill in the usually cozy halls of Hill House.

The dining room was occupied when Lacey came downstairs. She had lingered in bed after Rapunzel had gone down to help in the kitchen. She was surprised to see the other two travelers had come down from their rooms. They were cautious towards her at first but became more talkative over breakfast.

As luck would have it, one of the strangers was a merchant of sorts. He mostly had hand-me-downs in need of repair but he did have some dresses suitable for autumn in the countryside. Having worn the same dress for five days straight now, Lacey was desperate for a change of clothes.

Marian’s dress was ruined, worn past salvaging even for scraps. The castellan would have chided her for taking such poor care of the borrowed garment, but Lacey thought Marian would understand considering the week she had since she had left the First Kingdom. Besides, Rapunzel’s flimsy shift wouldn’t offer much in the way of warmth if it continued to get colder outside throughout the day.

Sensing a desperate soul, the merchant protested he hated to part with his limited assortment of dresses but when Lacey made it clear that money would not be a problem, he changed his tune.

In the end, Lacey purchased two long-sleeved dresses and two plain travel cloaks. With no magical assistance to assure either dress would fit, Lacey went back upstairs to try them on.

The first dress of checkered taffeta silk wouldn’t even go over her shoulders. Lacey wrestled it back off, the fabric resisting slightly with a threatening noise that sounded like a seam or two may have been stretched. The second slipped over her head.

Lacey tugged the blanket off the mirror to better see how the dress fit and found a comical sight. While the high waistline of the dress fit her perfectly, the sleeves dangled well past her fingertips and the hem was bunched up on the floor.

The dress’ previous owner must have been nearly as tall as Ella. In fact, it was entirely plausible that this dress had once belonged to Ella considering they weren’t too terribly far from the Tremaine manor. Still, the cream and dusty pink damask was warm and in otherwise good condition, so Lacey pushed the sleeves up, hiked up the skirt and headed back downstairs to find Rapunzel.

Mrs. Sprat and Rapunzel were in the midst of cleaning up the breakfast table when Lacey reappeared, nearly tripping over the dress on the last stair. “Here,” Lacey said, thrusting the dress to Rapunzel. “Go change.”

Rapunzel held the dress reverently, taking in the purple silk ribbons along the waist and hem. “Is...this for me?”

Lacey laughed at the awe-struck look in the girl’s eyes. “Yes, so go upstairs and try it on. If it
“It'll fit!” Rapunzel exclaimed and before Lacey could offer to help, she had torn upstairs to change, leaving Mrs. Sprat with the dishes.

Lacey pushed up her sleeves, which had unraveled again, and reached for another piece of toast. Her sleeve slipped down her wrist to drag through the strawberry jam. Mrs. Sprat clicked her tongue and without a word dragged Lacey into the kitchen.

Mrs. Sprat began to roll up the much too long sleeves and pin up the hem. Lacey’s thanks were met with a shake of a head as the matriarch of Hill House set to work.

After a bit, Rapunzel brought the last few dishes in to soak for breakfast. It was as if the dress had been made for her. The large oval neckline scooped across the front and back with the same fabric of the dress pleated and wrinkled alongside the neckline only to end in two ruffles on the shoulder, in a similar fashion of the balloon sleeves popular in the Seventh Kingdom.

Mrs. Sprat paused long enough to clap in delight, coming over to fluff the sleeves and check the hem. “Give us a twirl,” Lacey prompted and Rapunzel hurriedly complied, blushing in delight.

When satisfied the dress passed inspection, Mrs. Sprat returned to working on Lacey’s new frock. Rapunzel lingered at a window to admire her reflection. The frost was melting away but the wind was still howling through the occasional chink in the walls. “I should take some biscuits to Eugene,” Rapunzel declared as she fluffed her skirt. “I’ll be just a minute—”

Lacey waved Rapunzel back over to sit advised her, ignoring Mrs. Sprat’s sputters as she tried to push Lacey’s arm back down to her side. “He’s probably getting the kelpies ready for our ride. Best not disturb him or Gold will have our heads,” Lacey warned her. “He’ll come in when he’s hungry.”

Rapunzel had a healthy respect for Gold’s wishes so she returned reluctantly to Lacey’s side. “I hate Eugene had to sleep out in that old barn,” she complained. “He could have fit in the room with us. He doesn’t get that big.”

Mrs. Sprat made her signature warding off evil gesture and sniffed reproachfully. Lacey had to hide her smile. “Rapunzel doesn’t know much about men,” she clarified for the shocked older woman. “She’s not had a lot of experience with them.”

“Eugene’s the first one I’ve ever met,” Rapunzel informed her. Mrs. Sprat looked between the two of them for a moment before she shook her head and returned back to her task. Rapunzel, at a loss for what to do, resorted to her fall back, asking questions. “Why didn’t Eugene stay with us last night?”

“Uh.” Lacey couldn’t exactly admit that her only opposition to Eugene in the room had been the dangers of someone discovering a horse in the house. Besides, it appeared Mrs. Sprat was a stickler for decorum. “Boys can’t share rooms with girls,” Lacey settled on.

Mrs. Sprat nodded approvingly.

Rapunzel frowned. “Why not? We all slept together around the fire last night.”

Lacey had not anticipated spending the morning educating Rapunzel on the birds and the bees but a curious Rapunzel was easier to deal with then a fretful Rapunzel. “Well, you see, people get weird about sex—”
Mrs. Sprat stuck her with a pin.

“Hey!” Lacey yelped. “What? You think you can explain better?” The innkeeper’s wife jabbed another pin at Lacey threateningly. “Fine,” Lacey grumbled. “When two people love each other very much, they get married and share a bed.”

Rapunzel didn’t understand. “We’re not married,” she pointed out. “We shared a bed.”

Careful of the pins Mrs. Sprat was still wielding, Lacey played it safe. “We’re friends,” she explained.

Rapunzel had an answer for this as well. “Eugene and I are friends.”

Mrs. Sprat snorted at this, startling them both.

Lacey had no interest in throwing Eugene to the wolves but she didn’t see the harm. “Rapunzel…,” she began cautiously, “Eugene…is a boy who likes pretty girls….and you’re a pretty girl.”

“So are you,” Rapunzel responded matter of factly.

“But I’m older than him,” Lacey explained, navigating through this minefield.

Rapunzel’s brow furrowed. “Does that matter?”

“Uh, sometimes?” Lacey said, casting about blindly. “Look, Rapunzel…Eugene-”

Lacey’s eyes fell back to the window as she thought, only to notice Gold and Jack Sprat trudging back up the hill to the barn. She frowned, falling quiet as they both disappeared inside the barn.

“Eugene what?” Rapunzel demanded.

Lacey had to return her attention back to the warmth of the kitchen, but her eyes strayed back to the now desolate barnyard. “He likes you,” she said, too distracted to think straight.

Something was wrong. It was late in the morning now and Gold had yet to appear to hustle them to their final destination. He was eager to get rid of the princess and be done with this whole business, so why was he out strolling with the innkeeper in this weather?

“I like him too,” Rapunzel declared. “Don’t you?”

Lacey flapped an arm, earning her muffled growl from Mrs. Sprat who was now hemming the skirt. “No, I mean...I like you and you like me. We’re friends. Eugene likes you as...more than a friend. You know?”

Rapunzel’s baffled expression made it clear she did not.

Lacey’s eyes fell on Mrs. Sprat’s wedding ring. “When a boy like a girl as more than friends, he wants to…”

At her feet, Mrs. Sprat held up a wickedly long needle in warning.

“Marry her,” Lacey finished lamely.

“Eugene wants to marry me?” Rapunzel said in disbelief. “But...why?”

“A little help would be appreciated,” Lacey muttered to Mrs. Sprat, who had now gone
conveniently deaf.

“Marry me,” Rapunzel repeated as if solving a particularly knotty issue. “Mother never…”

Sprat and Gold emerged from the barn and Lacey craned her neck to see what they were up to. They stood for a moment, surveying the valley before they started back towards the house. A few moments later, the kitchen door swung open to reveal them both.

Their faces were drawn and Lacey’s stomach dropped. “What? What is it?”

“The boy’s gone,” Jack said to his wife who had paused in her work. “We’ve looked all morning. There’s no sign of him.”

“What do you mean he’s gone?” Lacey demanded as she stepped down from the soapbox.

“Barn was locked when I got up this morning,” Jack said. “The boy didn’t answer so I jimmied it open. No sign of him.”

Lacey shook her head. “He wouldn’t have left.”

Gold didn’t look so sure.

With a grumble, Lacey brushed past and out the door, marching determinedly for the barn. The morning air was bitter cold for the usual pleasant autumn weather of the Second Kingdom’s countryside.

Sprat caught up with her quickly. His tall, thin frame was enveloped in a bulky coat that had stuffing coming out of the seams and patches lovingly sewn over rips and tears. It made him look like a scarecrow, but he wasn’t shivering which was more than Lacey could say. “You better go back inside,” the innkeeper said with a nod towards the house. “You’re turning blue.”

It was an excellent suggestion, but Lacey was not about to be dismissed. “He can’t have gone far,” she insisted. The wind echoed her sentiment with a long howl as it came up from the valley beneath the hill. Her new dress, full of pins, clacked about her.

Rapunzel had emerged from the house and was hurrying after them. Gold was right behind her while Mrs. Sprat stood in the open doorway watching after all of them. The two other travelers wisely stayed out of it altogether.

“Belle!” Rapunzel exclaimed, slightly breathless as she arrived at her side. “This is my fault! I told you- last night- I told you-”

“You go back in and tell the Minnie to put on another pot of coffee,” Sprat instructed, heedless of what Rapunzel was trying to convey. “She’ll need an extra hand with the breakfast dishes.”

Rapunzel wavered, torn between this direct order and her worry over Eugene. After being up half the night counseling the young teen, Lacey didn’t even bother with patience. She put her hands on Rapunzel’s shoulders and spun her back around to the house. “You go help Mrs. Sprat. We’ll handle this.”

“Ask the Minnie to add a spoonful of cinnamon,” Sprat added as Rapunzel tried to protest. “Makes all the difference.”

Rapunzel went but judging by the set of her jaw and shoulders, her retreat was reluctant. She headed slowly back to the house, casting glances back at them from over her shoulder.
Gold joined them. “There are no signs of a scuffle,” he said. He cast a look at Lacey, taking in her shivering shoulders and trembling lips. His frown deepened. “What are you wearing? Don’t you have a coat?”

She did. A brand new cloak she had left upstairs in her room but he didn’t know that. “Have you ever seen me with a coat?” she shot back. Her following sniffle immediately ruined the venomous intent. Gold rolled his eyes but started to shed his overcoat. “I don’t need that,” Lacey told him but he flung it around her shoulders with little concern for her protests.

The fact that it was wool, still warm from his body heat and with a pleasant masculine scent, was annoying but Lacey didn’t look a gift horse in the mouth. She arranged it around her shoulders and clutched the front closed from the inside.

“Didn’t seem the type to run off,” Jack said with a shake of his head. “Damn shame.” Lacey looked to Gold but the ambassador appeared lost in his own thoughts. “Better get back to the chores,” Jack sighed. “I’ll just be tending to the pigs around back. Shout if….”

He didn’t finish his thought, but with a nod, disappeared around the back of the barn towards the pigsties. The barn door loomed half open before them, with only the occasional whinny from the steeds inside audible over the gale.

“He wouldn’t have left,” Lacey insisted as she brushed past Gold into the relative warmth of the barn. It smelled equine in here but was out of the wind’s reach and significantly warmer. At the back, Eugene’s stall was still ajar, just as she had left it last night. The hay was untouched and there was no sign of horse or man.

Gold had followed behind her, his attention on the barn door itself. “I would argue to the contrary,” Gold replied, “if not for the fact the barn was locked from the inside.”

Lacey frowned. “It couldn’t have been,” she said with a shake of her head. “When I left last night, he was already ….changed. I closed the door behind me, but he couldn’t have lowered the beam.” She wiggled her hands, red and swollen from the cold.” Not without thumbs.”

Gold trailed his fingers over the open stall door. Lacey stood from where she had knelt, searching amongst the hay, at his solemn expression. “What is it?” she demanded as she joined him. They stood nose to nose, the stall door the only thing separating them.

“Magic,” was all he said.

Lacey swallowed back the worry rising in her chest. “So, The Imp collected him?” Gold shook his head but Lacey picked up the banner. “It could have been. He could have needed his help-”

“It wasn’t him,” Gold insisted.

His tone brooked no argument but that didn’t convince Lacey. “How can you tell?”

“Because I can. It’s unfortunate but our Enchanted’s disappearance does not change the plan. Now, go and collect the girl from the kitchen before Gothel shows back up. I’ll ready the kelpies-”

“But Eugene-”

Gold snapped. “Is gone!” he exclaimed. “And he’s not coming back. So, go inside and collect your latest stray so we can be done with this whole fiasco. I do not doubt you’ll find some maimed wolf to adopt on the trek back to Corona or wander into another hornet’s nest from which I’ll have to save you. Enough is enough. The boy is gone; most likely dead because you couldn’t leave well
enough alone and stay in the carriage as I specifically instructed -"

Lacey slapped him. The sound reverberated in the lofts of the barn, her hand still hanging in the air just to the left of his face as they stared at each other. His right cheek was red from her palm print but his eyes were blank.

Lacey lowered her hand, shaking now from anger instead of cold. “We,” she said clearly and slowly so there would be no mistaking what she said, “are not...leaving without him.”

Lacey let his jacket fall from her shoulders to the dirt floor of the barn as she passed by him to the safety of the autumn morning. There was something in here making her dizzy and panic started to gnaw at her bones as she stumbled the last few feet of the now stifling warmth of the barn.

Gold did not follow her.

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There was nothing to do but wait. Mrs. Sprat stripped the dress of Lacey, leaving her in stays and a shift. Rapunzel sat sullenly on the floor, ignoring them both for whatever thoughts were in her head.

Lacey, wanting to keep an eye on the barn, started to do the dishes from breakfast, earning her an appreciative nod from the hostess as she settled in to start sewing the alterations to Lacey’s new garment. “Least I can do,” Lacey murmured in embarrassment.

The suds reminded her of Ella, and the happy ever after that had been snatched from certain defeat. They had all lived to see another day...though there had not been a witch out for their blood or an enchanted, exiled boy who had too much faith and not enough brains-

A dish slipped out of Lacey’s hands and crashed to the floor at her feet. It cracked in two, and Lacey stared down at it in horror. “Fuck,” she breathed as she turned to the hostess. “I’m sorry- I’ll pay for it-"

Rapunzel scooped it off the floor and held the two pieces back together. She cocked her head as if in thought. “May I borrow some yarn?” she asked over Lacey’s sputtered apologies.

The hostess kicked out her sewing basket towards Rapunzel and returned to her own sewing. Rapunzel settled down on the floor by her feet and began to wrap the broken crockery in thick spools of yarn. Lacey stood there for a moment, invisible. After a moment, she returned to the dishes.

Lacey cast a look over her shoulder, wanting nothing more than to encourage Mrs. Sprat to hem faster but the woman was smiling down at Rapunzel’s work. The girl had braided the pieces of yarn together and was wrapping the pieces around the shattered plate. Lacey watched the two work for a moment before she settled in with a cup of coffee on the counter, maintaining her vigil on the world outside.

When the sun reached overhead and the shadows disappeared entirely, Mrs. Sprat stood and waved Lacey back to the soapbox. Mrs. Sprat helped drape the dress over Lacey’s head before fussing with the sawtooth trim that angled from the shoulders to the waist on the front and the back of the gown.

“There’s a hole,” Rapunzel said as she pointed to a small barely inch wide hole at the skirt’s front.

Mrs. Sprat tsked impatiently but Lacey held up her hands. “It’s fine,” she assured her. “It’s perfect,
thank you.” Indeed, the sleeves now tapered at her wrists and the hem was just right, covering her ankles but not dragging across the floor. “No, really,” Lacey repeated as she hopped down from the box despite Mrs. Sprat’s noise of distress. “Thank you.”

Rapunzel held up her now completed project. “I fixed it!” she said as she handed the plate back over to Mrs. Sprat. A perfect circle of yarn, expertly braided, the plate would never serve food again but was a perfect hot plate for the table.

Mrs. Sprat tugged the girl into her arms for a hug, both hiding the tears in their eyes from each other. Lacey rolled her eyes but kept silent. When the hug continued longer than she felt comfortable witnessing, Lacey left the kitchen for the safety of the living room only to startle Gold. He quickly yanked his gaze from the large window across from where he sat at the table.

Neither of them spoke as Lacey lowered herself into the chair at the head of the table. Outside, Jack was leading the kelpies out from their stalls. They were saddled, coats brushed so they gleamed black in the sunlight. In the kitchen, there was a clatter of pots and pans which indicated Mrs. Sprat and Rapunzel had moved on from hugging each other to cooking lunch.

“No sign of him?” Lacey guessed.

Gold shook his head. “There were no tracks by the creek bed out back or on the path to the woods.” He exhaled slowly. “My guess….Gothel knew we would stop here and took advantage of Eugene’s separation from the rest of the party.” He shifted to catch her eye. “If I had….It was ensured our party was protected…I promise you that, but I underestimated the degree to which Gothel would go to achieve her revenge. And for that, I am sorry.”

Lacey remained quiet before she stood. Through the large lump in her throat, she managed, “thank you for trying.” And with that, she disappeared back upstairs to collect their things from the room.

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In the daylight, the Bridal Chambers was truly a beautiful sight. In the front corner of the house, it had a glorious view of the Infinite Forest. Below them, the forest swayed poetically, the leaves a riot of orange and red with yellow accents. It was a moving sea of color and Lacey leaned against the windowsill and watched the wind flirt with the leaves.

It was hard to imagine the cruelty hidden inside the vast maze of trees and monsters. Somewhere, there was a gingerbread house with the bones of a witch in a hearth. Nearby, a mill sat upon a still creek, and a father lived with his two children.

Well, perhaps they had moved out of the forest to somewhere safer. Lacey hoped they had. Their house had been sad and forlorn as if was waiting for its mistress to return. The family had deserved better than their quiet existence out there in the woods. Lacey hoped they found some peace, nightmares didn’t plague her too often anymore but she hoped the same would be true for Hansel and Gretel.

Her thoughts drifted naturally to Eugene. Was he laying out there somewhere in the woods, still and cold? Or was he wandering lost and alone? “Don’t be stupid,” she whispered to herself. “You don’t know…he could be fine.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?”

Lacey was no longer alone. Across the room, the mirror no longer reflected the room. A woman stood in the full-length frame. Raven black hair dangled down in a mockery of Rapunzel’s braid
and blood red lips curled in a smirk. “There you are,” Regina drawled. “I’ve been looking for you for ages.”

Lacey’s backed up against the window panes. The cold ate through the fabric of her dress, eliciting a shiver. Lacey’s voice wouldn’t quite work so all she could manage was a furious, breathy, “You-!”

“No!” Regina curtsied. She was still dressed all in black, but in an outfit befitting a queen. Onyx and obsidian glittered at her throat, the stones cascading down the length of Regina’s long black gown. “But let’s not talk about me, let’s talk about you.”

Lacey peeled herself away from the window. Regina seemed to be beyond the glass; nothing indicated Regina was able to reach out through it but Lacey remained wary. Her knuckles reached out to rap the glass, the sound echoing in the room. Regina regarded this exploration with wry amusement. “I must say, I’m surprised,” Regina confessed. “I hadn’t even thought it possible you’d survive the first night up there in the mountains. I forgot about you entirely until Ursula died. You see, there were rumors...of a princess under The Imp’s protection. We assumed it was that little mermaid, but Reul Ghorm insisted otherwise.”

Like Emma, Regina referred to her protector as The Imp, not Nyx or Lesak or the Dark One. Was that his true name?

Regina continued, “Blue told us of a...Believer from the world beyond. A Believer under The Imp’s protection, a woman that went by the name of Belle.”

Lacey’s fingers curled at her side. The Imp had been right. Faeries were not to be trusted.

“Well, it answered quite a few questions,” Regina said. “We had wondered what The Imp was up to in his little lair. The Dark Castle had grown more active than it had been in a century, and when I visited there was a certain...scent in the air. But when I went back to investigate...it was gone. The Imp played innocent of course...always does. The question is...why is he protecting you?”

Regina took a step closer to the mirror, her hand reaching out as if to caress Lacey’s face. “Belle the Believer...The Imp’s Pet. The Ninth Kingdom’s Maiden. Word has gotten out all about you, little one. There are whispers of the Witch Slayer, the stranger walking amongst them in plain sight, a puppet of the Ninth Kingdom.”

Lacey’s hands curled into fists. “No one is pulling my strings.”

“No?” Regina laughed. “Perhaps you just can’t see them.”

Lacey grabbed a candlestick from the mantle and hoisted it over her shoulder like a baseball bat. “Enough chit-chat. Where is Gothel?”

Regina smiled slowly. “Why I doubt she’s hard to find,” she said as she polished her nails on her sleeve. “In fact, I would say I’ve sufficiently distracted you enough that you haven’t even noticed she’s stolen that little brat right back out from underneath you. Easy enough to do with the right bait.”

Lacey sprang to the window, but only in time to see the blue-black shine of Rapunzel’s unmistakable braid disappearing into the woods. Lacey cursed, reaching over to grab her bag from where it hung on the back of the door. The tiara shifted in the depths, glinting back up at her, as Regina’s laughter followed her out of the room and down the stairs.
Chapter End Notes

We're in it now!

Thanks to everyone who left a comment!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At the bottom of the stairs, Gold was counting out coins into the hands of the merchant that had sold Lacey clothes. At the sound of her barreling down the stairs, he drawled, “Next time, perhaps you should let me negotiate with highway robbers for goods and services-”

Lacey stumbled to a stop between the two of them. “Rapunzel-“ she managed before having to pause to breath.

Gold shook his head at her. “Not the last time I checked-”

Lacey waved a hand. “She went after Eugene.” She paused meaningfully, casting a look over her shoulder at the merchant. “She’s in the woods.”

Gold knew what waited in the woods. “She was just in the kitchen finishing with lunch.” But he was already moving towards the kitchen with Lacey on his heels. The merchant squawked a protest but he didn’t follow after them.

The innkeeper’s wife, in the midst of stirring a pot of stew for lunch, squawked at the force at which the door slammed into the far wall. Rapunzel was nowhere in sight, her new cloak was gone from the hook by the back door. Lacey didn’t bother to lord it over Gold; she ducked underneath Gold’s outstretched arm to ask, “Where’d she go?”

Mrs. Sprat pointed shakily towards the back door.

“The simpleton,” Gold growled under his breath as they exited the warmth of the kitchen. It was unclear if he was referring to Mrs. Sprat or Rapunzel but either way, Lacey agreed with him.

“I saw her down there,” Lacey pointed towards the stretch of woods she had seen Rapunzel disappear into but Gold had already noticed the small footprints in the mud. He knelt down to examine them more closely which seemed beyond the point at the moment. “Who else has a shoe size that small? I told you- I saw her.” When Gold still did not move, Lacey shifted anxiously beside him. “What are you waiting for? We can still catch her-”

“Not if Gothel already has her.” He straightened to head towards the barn.

“Where are you going?” When he did not so much as look back at her, Lacey stretched her hands out after him wanting nothing more than to take someone, anyone, by the shoulders and shake them senseless but the only person in sight was already halfway to the barn now.

Knowing it would only end badly, Lacey resisted the urge to go after Rapunzel on her own. Instead, Lacey groaned in frustration and headed after Gold to the barn. The kelpies were already tied up outside, pulling at their ties and shifting their weight nervously sensing an ill wind.

Hearing their approach, Jack Sprat came out of the barn, wiping his hands. “The young miss is down by the pigsty,” he said in lieu of a greeting. “She was saying how she had never seen a pig before-”

“Nor will she,” Gold said curtly. “She’s gone off into the woods after the boy. We might still catch her if we hurry.”
Lacey already had one foot in the stirrup but the kelpie shifted away. Without comment on her grumbling, Gold boosted her up into the saddle. She flinched, preparing herself for a snide comment, but he was already vaulting up into his saddle with the same easy grace which he did everything. As the kelpies whickered and pulled at their leads, Jack loosened the ties. Gold pulled alongside Lacey. “Which way?”

With a jerk of her head, Lacey dug her heels into the side of her own mount. The two of them tore down the hill towards the waiting embrace of the Infinite Forest as Hill House disappeared behind them. The wind whistled and howled as if pushing them back. The kelpies galloped downhill and it was all she could do to hold on so she had to trust Gold to follow her.

At the first tree, the kelpies pulled up short, screaming and bucking. Lacey barely managed to keep her seat. “Whoa, hold on, it’s okay!” The kelpie reared back again, and vivid memory of a cold winter evening flashed through her mind so vividly, that Lacey nearly toppled backward.

Gold had to reach over to steady her kelpie. Only after a moment did it calm enough to stop screaming. Releasing control back to her, Gold sided up as close to the forest as possible. His hand traced the empty air before him. “There’s a barrier. Hardly subtle.”

Lacey, careful to keep her seat, waved her arm out a bit in the air beside her. “I don’t feel anything?” She dug in her heels to move closer but the kelpie refused to budge an inch.

Gold dismounted. “Not all magic is obvious as you’ve experienced.” He came to help her down. Lacey scoffed at this but she leaned down to meet him halfway. His hands were warm on her arms and surprisingly strong as he swung her down from her still nervous kelpie. “Go on back,” he told the two steeds and as was directed, they turned back and headed towards the barn on the hill. Lacey opened and closed her mouth, deciding against commenting in the face of the larger issue.

“This isn’t going to be pleasant,” he warned her. “There’s...layers of magical protection here. She wants to discourage us to leave well enough alone.” He cracked a grin. “She obviously doesn’t know you very well.”

Lacey was far too unsettled and unsure to smile back. “This is insane,” she muttered, pushing her hair out of her face. “Why bother with all this? Why not just take Rapunzel by magic... whisk her out of thin air?”

“Simple,” Gold told her. “The girl has been alone her whole life. Suddenly, she’s not. Neither Eugene nor you have left her side for a moment since she has come out of her tower. That constant companionship gave her a sense of confidence, bravery she would not have possessed otherwise. If Gothel took her back now, she would find a young woman who has tasted freedom; who has known friendship. It’s not as easy to keep people docile when they have something to miss.”

Something Regina had said repeated in Lacey’s mind. “Gothel lured her to the woods with Eugene,” Lacey muttered. “That-that-”

“Yes, Gothel has always been one to prey on hopes and fears.” Gold stopped to consider for a moment. “I had not realized the girl was...that attached to the boy.”

Lacey winced. “I may have...pointed out a thing or two to her this morning,” she confessed. “If she thought...she may have...” Lacey had single-handedly once again done the wrong thing by trying to do the right thing. “I was trying to help,” she finished with a grimace.

Gold pinched the bridge of his nose. “Well, regardless, we’ll have to go after her.”
Lacey gaped at him. That had been the last thing she had expected him to say. “We do? I mean...I know we do but I didn't expect you to agree to it.”

He snorted. “If I put you back on a horse and dragged you to Corona, you’d take the first opportunity to slip off and then I’d have to go after you. Or if you did come quietly, you’d never forgive me and I’d rather not be slapped again if it’s all the same to you.”

Lacey grinned. “Deal.”

“Now,” he said as he sized up the trail before them. “If I’m right, we’re about to walk through several layers of very nasty spells designed to make the traveler live through their worst fears. The girl couldn’t have gone far. Mostly because she won’t know what’s happening which will more than likely slow her down considerably. Thankfully that means she’s not too far from here but that also means Gothel will be somewhere nearby.”

A mother, there to save Rapunzel from whatever waking nightmares the spells showed her. It was ingenious and vile. Rapunzel would collapse into Gothel’s arms and be grateful to be returned to the tower.

“We never told her the truth. About her parents, about who she was,” Lacey said softly. “I told her...that love wasn’t being manipulated and controlled but... we did the same thing.”

“You did what you could,” was all Gold said in return. “She spent her whole life up there in that tower and was never once dared to so much as dream of leaving it. Not until you dragged her out and showed her the world was more than what she had been told.”

It almost sounded like a compliment. “Thought you didn’t think that was the right thing to do?” Lacey asked him. “In fact, I vividly recall you being a bastard about it.”

“You are impossible,” Gold replied. “Of course, it wasn’t the right thing to do at all, and whether you admit it or not, you know that’s true. The boy would have stayed here, a good job with good people but now he’s cursed, if not dead. We could have been back to Corona with the tiara and knowing the exact location of their missing daughter. We would have left well enough alone and departed with the crocus in our possession. The King and Queen would have gone straight to the tower and liberated their daughter.”

It did not escape her notice that he led with the fate of Eugene. Despite his cold attitude toward the boy, it seemed the usually unflappable Gold was not unaffected by the boy’s disappearance.

And while all of those were excellent points but Lacey was not in any mood to accept them gracefully. “You’re forgetting about Gothel,” Lacey reminded him petulantly. “If she almost killed us to protect the girl, what would she have done to the good King and Queen of Corona?”

“Wouldn’t have been our concern,” he said in such a typical Gold fashion that all goodwill he had earned in the last five minutes was instantly erased. Lacey scoffed at him but he ignored her bad temper. “Isolating her again, making her live through her darkest fears...Gothel plans to win the girl back through fear.” Gold reached his hand out to her, slowly as not to spook her. “Remember, anything you experience is not really happening. Keep moving forward and whatever you do, do not let go of my hand. Do you understand?”

Lacey regarded it for a moment before she reached out to clasp it. His fingers curled around her own, and together, they stepped into the Infinite Forest and into the first of Gothel’s spells.
There was a knife to her throat. “Welcome home,” someone hissed in her ear. “I’ve been expecting you.”

Lacey stood in the hall of her darkened apartment, her purse dangling off her shoulder as she fumbled to hold onto the bag of groceries in her arms. Razor sharp nails dug into the soft skin around her throat, drops of blood already welling to the surface. She wanted to scream but nothing would come out of her mouth. Another hand pressed into the small of her back, guiding her further into her apartment.

She did not let go of the bag of groceries. The nails dug deeper and Lacey had to lean back into the assaulter to avoid slitting her throat. She debated slamming her head back into the unseen face but the nails changed angles as if her attacker knew what she was thinking. “None of that,” came the warning, more of a purr than a hiss now. It was also the voice of a woman. “I’ll leave you here to bleed out. You live alone don’t you, Lacey?”

Regina pressed against her, and though she could not see her, the curve of her smile against her neck nauseated Lacey. This was someone who enjoyed death and pain. There would be no quick end here, no mercy. Regina would toy with her until she was begging for death.

Fear started to flood through her, the adrenaline rush leaving her shaky. “No one will miss you,” Regina whispered into her ear. “It’ll be days before anyone notices the smell. Maybe weeks before they call someone. You’ll die alone. Forgotten.”

Lacey closed her eyes as the nails bit deeper. She still had the bag of groceries in her arm and it grew heavier. If she dropped it-

“Don’t let go.”

Lacey’s eyes fluttered back open. Who had said that? Her apartment was dark, the windows reflecting the city lights from below. Everything was just as she had left it...before she had left for Storybrooke.

Before Fae...

When had she gotten back? How had she gotten back?

Nothing came to her. The memories that were there were fuzzy and unfocused as if they were dreams. Had she dreamed it? The last thing she remembered was a forest and a man with brown eyes…

Regina wrapped her hand tightened against her throat, cutting off her air as she hissed something threatening but someone else was speaking too. Words faint and distant but reassuring and warm-

“You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

Squeezing the bag of groceries tight, Lacey took a step forward into the blade of the knife only to gasp as she stumbled out of the cobwebs of her dream and back into the nightmare of Fae.

“There you are,” Gold said approvingly. Her hand was still clutched in his own, sweaty and shaky. She tried to form words, furious and embarrassed but he spoke over her stuttering. “Don’t be too hard on yourself. The first time is always the hardest to shake. You did well.”

She looked over her shoulder to see they had not gone far at all. The outside world was still visible through the low hanging branches but it was already growing warmer as the sun moved higher into
the sky. “How long?” Lacey gasped. “How long was I out?”

Gold shook his head. “No telling. I was out for a bit myself but you did well,” he assured her. He was lying but absurdly enough she appreciated it.

Lacey lifted her free hand to her throat but there was no cut, no blood or bruise that indicated anything really had been there. If Gold noticed, he didn’t pry. He simply helped her up.

When Lacey went to drop his hand, he shook his head. “We may hit another spell any moment. We can’t risk losing each other if your dream takes you one way and mine another.”

For his part, he didn’t look any worse for wear. “What did you see?” she asked him as they moved deeper into the woods.

“A worry,” was his only response. “You?”

“A reminder.” She left it at that, not having any interest in sharing how badly she was still shaken. Her encounter with Regina in the mirror had surprised her but the knowledge that she would never be safe...that even if they made it through this that Regina was out there waiting...

Oblivious to this, or simply being astute enough to not press her, Gold scanned the horizon of the path for the next spell. “The next one will be worse,” he warned her.

Lacey stopped short. “Rapunzel couldn’t have gotten through that alone.” She turned back the way they had come. “Could we have passed her-?”

Gold shook his head and pointed to the ground before them. A few twigs were snapped and leaves were trodden but there was a clear boot print just up ahead.

“But- how?”

“You know what they say,” Gold said as they started moving forward again. “Do the brave thing and bravery will follow.”

Lacey did not get to respond as the second spell wrapped them in its embrace.

--

Lacey pulled against the shackle around her wrist but it held tight to the wall. She swore, rubbing at the blistered and reddened wrist but she could not pull her hand free.

She had lost count of how long she had been in here. Her clothes were in rags and the putrid smell of death and decay permeated the air. Her shoulders slumped as the unmistakable truth of the situation grew crystal clear: She was going to die in here.

“Why,” came the voice from the shadows. “What’s the matter, dearie?”

Lacey pivoted on her heel as a figure rose out of the darkness. It reached out to her with sharp talons. Lacey wrenched away only to be snapped back by the chain anchoring her to the dungeon wall.

Again, she could not speak. Her throat closed up in angry terror, but she refused to cow to her fear. If death was coming, she would meet it with her eyes open.

“I wonder,” The Imp said as it reached up to caress her face, swollen from beatings and dirty from sleeping on the ground. “What will you give me to free you from this prison? What would you
sacrifice for your liberty?”

It would be so easy. All she had to do was tell the truth. What would it hurt? She was the one left to rot in this purgatory. No one else had suffered, why should she protect them?

“That’s it,” the voice crooned as it moved closer. “Tell me, dearie. You can tell me.”

Lacey could not even remember why she was holding out. What was so important that she remained here? She had her chance at freedom, who cared about what happened to anyone else? She had to look after herself. No one else would.

“Yes?” it sang as it’s fingers wrapped around the shackle.

Lacey opened her mouth, lips parting to sell her soul to save her life. Her fingers gripped around the metal of the shackle to anchor herself - only to feel the shackle tighten. Lacey paused, shifting her focus from the golden gaze hovering just inches from her nose to the warmth of the metal shackle. Her wrist was infected, puss weeping from sores, but her fingers and palm were warm.

As if someone was holding her hand here in the darkness.

The name was unfamiliar but it came to her lips like a prayer. “Gold?”

A ghost squeezed her hand and the ghoul masquerading as the Imp howled as Lacey stepped forward, regardless of her shackles, and into freedom.

--

“That’s right; there you go,” Gold murmured as Lacey collapsed into the dirt. Their joined hands were clutched to her chest as she took in deep, shuddering breaths. “That bad?”

A violent shiver ripped through her. “D-dungeon,” Lacey managed, avoiding looking up at Gold as she sat up. She forced a shaky smile but still couldn’t bring herself to look at him in case the fear was still lingering in her eyes. “You know,” she said, hoping to break the silence. “This is the first kingdom where I haven’t seen the inside of a dungeon.”

Once again, Gold helped her to her feet. “Give it time,” he said with his own stab at gallows humor. She relinquished her painful grip on his hand but he curled his fingers back around her’s. “Best not let go just yet.”

“Right.. Have you...is there any sign of her?”

Gold nodded up ahead. “Thought I heard something right before you came to,” he told her. “Haven’t heard it again. May have been the wind.”

He was lying. Trying not to make her feel bad about how hard the spells were affecting her. It was frustrating that Gold of all people was witnessing these weak moments, but he hadn’t let go of her hand and his words were reassuring instead of dismissive. “Are you even seeing anything?” she asked him, all too self-aware she must look a pitiful mess.

He nodded roughly. “At my age, I’ve lived through enough to expect the worst. Nothing Gothel can show me is anything I haven’t already experienced. Haven’t already lost.”

Still raw, she spoke before she could think better of it. “What happened? To your son? If you don’t mind me asking,” she hurried to add as a shadow fell over his face.
She didn’t expect him to answer, not really. So, it was a surprise when he said, “I broke a promise to him and it cost me everything.”

“I’m sorry,” Lacey whispered. “I shouldn’t have-”

He didn’t let her finish. “We best keep going.”

Lacey nodded as she leaned down to brush off the dirt clinging to her skirts. “Wonder what Rapunzel’s seeing?” she murmured, more to herself than anything but as usual Gold overheard her.

His jaw tightened. “Nothing good.”

--

When they entered the next spell, Lacey already knew what she would find. There was only one last trauma, one last lingering wound that had never quite healed despite the years that had passed.

Perhaps that was why she was able to keep moving forward. She moved past the tall figures all in black, the quiet voices and hushed sobbing all breaking over her. This was a memory she had buried, repressed, ignored but it had never been far from the surface.

She was six- no seven. It was the summer, and the air conditioning unit rattled and shook in the wall as it tried valiantly to cool the house. A losing battle with all the people crammed inside, doors opening and closing as more people came to pay their condolences. Casseroles were on every surface, and people kept reaching out to her for a hug, to croon over her head, to mutter condolences to make themselves feel better.

Lacey had let them that afternoon. She had never gotten to the casket on the far side of the room, the thing that had laid in wait for her too terrible to confront. Here, now, she grasped the stuffed animal she had in her hand tight. It was warm and comforting. It had been her security blanket as a child but here and now it was something more.

It was Gold holding her hand in the woods, anchoring her to reality.

She kept pressing forward but this time, the spell did not break. There was something else she had to do here. She was feet away from the coffin now. The curtains were pulled back so sunlight could stream into the open casket but she was too short to see inside. Someone would have to pick her up.

She knew where he would be sitting. He had not left the chair in the years after her mother’s death, not until his own death had removed him from it for good. Lacey arrived at the foot of her father’s chair. In her oldest memories, Maurice French had been a large, rotund man, forgetful but always cheerful but here and now he was shrunken and grey.

At seven, Lacey had not known that she would never see his smile again, never hear his laughter or be pulled into the garage to see one of his latest inventions. But she knew it now.

“Papa,” she said and with her free hand, she reached up to tug at his paw. “Papa, please.”

He waved her away. Lacey tried again. How often had she done this? Every day until she had turned eighteen and left Avonlea forever.

“Papa, we need to say goodbye,” Lacey urged him. She had never seen her mother after that last trip to the hospital. She had only known her as a wasted away skeleton in paper-thin skin, eyes sunken and head as smooth as an egg. She had been too scared to see what that creature would have
looked like in death. But this was the price of Gothel’s spell, so Lacey ignored her childhood terror. It was time to say goodbye.

Her father’s eyes swung to the casket over her head. “Leave me, little lady.”

Little Lady Lacey. Her parents had sung her that song...the same song she had sung Rapunzel, a lullaby they had made up just for her...

Lacey tugged again. Did Gothel think this would break her? Did she think this would be the thing to have her fall to her knees and disappear? If so, she was wrong.

The stuffed animal in her grip nearly fell out of her arms; she had to fumble to catch it. Something was wrong. She had to hurry. “Papa!” Lacey demanded, stomping her foot until the entire funeral turned to look at her. “Get up!”

As the shadows began to chatter, her father stumbled to his feet. He was dead drunk.

At seven, Lacey had just assumed he was sick as well. The switching of moods, being ill on the floor, sleeping constantly. All the same symptoms as Mama’s. Lacey had tried to take care of him... until she had realized his illness was self-inflicted. That he had abandoned her.

She hadn’t bothered to go back for his funeral. After all, her father had died with her mother. They just had to wait to bury him.

She led him to the casket but she had to fight to keep hold of the two things in her hand. The stuffed animal was a weight, dragging her down. Lacey clutched it to her chest as she tugged her father closer to their destination. Maurice staggered and stumbled, shadows of guests blocking their path at every turn. It did not deter her.

When they finally made it to the casket, Lacey tugged on his hand. “Up,” she commanded and lost in his own daze, he complied. As he hoisted her onto his shoulders, Lacey had to clutch at her stuffed animal in both hands as it threatened to fall away from her completely.

As Lacey laid eyes on her mother, her father went still underneath her, as did everything else in the room.

Except it wasn’t Colette French, ravaged by cancer, lying in the casket. Instead, Lacey’s own face looked back up at her. Her eyes were open but blank, the life had gone out of them.

“This is your fate, Belle.”

Regina appeared on the other side of the casket. She was dressed in Graham’s hunter outfit, the black mask in her hair and her eyes as cold as ice. “No matter where you go, or what you do, you won’t see the end of this year. I’ll make certain of it.”

Lacey, still a child, simply held her stuffed animal tighter and squeezed it for all she was worth. She pressed her face into the fur, the warmth reassuring as the world spun out from around her. “It’s okay,” she whispered into the matted fur. “We’re okay. Hold on to me. Hold on.”

“What are you doing?” Regina demanded, but it was not Regina’s voice. “Stop that! Stop it I say!”

“I’m here,” Lacey whispered. “I’m not going to leave you.”

There was a gasp and the stuffed animal’s arms came up to embrace Lacey in return. Except it wasn’t her childhood companion but Gold shaking in her arms as he gasped for breath against her
They were entwined with each other amongst the fallen leaves. Gold’s legs were twisted in the fabric of her skirt, his head on her chest as he shivered. Lacey pushed the sweat-stained hair out of his face, and simply let him catch his breath.

“B-Belle?”

“I’m right here,” she said but she did not release him. “I got you.”

The ambassador lifted his head, their eyes locking as they both tried to shake the demons haunting them. Lacey did not ask him what had finally laid him low, but now she could see the signs that he had been just as haunted in the last two spells.

There were tears in his eyes, but there was something else too. There, in the odd quiet of the woods surrounded by fallen leaves, Gold’s lips parted and his eyes drifted down to her lips. He hovered over her, the shadows darkening around them as the afternoon started to fade into the early evening. Lacey stayed perfectly still, knowing there was something different here, something she was not quite ready to name.

“Belle, I...” his voice was the only sound in the world. “I-”

The only sound.

Lacey grabbed him and rolled the both of them to the side seconds before the spell exploded in the spot where they had lain. The earth shuddered and dirt and rocks sprayed them both as Gothel came out of the trees.

“My, my,” she crooned. “What do we have here?”

Chapter End Notes

Heavy chapter but it was really important for me to revisit Lacey's traumas.

After losing Graham and entering Fae, Lacey views Regina as an antagonist and the ultimate culmination of everything she has faced in Fae, everything and everyone she has lost. Gothel is toying with Lacey's main goal of "getting back home" by showing her that nowhere is safe for her.

But despite everything, Lacey does know a place where she is safe: the Dark Castle with the Imp. (Whether she likes it or not) Which leads to the scene with the Imp as a monster. Gothel is manipulating Lacey's own fears and doubts and using them against her. The one person protecting her twisted into the real threat.

And lastly, the funeral scene. Gothel has to dig deep here- but this is something Lacey has dealt with since she was a kid. The first two surprised and unsettled her because she still has not come to terms with her journey in Fae. The root of this childhood scene is more about how Lacey sees herself now.

With Ariel, Lacey was more of a mentor/big sister. She taught her, protected her, bickered with her- they had a deep fondness for each other. With Gretel, Lacey was more of a babysitter, they didn't really get to know each other but Lacey was
responsible for her. Both relationships Lacey chose her role. In this arc, Rapunzel has put Lacey in the "mother" role of being a caregiver, leader, and teacher. And Lacey has no power over the willful teen's casting. (It is worth noting that Lacey had adopted Eugene to a degree as well, but his needs are significantly different than Rapunzel's and Lacey got to choose her role with him as well.)

Anyway, this chapter was meant to check in with Lacey and where she is in her own personal journey, with glimpses of Gold's as well.

Oh also, Gold was seconds away from kissing her in case that was not 100% clear.
The air was hazy as a fine mist of dirt drifted back down into the now sizzling, smoking gape in the earth. In the aftermath of Gothel’s attack, she was somehow still alive. Her eyes were blurred with tears from the ash and soot but miraculously, nothing hurt other than that and a loud ringing in her ears. Something had landed on top of her but when she tried to roll out from underneath it, it would not budge, if anything it clutched her tighter- Oh.

Reason slowly crept back in, though it was dulled by the attack on her senses. She was now all too aware that Gold lay sprawled over her.

His hip was pressed up against her stomach with his arm was draped around her waist. She had pulled him to the side, but he must have rolled them over and further out of harm’s way.

Gold slowly raised himself, his face swam in and out of focus. His mouth was moving but Lacey couldn’t make out the words. Steadying herself against the whirling world around them, Lacey pressed her forehead into Gold’s chest, hoping the rest of the world would fall away and just let her rest, just for a moment.

Gold had other ideas. His hands ran over her shoulders and down her arms, skimming across her neck before his fingers slide into her hair. Lacey moaned, not quite comprehending, as she leaned into his touch. Gold’s fingers did not linger but continued as if searching for something.

He grazed the spot just below her jaw and for a second, Lacey’s heart faltered as his eyes came into focus above her. Then, his fingers brushed lower down her neck and a ticklish sensation shot down Lacey’s spine. “Stopit,” she grumbled as she tilted her head away. “Tickles.”

“Belle, can you hear me?” The shaken man from moments before was gone. The ambassador was back in his place. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” she murmured. “Where’s...where’s Gothel?”

“Is she still alive then?” came the voice from across the glen. Leaves stirred and cracked underfoot as Gothel crept closer for a better look. “Pity.”

Lacey tensed, but Gold anticipated her thoughts. He caught hold of her chin, tilting it so she couldn’t look anywhere but directly up at him. There were flecks of gold in his dark eyes. It caught the fading light and sparked a memory…. As Lacey tried to recall where she had seen that color before, a lock of his hair fell down over his eyes. Lacey reached up to brush it away so she could get a better look.

She didn’t realize Gold was speaking until he caught her wrist. “Belle, listen to me. Stay down.” Gold leaned in closer, peering into her eyes. “Not concussed,” he said more to himself than to her. “I’ll handle this. Nod if you understand.”

He moved to stand but Lacey caught at his sleeve. “Wait,” she croaked. The world was still on a tilt, but if she squeezed her eyes closed, it calmed down just enough for her to catch her thoughts. “We should run, we can’t-”

“I’ll handle this!” Gold insisted.
“But-”

“For once, would you just trust me?”

Before she had a chance to tell him it wasn’t a lack of trust in him, something bright white hissed through the air. Sensing the magic, Lacey instinctively rolled to her left while Gold sprang away to the right.

Another spell exploded in the spot where they had just been. Lacey, lay dazed before something hot started to sting through her petticoats. Bolting upright, she hurried to beat out the small sparks that were burning through her brand new skirt. The sudden movement twisted her stomach violently, and she rolled to her side as bile rose up in her throat. She might not be concussed now, but she hadn’t eaten all day and her head was still swimming.

While Lacey tried not to be sick, Gold smoothly inserted himself between herself and the witch trying to kill them. He had leaves in his hair. His face was streaked with dirt and his clothes were covered in filth but his back was ramrod straight. “Enough! Do you truly seek quarrel with the Ninth Kingdom, Gothel?”

At his casual use of her true name, Gothel’s face curled back into a snarl. “I seek quarrel? You and your ilk are the ones who came into my forest to steal what was mine!” She lifted a pruned hand, shaking with fury at where Lacey lay in the leaves. “And that one- that one’s life was forfeit the moment she stepped foot in my domain!”

“I do not need to remind you that the Believer is under the protection of the Ninth Kingdom,” Gold said. “As was the boy-”

“The boy?” Gothel threw her head back in a laugh that wracked her whole body into convulsions. “That creature was better off dead. It would be a favor to end his miserable existence.”

As her equilibrium returned, Lacey pushed herself up to her elbows. She fought back another wave of nausea but the world stopped spinning long enough for her to get her feet beneath her. She staggered into Gold who had to catch her and hold her upright. He opened his mouth to reprimand her but Lacey clutched at his shoulders. “We should run.”

“Run? You can barely stand-”

The hag spat at their feet. The dry leaves sizzled and screamed as the acid phlegm ate its way to the earth underneath. “You like deals...Hand over the Believer and I’ll fetch you a Crocus myself. Better yet, I’ll let you leave my forest with your life.”

“If you think I’m fool enough to make a deal with you, you’re growing senile in your old age,” Gold replied. Lacey clutched at his arm but he ignored her, his entire focus on the witch across from them, within striking distance. If Gothel attacked them, there would be no escaping. Their only hope was diplomacy. God help them. “And I’ll remind you Gothel that you attacked without any provocation-”.

Gothel bared her gums in a silent hiss. “Without provocation? Two of my sisters. Dead at her hands. For that alone, our law dictates she pay with her life.”

“The Laws of the Nine do not call for blood for blood,” Gold pointed out. “Magic does not guarantee immortality, Gothel. They challenged the Ninth Kingdom’s will. Their demise was their own hubris.”

“They sought no quarrel with the Ninth Kingdom until you brought her to their doorstep,” Gothel
snarled as she pointed an arthritic claw towards Lacey. “Just as you did here. You brought her to my woods. To my realm.”

“Stealing the diadem was not the wisest move,” Gold replied as if they were discussing a business arrangement. “You must have known it would raise suspicions.”

Gothel bristled. “I did what had to be done for my child-”

“Your child?!”

Lacey’s last nerve had been shredded in Gothel’s little funhouse mirror spell and fury. The aftereffects of the violent spells had shaken her but as her senses returned, so did her outrage.

“Belle…” Gold warned but it was too late for common sense.

It erupted in her as abruptly as any spell Gothel could throw. “Rapunzel is not your daughter, you vicious, vile-!”

“She is mine! I protected her!” Gothel shouted over Lacey’s tirade. “I kept her safe from everyone who would harm her! I alone understand her- I alone care for her! I alone love her!”

“ You stole her! Locked her in a tower! Lied to her!”

“I did what was best for her!” Gothel decreed as she rose herself up to her full height. There was a tingling in the air. “I am her mother!”

“No!” Lacey’s hands curled into fists at her side as she hurled back abuse. “You’re just some evil bitch who manipulated an isolated and lonely kid into thinking abuse was love.”

Gold wrapped his fingers around Lacey’s wrist. “Enough,” he hissed but his words were in the wind.

Lacey tugged her arm free and continued on, unable to stop herself. “Over my dead body will you lay a finger on that girl ever again.”

“Over your dead body?” Gothel repeated in a hoarse whisper. “So be it!”

The air grew sparse as it was sucked out of the clearing. With a cry of fury, the hag hurled a spell directly at Lacey’s head. Too close to duck or dodge out of the way, Lacey could only flinch, eyes shut tight against the sight of her own death.

But it did not come. Instead, the air stirred around her face as traces of magic whisked past her. The magic had found another target.

Lacey opened her eyes just as Gold staggered backward into her with a grunt. Lacey, not expecting the sudden weight, nearly dropped him.

“Gold?”

His hands were clasped over his throat, blood welling between his fingertips. He was trying to say something, but blood just bubbled up from his lips. A diagonal wound slashed across his front, it had hit just to the left of his neck and cut down, down, down to his right hip. The cut was clean, deep enough to nick the artery at his throat. Lacey struggled to hold him upright, but blood coated her fingertips. She gripped the sodden material of his coat but it was already drenched with blood. Lacey staggered, lowering him to the cold ground.
In the silence of the woods, the clearing echoed with Gold’s strained gurgles as he fought to breathe. His eyes were closed, flickering as he slipped away. Lacey shook him. He couldn’t go to sleep, he couldn’t- “Gold!” Lacey pressed her already stained red hands against the wound at his neck, trying to staunch it. The blood burned sensation back into Lacey’s frozen fingers. It galvanized her and she shook him again. “Gold! Don’t you dare die on me. Don’t you dare-”

He caught at her hands but he could not hold on to them. Both of their fingers were slick and stained with blood. “What?” she asked him. “Gold, what is it-?”

He lifted a hand towards her, willing her to understand. “R-r-run,” he managed and his eyes slipped closed.

Lacey whimpered, but the noise struck her in her throat and choked her. She grasped his chest, searching for a heartbeat, her mouth uttering pleas that fell on deaf ears.

“By all means, keep begging.” Gothel either did not notice Gold still lived or did not care. The witch bent down, her breath rancid. “It’ll be such a nice touch to the story I’ll tell Regina when I bring her your head.”

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Lacey wondered where The Imp was. He had the knack of appearing at the most unlikeliest of moments, but perhaps he trusted Gold to handle whatever arose. But now Gold lay dying, and she was next.

Lacey moved to stand, but it was too late. Gothel hovered over Lacey; her wrinkled hand caressed Lacey’s curls. Without warning, the witch’s nails dug deep into Lacey’s scalp to draw her head back, exposing her throat. There was a flash of silver as a knife appeared in Gothel’s other hand. It gleamed as bright as any moon in the dusk.

The shadows were growing darker now as the sun began to set. Gold’s chest rose and fall in jerks, and blood continued to bubble as he labored to keep breathing. As she stared up at the sky, nothing came to Lacey but a memory.

In college, on a lark, Lacey had taken a self-education class. She had ended up dropping out of it, having been more interested in the instructor than the lessons. But the first class had covered something rather simple. Something Lacey had never quite forgotten though she had scoffed at the idea of ever having to use it.

“As much I as would love to make this last,” Gothel said as she raised the knife higher. “We don’t have much time.”

No, they didn’t. It was now or never.

Locking her core, Lacey reached up and clasped both of her own hands over Gothel’s claw where it clutched her curls. Her elbows came up over face and she twisted on her back heel and ducked under Gothel’s arm.

Gothel attempted to lash out with the knife, but when Lacey popped up, still clutching Gothel’s hand in her hair, Gothel was thrown off balance. Lacey twisted to the left and Gothel howled as her arm strained with Lacey’s momentum. Grasping Gothel’s hand on her head, Lacey pulled as hard as she could and there was a cracking noise as the witch’s wrist snapped.

Gothel’s screech echoed throughout the silent forest. The elderly witch fell to her knees, cradling her wrist as Lacey staggered away from her. Gold lay beyond Gothel, out of her reach now. Lacey took a step towards him but his last word rang in her head.
Run.

If she stayed, she too was as good as dead.

With one last look at where Gold lay, Lacey turned and fled into the forest. Gothel’s curses following after her. The only way to go was forward so Lacey plunged deeper into the woods. If she stumbled back through the spells, she would be easy prey. The time spent in those illusions may have felt like mere minutes but night was falling in the Infinite Forest. The whole day had passed in those waking dreams.

Lacey pushed aside branches and stumbled over roots. She ran as fast as she dared as the shadows deepened and night fell, taking some comfort in the sounds of the evening. An owl hooted nearby, and something scurried out of her path as she crashed through the bushes.

All of this for what? They had been so close! So close to returning Rapunzel home to her parents...but Eugene had vanished, and now Rapunzel would be locked back up in her tower- never knowing the truth and Gold- Gold was...

Lacey couldn’t think about Gold. The smell of copper would not leave her no matter how fast she ran. The noises of the forest grew louder and louder as she ran, a sign Gothel had not given pursuit quite yet, but over it all, Lacey could still hear Gold’s dying gasps.

Lacey continued on her mindless flight, hardly caring where she was going until her foot skidded out from underneath her. Her arms wavered but the earth had disappeared from beneath her feet and she plummeted downwards into a small ravine.

With a splash, she ended up in a small creek bed. Freezing water soaked through her dress and cloak in an instant and brought her back to reality as she gazed up at the stars slowly appearing in the night sky.

Lacey groaned, sitting up gingerly. Her back was sore from the impact but she had only fallen a few feet. Nothing seemed twisted or broken but she stayed there for a moment, her hands in the freezing cold water. Pink tendrils washed downstream as the creek rinsed away the blood. Besides her, the bag with Rapunzel’s tiara bobbed beside her on top of the flowing water.

More blood. More death. Following after her like a phantom and striking down anyone who so much as wandered into her path.

What would The Imp say when he heard his most trusted aide was dead? Protecting her?

Why had Gold jumped in front of her? Why would he-

Too many questions haunted her. Too many deaths were on her head. None of this was supposed to happen-

Lacey tipped her head back and let loose a primal scream. Her mouth stretched, her face taut as she released every frustration she had into the world with that one long unholy shriek. Her elbows were bent to her chest as her palms faced the heavens. Her fingers curled as if to catch whatever answers the universe might supply. Lacey screamed until tears pricked her eyes and her whole body started to shake from lack of air.

She did not care if Gothel heard it. The old hag was welcome to come and try to finish what she started. Lacey wouldn’t make it easy on her.

The scream died away as Lacey gasped for breath. The gasp turned into a sob, and then another
and another as Lacey pressed the heel of her hand to her eyes and began to sob.

“H-hello?”

Lacey stifled her sobs as best she could. It was too dark to see, but the voice had come from the trees above the ravine, the far side from which Lacey had come. Someone rustled along the path, agonizingly slow. “Who’s there?” Lacey demanded as something like hope started to burn in her chest. “Rapunzel?”

“Belle, is that...,” the voice hiccuped, “is that you?”

Lacey made her way to the other side of the creek, ignoring the freezing needles of cold stabbing through her slippers. The girl’s head popped out from a tangle of briars. Her braid was in shamble, and a large swath of it fell down the side of the ravine, nearly onto Lacey’s upturned face. “Belle!” the girl half sobbed in relief. “It is you!”

Lacey tossed a look over her shoulder but the forest on the far side of the creekbed was still humming with noises of crickets and the rustle of wind. “What are you doing here?” Lacey asked when she was certain there was no immediate danger. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t...I don’t know,” Rapunzel sniffled.

The forest was full of the noise of things stirring in the night, which at least meant Gothel was not nearby. Still, they needed to keep moving. If Lacey’s scream didn’t bring Gothel right to them, it would bring something possibly just as bad. The sides of the ravine were too steep for Lacey to climb. Lacey ran a hand across the expanse right in front of her to see if there might be any footholds but it was slippery with mud. No roots or crevices.

Rapunzel carried on above her, “Belle, I’m s-s-scared. I’ve had the most t-t-terrifying day-”

“Rapunzel, listen to me,” Lacey said as she tried very hard to keep her voice calm. “I need to find a way up to you. We have to keep going-”

“Going?” Rapunzel squeaked. “Oh, no, please! My tower isn’t far from here, we could just-”

“Rapunzel!” Lacey called up. “Hey, hey, we need to find Eugene-”

This was apparently the wrong thing to say. With another sob, the girl shook her head violently and more hair tumbled down the side of the ravine as she wailed, “Eugene’s dead! And it’s all my fault!”

The bottom of Lacey’s stomach plummeted. Gold’s face, speckled with blood as he tried to talk- Lacey clenched her eyes shut. She had to stay in control. One foot in front of the other. Lacey took a long breath as Rapunzel continued to cry. As calmly as she could, Lacey asked, “Rapunzel...did you...did you actually... see Eugene die or did you just dream it?”

Rapunzel shook her head, and more hair slipped out of her braid. “I...I saw it. We were running-running from the bandits and he jumped over the fence and I slipped off his back-”

“He was a horse?” Lacey demanded. “When he died?”

Rapunzel whimpered. “I should have stayed in the tower,” she sniffled. “But I had to get to you - to warn you-”
“Rapunzel,” Lacey said, keeping her voice light. “Eugene wouldn’t be a horse during the day, and you’ve only been here since this morning. Whatever you saw… whatever you experienced, it wasn’t real. It was a spell.”

“A spell?” Rapunzel sputtered.

Lacey nodded earnestly. “It was just magic designed to scare you. Gold and I saw things too. Terrible things. Worse things we could think of…but none of it was true. The dreams just wanted us to give up.”

“Give up what?” Rapunzel sniffled.

Lacey shrugged. “Hope.”

“Hope?”

It was not a question of what hope was, but why it was important. Lacey sat back down in the creek as she rubbed at her brow with the back of her hand. “Rapunzel, when we met in the tower…you didn’t want to come with us. You had no idea what the world was like. Did you ever want to know?”

“Oh course,” Rapunzel replied indignantly. “I asked Mother all the time…and she always told me the world had been wonderful once…long ago. Now, it was full of death and horrors and liars and thieves. My home was the only safe place left in the world.”

“When you put it like that,” Lacey sighed. “Why did you go back into the woods? This morning? Why didn’t you just come with us to Corona?”

Rapunzel did not answer immediately. “I thought I saw…Eugene by the forest but…when I got here, I couldn’t find him and then I was…. I was scared,” she answered as she looked up at the sliver of moons barely visible through the clouds. “Mother always said I was too…stupid to survive in the world. She told me….I would die if I left the tower….that the world was full of monsters and madmen….but it’s not. It’s full of people like you and Eugene and the Sprats and kelpies-”

“Okay, well, kelpies are kind of dangerous usually-”

“Eugene had been scared too,” Rapunzel sighed. “He told me…he told me sometimes when he got overwhelmed he would…take a long walk. He said it always made him feel better. I’ve never gone on a long walk before,” Rapunzel confessed, her voice barely over a whisper. “So, I just…kept walking and…then…I found him but then there were the bandits…and then he died and I got lost and even though I was scared, I just made myself keep walking.”

Lacey, half frozen from the water soaking her to the bone, curled into a ball where she sat, her chin on her knees as she tried to rub some life back into her toes. “So, you made it through all of those spells because you what? Just kept walking?”

“I didn’t know they were spells,” Rapunzel sniffled. “First Eugene died…and then I was all alone and Mother didn’t come and-”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Lacey reassured her. “It’s over now. And…you were right. I should have never made you leave the tower. I should have listened..”

Here in the creekbed, the wind was not as strong but as another gust of wind came along, Rapunzel’s hair picked up in the breeze and floated over to where Lacey sat. The ends tickled her face.
“Oh, Belle,” Rapunzel hiccuped. “No! I...I’m glad I left. I wouldn’t have met the Sprats or seen a pig or gone for a walk.” The girl shivered as the wind picked up and the trees moaned and bent under the force. “I want to see the Sun Court and see other kingdoms and meet more people...and...and I’m a terrible daughter for wanting that!”

“Rapunzel, wanting to have your own life does not make you a terrible daughter. A mother...a mother wants what’s best for their kids but locking you up all alone in a tower...isn’t protecting you. It’s hiding you.”

“From what?”

Lacey scrubbed her face with her hands. Rapunzel had a way of cutting through the bullshit sometimes that impressed Lacey despite herself. “You really want to know?”

Rapunzel nodded.

“No, I mean, are you sure?” Lacey repeated. “Because it’s not going to be something you’re going to want to hear.”

Rapunzel nodded, more fervent this time.

“So, don’t accuse me of lying to you or go rushing off into the forest without me-”

“I wouldn’t!”

“Because if you accuse me of lying, or refuse to believe me, I swear to God, I’ll-”

“Just tell me, Belle!”

“You’re a princess!” Lacey blurted. “Gothel’s not your mother. She’s a witch who stole you and locked you up in a tower so your real parents could never find you.”

Rapunzel blinked. “A princess?”

Lacey sighed, deflated now. “Your parents are the King and Queen of Corona, the Sun Court of the Second Kingdom. They’ve never stopped looking for you. And even when Gold...tried to convince them otherwise...they know you’re out there and they haven’t given up hope.”

“But...but that’s impossible,” Rapunzel almost inaudibly. “I would...I would know...Mother wouldn’t-”

“She’s not your mother,” Lacey said wearily. “For one thing, you don’t look a thing like her. She’s got skin the color of a moldy apple and you….you look just like your mother. Your real mother. I knew who you were the second I saw you. You have her eyes.” There was silence from above and Lacey buried her face into her hands. “Not like it matters. We’re either going to freeze to death or-”

Without warning, the entire bulk of Rapunzel’s hair fell over the side of the ravine. Lacey jumped to her feet as Rapunzel’s face appeared over the edge. Her eyes were narrowed in determination. “Grab on!” she called out.

“Are you nuts?” Lacey demanded. “What do you want me to do climb up your hair?”

“That’s exactly what you’re going to do,” Rapunzel replied. “There’s a tree root up here. I’m on one side, my hair is on the other. Rappelling. Remember?”
Lacey gawked at her. “Rapunzel, I’m not-”

“I have a dream,” Rapunzel said determinedly over Lacey’s protests, which was uncharacteristic for the usually sweet-tempered and quiet young woman. “Sometimes. Where there’s a woman smiling down at me and she...she has green eyes. Like mine. With stars in her hair.”

Lacey reached into her bag, still miraculously under her cloak. It was wet along on the back edge from her dip in the creek but there were only a few things in there besides-

“Like this?” Lacey tossed it up and Rapunzel had to lean over the edge precariously but she managed to catch it.

The girl gazed at it for a long moment before she nodded. “Yea. Like this.”

“Rapunzel,” Lacey started. “I know...it’s a lot to take in but...I was just trying to help. You were...scared and I thought if you could just see Corona...meet your parents...you’d understand.”

“You could have just told me-”

“Would have believed me?”

Rapunzel shook her head. “Probably not,” she said in a small voice. “Belle...what...what are they like? My...parents?”

Lacey wavered. “Fair,” she decided, remembering their reluctance to punish Eugene for doing what he thought was right and how they had seized upon the opportunity to simply banish him. “Beloved by their people...kind.”

“Kind,” Rapunzel wondered. “Mother always says kind people were fools.”

“Gothel wanted you complacent, so she lied to you and scared you and kept you away from the world so you would never know the truth.”

“A princess,” Rapunzel repeated as she turned the tiara over in her hands. “But I’m--I’m just a silly girl, how could I be a princess?”

“You could always ask your mom,” Lacey suggested. “Your real one, Queen Arianna of Corona. Would you like to meet her?”

Rapunzel nodded. “I...I think so.”

Lacey pinched the brow of her nose. Gold was gone, but if they could get back to Hill House she could get them to Corona. Perhaps there...she might persuade a grateful King and Queen for help in finding Eugene. Or...perhaps The Imp would pluck her up and lock her up in Rapunzel’s tower for the rest of the year in punishment for getting his most trusted aide murdered.

She couldn’t think of those things now. She had to focus on one thing at a time, and right now, it was getting out of the ravine. “Okay, then hold onto something,” Lacey instructed as she wrapped both of her fists into the strands.

This could actually work.

“This is going to hurt,” Lacey warned as she was crouched down in the mud of the creek. Rapunzel grunted, a sharp noise, but did not cry out or fall over the side of the ravine’s edge.

“Alright,” Lacey said to herself as she tried to focus. Raising one foot up to balance against the
ravine wall, Lacey called out a warning, “hold on!” before she lifted her other foot from the ground.

There was a moment of discombobulation as Rapunzel’s hair swayed sickeningly but Lacey was only hovering over the ground. Pressing through the soles of her feet, she kicked off the wall and hauled herself upward. Her movements swung her back towards the wall in a pendulum motion but her feet hit just enough to steady herself. Lacey began to slowly but surely pull herself up using Rapunzel’s hair.

Her hands started to sting as the strands bit into the soft skins between her fingers but Lacey gritted her teeth and continued upwards. The ravine was only six feet or so, but her arms started to strain rapidly. She had to pause a few times before she made far enough up where Rapunzel was able to reach out and grab Lacey’s shoulders to haul her up onto the embankment.

They lay there panting as the sliver of one moon came into sight above them. Rapunzel was gingerly touching the roots of her head, wincing slightly as Lacey ignored the burning in her limbs. “I don’t ever want to do that again,” Lacey declared to the world at large.

“I don’t either,” Rapunzel grumbled. “You’re heavier than you look.”

Lacey muttered a half-hearted insult in return but it fell on deaf ears. They lay there for a moment or two before Rapunzel rolled over to her side. Her face scrunched up as she regarded her in the moonlight. “You’re covered in mud,” she said with a moue of distaste. “And...what is that?”

Blood, Lacey’s mind supplied helpfully. Lacey just shook her head. Her fall in the creek meant her entire dress was soaked, the dark fabric clung to her. She should be freezing but between the climb and the exhaustion, all she felt was numb. “It’s nothing,” she lied as she stared up at the night sky.

Rapunzel was not that easily dissuaded. ‘Where’s Ambassador Gold? Didn’t you say he was with you?’

“He couldn’t make it,” came a voice from the woods. Gothel appeared out of the shadows into the meager light of the moon. “I’m afraid you’ll just have to make do with me.”

Chapter End Notes

Two more chapters before we leave the Second Kingdom behind but man- how are we going to leave it is the question...
As Gothel emerged from the trees, a dull, pulsing rage simmered back to life in Lacey’s chest. She bit down hard on her lip; she had to ignore her more violent impulses. She had to stay calm.

Looking at her, no one would have ever guessed had Gothel had just killed the man in question in cold blood. The witch from the woods was gone, replaced by a benign grandmother figure. There was no sign of a broken wrist or any fatigue whatsoever. Gothel merely looked as if she was out on a midnight stroll through the woods.

The power cloaking Gothel was subtle but effective; a mask covering the evil hiding underneath. No wonder Rapunzel had been blind to the truth. If it were not for the steady strum of magic, so subtle it was almost easy to miss, Lacey may have been fooled as well.

“Rapun-” Lacey began but Gothel was quicker. In a subtle twist of Gothel’s fingers, the words disappeared from Lacey’s mouth. Recognizing the symptoms of a silencing spell, Lacey did not bother to keep trying.

Gothel appeared to have no intention of revealing herself to Rapunzel and if she didn’t want to risk showing Rapunzel her true colors...namely that she was, in fact, a witch… Lacey had a chance, slim as it may be, to actually survive this encounter.

Gold forgotten, Rapunzel stumbled to her feet, looking as she might weep with relief. “Mother! Oh, Mother. I’m so glad to see you!”

Despite this warm welcome, the witch did not move to embrace Rapunzel; she remained just out of reach. She gave no indication she saw Lacey at all. Her eyes flickered over Rapunzel’s deshabille with distaste. “Rapunzel,” Gothel admonished. “Where have you been? I’ve been worried sick.”

Rapunzel flushed. “I...I.”

Gothel took pity on her. She sighed, drawing it out to indicate her exasperation. “Never mind that now. Whatever have you done to your hair, pet? Come, let Mother see.”

But Rapunzel couldn’t. Her hair was caught up in branches and around roots, dangling over the ravine as well as half underneath Lacey. The girl tugged at it to shuffle forward, clutching at various locks of her hair in acute embarrassment.

“I...I had braided it,” Rapunzel explained as she self-consciously clutched at the remnants of said braid. “It fell out while I was running”

“Braided?” Gothel chided. “Well, you musn’t have done a very good job. Besides, you look so much better with your hair down.” Gothel reached out to lift a hank of the dirty, tangled hair wrapped around Rapunzel’s hand. “Ugh,” she murmured, stopping short. “It’s filthy”

Rapunzel lifted her other hand up to her forehead to push the hair out of her eyes, the same hand clutching her tiara.

Gothel’s eyes narrowed. “What do you have in your hand, Rapunzel?”
Rapunzel froze as shoulders became hunched and tense, the very picture of a guilty child. “It’s...a tiara, Mother.”

Gothel tsked, “I know what a tiara is, Rapunzel. Where did you get it?”

Master manipulators were always good actors. Gothel did not show any sign she recognized it, much less had been the one to steal it from the royal palace.

Lacey moved to get to her feet, trying her best not to tug at Rapunzel’s hair that still lay half underneath her. She planned to circle as close as she dared, perhaps try and jump on Gothel from behind while she was distracted-

But Rapunzel felt her stirring. Not taking her eyes of her mother, she waved a hand as discreetly as she dared behind her back, indicating Lacey to stay put.

Gothel’s eyes cut to her. At the sight of Lacey, bloody and exhausted, Gothel’s face wrinkled into a knowing smile. “Ah, and who is this? You haven’t introduced me.”

“Oh. Um. Mother, this is Belle,” Rapunzel told her. “She’s friends with Ambassador Gold.”

Lacey’s fingers curled into the palm of her hand; fingernails, still coated in blood, dug into the soft skin there. Rapunzel did not appear to be in any physical danger; Lacey could not say the same.

“Yes, they’ve been very kind to me,” Rapunzel answered, oblivious.

“Oh? And was it your little friend here who gave you this tiara?”

Rapunzel nodded miserably.

“You know? Because they’re thieves, pet. They stole it and had you carry it for them. This one here would see you arrested in her stead, dragged to the dungeons where you’d rot for the rest of your life”

In response, Lacey brandished her middle finger. Gothel may not have recognized the gesture but she got the meaning of it clear enough. Her eyes narrowed and she raised a clawed hand without thinking- Rapunzel made a valiant attempt to bring her mother’s attention back to her. “No, it was nothing like that. Belle returned it to me.”

“Returned?” The question was a veiled dagger.

Rapunzel nodded miserably.

“You know? Because they’re thieves, pet. They stole it and had you carry it for them. This one here would see you arrested in her stead, dragged to the dungeons where you’d rot for the rest of your life”

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“Returned?” The question was a veiled dagger.

Rapunzel didn’t quail. “It’s mine, Mother.”

If Gothel was surprised by this, she did not show it. She threw her head back and laughed as if Rapunzel had told her a great joke. “Yours? Oh, Rapunzel, Don’t make me laugh. What would you do with a tiara?”


“Oh? Well, let’s see if it suits you. Here, let me.” Snatching it out of Rapunzel’s hands, Gothel placed it in Rapunzel’s hair. “Oh, dear. It doesn’t suit you at all.”

Hurt, Rapunzel reached up as if to tug off the tiara.

Gothel stepped back a bit to better examine Rapunzel, her nails biting into the girl’s chin to tilt her face up to better stare down at her. “Rapunzel, have you been eating sweets again? What have I told you? Your face is all splotchy. No, daughter of mine should look like some common
milkmaid. If you don’t care how you look, that’s fine but I have to look at you.”

Rapunzel wrenched her face from Gothel’s grasp. There were no traces of tears in the girl’s bright emerald eyes. “Mother, why are you here?”

Unused to this calm confidence, Gothel startled. “Why...am I here?” She recovered quickly. “I came to save my daughter from the thieves who stole her from me.”

“No one stole me, Mother..”

“Oh, so you wanted to leave the tower?” Gothel asked.

Rapunzel faltered. “No…” she confessed. “But they were only trying to help-”

“Help? Help you how? I was worried sick. No idea where you were. You could have been dead for all I knew!”

“Mother, I’m sorry,” Rapunzel hurried to apologize. “I never meant to worry you.”

“No thought whatsoever of me,” Gothel continued over her.

“I was safe,” Rapunzel tried to assure her. “I was with my friends.” She said the word proudly, if not a little shyly. It occurred to Lacey that Rapunzel had never had friends before, and how much it must have meant for her to be able to say that.

Gothel wasn’t having it. She leveled a bony finger at Lacey. “You think they’re your friends? They don’t care about you, you naive little fool. They were only using you. As soon as they can, they’d have turned on you. Sell you to one of those men I warned you about-”

Lacey could not tell who was more surprised when Rapunzel cut off Gothel with a fierce “No!” The witch stared back at the girl as if seeing someone new. Rapunzel’s emerald eyes were narrowed in grim determination. “You don’t understand.”

The eerie silence that always accompanied Gothel stretched around them. The witch laid a shaking hand to her chest as if wounded. “I don’t understand?” she breathed.

Rapunzel wavered. “I just meant-”

“Rapunzel, what have I taught you?” Gothel continued over her. “You can’t trust anyone in the world but me. I alone love you. I alone understand you. Whatever this degenerate has told you is a lie. She would just have you walk like a lamb to the slaughter-”

The tiara was lopsided on Rapunzel’s head; it began to slide back a bit. The girl had to clamp a hand to her head to keep it in place. “Belle wouldn’t do that. She’s my friend.”

This time her voice was not as confident.

Gothel seized upon this doubt. She began to stroke Rapunzel’s hair. It was a familiar, intimate gesture and even Rapunzel faltered at this unexpected warmth. “Your friend? What have I told you about friends? They just use you and leave you. I’m the only friend you need. Don’t you love your Mother?”

“Of course, I do...” Rapunzel melted into Gothel’s embrace. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be ungrateful, Mother. I’m just so tired....”

“You do look exhausted. Let’s get you back to your tower. You can sleep for as long as you’d
“Mother, I don’t actually want to go back to the tower. I want to… I was hoping to go to Corona.”

The air grew thicker around them as the magic built. Lacey didn’t dare come any closer. This was not her fight.

“Corona?” Gothel repeated incredulously. “Why would you want to go there? It’s a den of sin. Only bandits and thieves live there-”

“Mother, I don’t want to argue.”

“Then, do as you are told,” Gothel told her. “I alone know what is best for you.”

“But Belle said-”

“Belle again?” Gothel’s fists curled at her side. “She’s a liar. All of them are liars.”

“But-!”

“They took you from your home-”

“Mother-”

“They confused you-”

“Please, just listen!”

“They lied to you!”

“You’re the one who lied!” Rapunzel exclaimed, losing all restraint. “You’ve lied to me my entire life and you’re lying to me now!”

Gothel went eerily still. “How dare you to speak to me like that. I am your mother-!”

“You’re not my mother!”

There was dead silence in the clearing. The harmless grandmother faded away until Gothel stood tall and straight. “What did you just say to me?”

Rapunzel swallowed audibly but she seized upon some semblance of courage. “You…you’re not my mother,” she said, her voice shaking but determined. “My mother is Queen Arianna of Corona.”

Gothel’s face darkened. “There’s no such person as Queen Arianna. It’s just another lie she fed to you.”

“I don’t believe you,” Rapunzel replied timeously. “She has green eyes like me and she’s kind and good. Like me.”

“You are not kind or good. You are a hurtful, spiteful, hateful child who wants to break your Mother’s heart.”

Doubt flickered across Rapunzel’s face. “Mother, I just...I just want to see it with my own eyes.”

The girl took the witch’s hands, carefully and reverently. “Please, can’t you just take me? Just for a little while? If it’s really not true, we can go home-”

Gothel wrenched her hands away. “Enough. You are going back up into your tower where you will
stay and be thankful that I still even want you after all of this foolishness!” Rapunzel staggered as if she had been hit. “After everything I’ve done for you,” Gothel continued, heedless of her daughter’s pain. “And to be repaid like this! I won’t stand for it, you ungrateful brat!”

“I’m not a little girl anymore!” Rapunzel insisted. “Stop treating me like one!”

“Oh?” Gothel’s voice was a whisper. “So, you survive a few nights in the woods and you don’t need me anymore. You’re all grown-up now? Fine! Then, find your own way out of the woods!” As Gothel spoke, her magic hung heavy in the air around them, as thick as any summer thunderstorm. At this last exclamation, it struck.

There was a crack of thunder and on the far side of the ravine, a bolt of lightning came down from the heavens. The bolt was as black as pitch, jagged and raw. It struck the tallest tree just across the way, and the large tree split in half. Rapunzel screamed, throwing her hands over her ears as she fell to her knees. Lacey rushed to her just as Gothel disappeared from sight.

Without words, Lacey could only pull at Rapunzel’s hands, trying to get her to look up at her but the girl keened and cried, shaking in terror. Lacey raised her head, looking about to see if Gothel would strike again, but the forest sounds had returned. Creatures started to stir and cry around them as the inhabitants stirred back to life. Nearby, something crashed through the undergrowth.

Rapunzel lifted her face, her green eyes dark and mossy from tears. She cast her eyes about for her mother, ignoring Lacey entirely as if she wasn’t even there. “She left,” Rapunzel murmured, shocked. “She knows I’m scared of lightning...she wouldn’t...she-she”

Lacey was going to enjoy killing Gothel. She was going to enjoy it at almost as much as she was going to enjoy killing Regina. It wasn’t enough to manipulate and abuse her daughter, she had to terrify her, using all her fears and doubts against her like knives.

Lacey gathered Rapunzel’s face in between her hands and pressed a searing kiss to the girl’s forehead, hoping that would convey what she couldn’t say. Rapunzel stiffened and then melted into her, arms coming up as sobs poured out of her. Lacey stroked her back in circles, wanting to reassure her but not having the voice to do so.

After a while, Rapunzel sniffed and sat back. “Belle? What’s wrong? You’re never this quiet.”

Lacey would have laughed if she wasn’t so exhausted. Instead, she tapped her throat, mouthing a few words to illustrate she had no voice to speak. Rapunzel’s fingers brushed across Lacey’s lips. “Mother did this,” the girl said, her gaze worlds away. “I know because...I lose my voice sometimes too. It’ll come back,” she hurried to reassure her. “In a few days. It always comes back.”

Yesterday, this resigned acceptance to abuse would have enraged Lacey. Today, after seeing how Gothel’s manipulations firsthand, it broke her heart. Lacey brushed the tears from Rapunzel’s face, smiling as encouragingly as she could even as tears threatened to fall from her own eyes.

Gold was dead. Eugene lost. At this point, Lacey could only hope The Imp would realize something was wrong. He was never far away...so where was he now?

Rapunzel lifted her head, sniffing. “Do you smell something?” she asked, turning her head this way and that.

Lacey shook her head but then she smelled it too. Faint but growing stronger, the scent of smoke was on the wind. She lifted her head up to the tree which had been struck by the magic and found its charred and mangled husk had begun to smoke.
As they watched, a small flame bloomed to life in the hollow of the decimated tree trunk. Sparks started to shoot out, faster and faster, black and purple, arching further and further as they popped and fizzled. The leaves underneath the tree began to curl and smoke as they caught, black flame spreading out, greedy for more.

Clutching each other for support, they both stood. Around them, animals began to scream. The fire started to arch and spit, hissing as it hit the water in the creekbed below. It continued to lick over the edge, searching for a hold on the other side of the ravine.

For a moment, Lacey thought the fire would fizzle out, but all at once, four more flames caught. The branches wobbled as the fire began to eat its way toward the trunks. Gothel had left them little choice. They would have to run.

Lacey bent down to grab as much of Rapunzel’s hair as she could. Rapunzel hurried to gather the rest. They cast one more look at the bank across the way, just as the tree caught entirely, a black flickering candle in the darkness. Its splintered branches reached out in silent plea to its fellows and sparks began to jump from tree to tree.

Together, they turned as one and disappeared into the trees.

The fire followed.

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Sweat prickled under Lacey’s arms and across her upper lip, and her arms were sweating from the heavy, warm bundle of Rapunzel’s hair. They had been running for what felt like an hour. Lacey’s chest was tight from their quick pace and the overall lack of air, and all she could do was cough. Silently.

“Ouch!” Rapunzel cried out. Her hair had gotten caught in another low hanging branch. As Rapunzel tried to wrench free from the branches, the wind increased and her long, dark hair only got more entangled. Rapunzel dropped her armful of hair, which entangled in nearby roots. Lace tried to help but her own hands were full of hair. She could not even offer words of encouragement or point out that yanking at it wouldn’t help matters. With no voice, all she could do was watch in silence.

In a cry of defeat, Rapunzel collapsed to the ground. “I can’t!” she declared as she buried her face in her hands. “It’s no use! Mother was right. I’m a stupid, foolish, ungrateful girl-”

In the distance, there was the noise of animals breaking through the undergrowth of the forest, away from the all-consuming fire burning its way through their trees. The air was hot and sticky, and it was growing hard to breathe or to see as the fire grew closer. Gothel had no qualms of burning the whole forest to the ground if it meant she got what she wanted: Rapunzel alone and afraid.

If Lacey had time to braid her hair, perhaps they’d have a chance but the fire was growing rapidly and edging closer and closer no matter how fast they ran. Something ancient beat wildly in Lacey’s chest, an urge to run, an urge to flee and a twin knowledge that there was nowhere to go, nowhere to run that the flames would not follow.

There was no alternative. they had to keep going. Lacey squatted down beside where Rapunzel sat crying in the dirt. Rapunzel’s bottom lip trembled as more tears leaked from the corner of her eyes. “I can’t,” she sniffled. “Belle, I can’t-”

Lacey poked her, hard in the shoulder. Rapunzel yelped and batted her hand away but Lacey
repeated it, this time harder. Drops of sweat dripped down into Lacey’s eyes. It stung, her eyes already sensitive from the smoke. Lacey winced, wiping a sleeve across her brow when a flash of white caught the corner of her eye.

Lacey twisted to look into the overgrown forest to their right. Smoke wafted low among the bushes and green but had not quite obscured Lacey’s view yet. Another breeze found them, carrying the scent of ash, and as the branches of the trees waved, a flash of pure white flickered in the distance.

Rapunzel was still crying; Lacey held up a hand for silence. With a sniffle, Rapunzel bit down on her lip, not quite understanding but obeying. Lacey scanned the trees, but there was nothing but the usual forest noises.

She waited, holding her breath, and there, slightly to the left this time, the same flash of white. Lacey crept closer. Rapunzel followed after her, crawling on her hands and knees. There was no telling who or what was out here in the woods but it looked like- “It’s a horse!” Rapunzel exclaimed in a loud whisper.

The creature’s ears flickered. It did look just like a horse, except for the longhorn sticking out of its forehead.

The unicorn’s eyes were a dark purple, almost black. It regarded the two of them solemnly. The forest behind them was still burning, and flickers of orange and red were starting to lighten the sky between the tree’s branches.

“Do you think it’s friendly?” Rapunzel wondered.

Lacey didn’t know and she didn’t care. There was a bitter taste of disappointment in her mouth. She had let herself hope...just for a second that they had somehow stumbled upon Eugene. A stupid fantasy. She knew all too well the tricks of the Infinite Forest. Part of her was glad it was burning. Part of her wanted it to.

Lacey jerked her head back towards the path. They had to keep going.

Rapunzel did not budge. “What’s it doing?” Rapunzel asked as the unicorn tossed its shimmering head. The mane was more silver than the rest of the pure white body but it was starting to glow orange and red as the fire grew closer and closer. Rapunzel’s voice grew concerned. “Isn’t it going to run?”

Lacey shrugged and gestured for Rapunzel to follow but the girl did not stir. Lacey tapped the girl’s shoulder and jerked her head. It was time to go.

“We can’t just leave it,” Rapunzel argued. Lacey spread out her hands, helplessly. Rapunzel huffed at her. “We should try and warn it at least.”

Lacey was not certain how one warned a unicorn of an impending fire but she was coming to recognize that glint in Rapunzel’s eyes. With a silent grumble, Lacey pointed sharply at the ground, ordering Rapunzel to stay put.

Making as much noise as physically possible, Lacey climbed out from beneath the bushes. The unicorn, unfazed, simply continued to stand there.

Lacey made deliberate shoo-ing gestures to encourage the unicorn to run off but without a voice, she must not have appeared very threatening. Growing annoyed, Lacey stomped towards it, prepared to push at the great stupid beast until it moved away.
When she got almost within reach, the unicorn snorted and lowered its head in a clear warning. The horn was sharp and long and pointed right at her. Stopping dead in her tracks, Lacey eyed the horn warily. She held up her hands, palms out. There was no need to impale the messenger.

There was a cacophony of sound as Rapunzel crashed through the clearing, fighting to free her hair from the bushes and weeds. The unicorn raised its head as Rapunzel stumbled to a stop just beside Lacey. Lacey threw up her hands in frustration but Rapunzel barely noticed her. “Oh, it’s beautiful,” Rapunzel murmured.

Mesmerized, the girl moved closer to the beast for a better look. Lacey jumped to pull her back, but the unicorn tossed its head and whinnied a warning. Lacey froze but Rapunzel continued forward, murmuring soothing words of praise.

Thankfully, the unicorn did not seem to have a problem with Rapunzel. Curious, it took a step closer to meet her approach, sniffing the air. The lost princess raised her hand carefully, just like she had with Eugene, to let the unicorn inspect her.

The unicorn did not hesitate. It nuzzled into Rapunzel’s offered hand and then snorted into her palm, eliciting giggles from Rapunzel. With its blessing, the girl gently moved to brush the lock of hair on the crest of the unicorn’s head, just shy of where the horn jutted forth proudly into the air.

Lacey took a step to join them but the unicorn jerked its head to face her and shook its head in clear warning. She was not welcome.

Grumbling (silently) about stupid, magical beasts, Lacey pointed at Rapunzel and then back at herself. They were a package. Where Rapunzel went, so did Lacey. She wasn’t losing the princess now. Especially to a mythical horse with a horn on its head.

Rapunzel clasped Lacey’s hand to drag her up to the unicorn. Lacey’s struggled against the girl’s curiously strong grip but her voiceless protests went unheeded as she was drawn into impaling range. With a firm grip on Lacey’s wrist, Rapunzel presented her to the unicorn. "This is Belle. She’s a friend."

Lacey had to fight the urge to fidget under the unicorn’s solemn gaze. Finally, it snorted and shook it’s head before gently nuzzling for Lacey’s hands.

“See, she likes you!” Rapunzel cried in delight. “I knew she would. Isn’t she wonderful?”

This close, Lacey could see the sharp point of the curved horn in closer detail. It looked even deadlier up close. The smell of smoke was growing stronger now and the clearing had grown hazy. It was time to go. Lacey moved to take Rapunzel’s arm but the unicorn gently caught hold of Lacey’s sleeve with her teeth and tugged slightly over towards the left.

Lacey understood. The left was free of fire, but there was no path. They’d never make it if they went that way, not with all of Rapunzel’s hair.

Lacey bent down to pick up an armful of the thick, dark tresses and presented it to the unicorn with a raised eyebrow as if to say, “We can’t. See?”

The mysterious purple eyes gazed up this offering for a long moment before moving over to where Rapunzel stood. It exhaled in Rapunzel’s face, causing her to giggle. Satisfied, the creature slowly knelt down.

Looks like they had a ride.
The unicorn led the way through the forest’s thickets. It never hesitated or faltered as if knew exactly where they needed to go. Lacey wasn’t quite sure where that was, she didn’t have any better alternatives at the moment. So, she followed.

They had wrapped Rapunzel’s hair around her waist so she could ride. Her hair was coiled in loops and trailed down the girl’s legs but did not drag on the ground. Personally, Lacey thought it looked a bit silly but Rapunzel was happily chatting away with the unicorn, assuming that just like Eugene, the creature could understand her perfectly.

Which it probably did come to think of it.

Ash drifted on the wind, catching in Rapunzel’s dark hair. The fire had shifted. It was no longer at their backs but to their right now. Up ahead, the unicorn paused as if determining which way to go. There was only one way to go. The fire was herding them, Lacey was sure of it.

At this point, she didn’t know what else to do but let it. Her feet were sore from the uneven, rocky forest floor. Lacey had found half the tree roots with her ankles and the other half with her toes. She was wincing with every other step. Knowing she would be passed again soon, Lacey continued on past Rapunzel and the unicorn, robotically putting one foot in front of the other.

“Belle?”

Something was wrong. Lacey turned to find the unicorn sniffing the air to the right, where there were flames growing closer and closer. “She isn’t listening,” Rapunzel explained as she dug her heels into the unicorn’s side, trying to urge her forward. Making up its mind, the unicorn twisted to head directly towards the fire.

Lacey swore. She was done with all equine beasts after this.

Hurrying after it, Lacey carefully (the unicorn did have a rather large, pointy horn after all) stepped in front of the great beast and jerked her thumb over her shoulder. They needed to go back the way they had been headed.

The unicorn sidestepped her to continue forward and broke out into a trot. Rapunzel bounced up and down on its back as she twisted back towards Lacey. “Belle!” The last thing Lacey saw was the lost princess’ wide-eyed look of terror before she and the unicorn disappeared entirely into the trees.

Lacey ran after them, nearly falling twice before cutting her toe on a half-buried rock. Blood welled up in her shoe but she pressed on. She was already covered in blood and mud, what did a little more hurt?

Rapunzel managed to keep her head. “Belle!” she called from just ahead but out of sight. “Belle, over here!”

They were out sight but not far. At least the damned unicorn wasn’t spiriting the princess away. Taking more care to navigate the terrain, Lacey followed the path of broken twigs and crunched leaves. She came to another clearing, remarkably similar to the one they had met the unicorn earlier. Right down to another unicorn, though this one was kneeling in the grass, unmoving except the occasional flicker of its tail.

With a strong sense of deja vu, Lacey watched as Rapunzel slid off her unicorn to approach the second one. At the sound of her footsteps, the unicorn jerked it’s head about in alarm, revealing it
was in fact not a unicorn after all but just a plain, white horse.

Eugene.

He was covered in scratches, some deep, running all over his flank. His forelocks were filthy with mud and dirt and his belly was stained green and brown from where he had lain on the earth.

Rapunzel gave a cry of delight and flung herself at him. “We were so worried,” Rapunzel was telling him as she stroked the underside of his snout. “You disappeared and then I got lost in the woods. I would have been wandering forever if Belle hadn’t found me—”

At her name, the horse’s ears pricked up as if listening for her but he did not turn to look for her. A cold rock formed in the pit of Lacey’s stomach.

“Eugene, we met a unicorn,” Rapunzel was saying, “She led us straight to you.”

The unicorn was growing agitated. The wind had shifted yet again and the smell of burning wood filled the glen. Eugene’s nostrils flickered and his body twitched at the scent of danger but he did not move to stand. There was something wrong but Lacey couldn’t quite place it.

Kneeling down beside him, Lacey slid her hand up from his back to his shoulder as she settled beside him. Eugene whinnied in distress and tilted his head to his left shoulder, his eyes squeezed shut. Lacey placed a hand under his snout and tilted his face upwards. Eugene shivered but slowly, he opened his eyes. They were as milky white as the rest of him.

He was blind.

“What...what’s wrong?” Rapunzel demanded as she looked back and forth between them. “Eugene, what happened?”

“Gothel happened.” The Imp answered as he knelt down beside them. The unicorn gave a loud bleat of aggravation and tore out of the clearing back the way it had come. Lacey’s whole body tensed but The Imp did not look at her. He knew. He had to know. She still had Gold’s blood on her. He was dead because of her.

The Imp carefully took Eugene’s head into his hands. Eugene exhaled straight into The Imp’s face. Lacey still could not find her voice, but Rapunzel, as usual, did not have that problem. “What’s wrong with Eugene?” Rapunzel’s voice quivered a bit, but she was brave enough to at least ask.

“His sight was stolen...if I had to guess for a spell. True Sight.”

“What’s that?”

The Imp was solemn. “It is when one takes someone’s vision so they can better see. It is an unspeakable act, done only by the most desperate.”

Rapunzel swallowed her fear of The Imp to ask a third and final question. “Can you...fix it?”

Eugene’s ears pricked up at this last part and he whickered.

The Imp shook his head. “There’s no undoing this.” He got to his feet and surveyed the clearing around them. Lacey followed suit. He had to see the blood on her, he had to know. Yet, he still wouldn’t meet her eye. “Gothel stole his sight to aid her own. It is how she is using the fire to follow you through the woods.”
On the ground, Rapunzel inhaled sharply. Several strands of her hair were lifted in the breeze, floating around her. “Mother did this?”

The Imp nodded. “She will not rest until she has what she wants. So, I’ll ask once more, will you cut your hair?”

The girl’s bottom lip trembled but she considered it. After a moment, she broke eye contact and shook her head before burying it into Eugene’s shoulder.

“So be it,” The Imp said, his voice resolved. Without a word, he raised his fingers and snapped.

Lacey had to raise her feet up to avoid being yanked backward as Rapunzel’s hair shot towards the girl from every direction. It rose up in the air only to fold itself into an intricate french plait, stylized so that there were folds that looked like roses and swans. “There,” The Imp said as he admired his work. “Fitting for a princess.”

It had taken less than a minute. Rapunzel lifted a marveling hand to her magically arranged updo, her hands ghosted reverently over the shapes and twists.

“I will warn you,” The Imp said to her. “At some point, you will have to make a hard choice. Between what is necessary and what you wish. We all do.”

The girl’s eyes were filling up with tears but she managed to nod in understanding.

The Imp turned finally to Lacey. His golden gaze was somber. Gone was the giggling goblin who had haunted her every turn. Here, before her, stood the ruler of the Ninth Kingdom, one of nine guardians of magic. At that moment, Lacey almost didn't recognize him.

“What happened?” was all he asked.

The words caught in her throat. Even if she had a voice, there was no explaining how Gold had died to protect her, no words she could say to explain she had not asked it of him without sounding callous. She knew so little of Gold...he had lost a son...that was the most personal thing she had known about him. Would The Imp mourn his ambassador or was he just another pawn to him?

Rapunzel answered for her. “Mother found us,” she told The Imp. “She wanted me to go back to the Tower with her...but I want to go home. To Corona.”

“I figured as much. I meant with her,” he said as he indicated Lacey. “She’s never this quiet.”

“Oh. That. Mother...prefers silence sometimes,” Rapunzel said with a too knowing tone. “It wears off...after a while.”

“Hmm,” was all he said to that. “If Gothel has True Sight, she’s aware of our every move in this forest. Rapunzel, do you choose of your own free volition to go to Corona?”

Rapunzel hesitated for the slightest moment before nodding. “I want to meet my mother,” she said. “My real one.”

“Then, we should go. The fire is nearly upon us.”

“Can’t you just-?” Rapunzel shook her hand meaningfully. “Put it out?”

It was not a stupid question and The Imp did not treat it as such. “Gothel anticipated my interference. Much like the tower, she’s used blood magic. The fire will follow you, shaping your
path until you return to the tower where this all started.”

So they had two options. Go back to the tower and make a stand or try to break to the edge of the woods.

Rapunzel stood, a decision made. “How...how far are we from the edge of the woods?”

The Imp pointed due south. “About three miles. Give or take.”

Lacey did not bother to wait and hear how close they were to the tower. She knelt down beside Eugene and urged him to his feet. The horse cocked his head, uncertain what she wanted, but after a moment’s of Lacey tugging, he reluctantly stood.

Eugene took a shaky step forward and then another, using his front hooves to check in front of him to check to see if there was anything there. Lacey did her best to steady him but it was a classic case of the blind leading the blind. Or the mute leading the blind. Or however, the stupid idiom went.

“As humorous as that would be,” The Imp sighed. “We don’t have the time.”

He snapped his fingers. Up ahead, there was a low rumbling. The air, already heavy with smoke and ash and heat, grew heavier as a shimmer tore through the forest straight towards them. It ended at their feet, and for a moment, there was silence. Then, branches sprang aside, trees uprooted entirely. Roots and twigs and buried rocks leaped up in the air and settled alongside a trail, a neat path.

The Imp stood with a fierce grin on his face as he surveyed his handiwork Eugene’s ears were flickering like mad as he strained to understand what he had just heard. Rapunzel simply murmured, “Wow”.

“Come, come,” he sang before starting forward.

Eugene sniffed the air about him, and when he found Lacey he nuzzled at her. “I can lead him,” Rapunzel hurried to offer, jumping between them. “You can go on ahead.”

That was the last thing Lacey wanted but she knew she had to. Lacey released her handful of Eugene’s mane. He whinnied nervously until Rapunzel replaced it with her own, whispering words of assurance. Lacey wished someone would do the same for her.

It struck her that she had been alone for a very long time. Long before she had entered this world, long before she had set eyes on Storybrooke. She had never minded that before.

Not until she had met someone who had perhaps been just as alone as she was...someone who had been just as determined to make it one day to the next in spite of the odds...someone who was laying in a field somewhere, staring unseeing up at the stars.

Dead because of her.

With one last look at Rapunzel and Eugene, Lacey headed up the path to join The Imp. She would tell him Gold had died protecting her.

It was the least she could for him.
With this penultimate chapter, we get a little bit closer to the end of this arc. I debated cutting this into two chapters but it felt right to end this arc on Chapter 50, so I kept all sixteen pages in one update. Hopefully, that makes up for the delay in updating.

As for the delay, it's because I revised this chapter over and over again. This was the first time we see Rapunzel and Gothel interact and I wanted to be cautious and as respectful as I could be in the way I portrayed the emotional abuse Rapunzel has suffered all her life. I hope I did it some justice and further supported Rapunzel's arc.

Poor Eugene. I always planned to have him suffer the same fate of the original prince in Rapunzel's tale. Poor kid can't catch a break. But he's alive! And I know everyone knows the twist at this point in this tale, but raise your hand if you're relieved to see The Imp!

Next chapter, Lacey faces the music and Gothel catches up.
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

Guess who is back with the conclusion of this arc!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Just up ahead, the Imp was humming as he strolled along, fingers twirling in time to his wordless tune. He did not seem to notice the smoke drifting overhead or the overwhelming heat from the fire burning just at their back.

No matter how far they walked the smoke and flames followed them. They could not go as quickly as Lacey would have liked. Eugene was growing more confident as he went, but he was still blind and even Rapunzel’s constant encouragement could not convince him to go faster.

Meanwhile, the mud and blood covering Lacey had finally dried, only to leave her itchy all over. It would have been enough to drive her crazy if not for the stabbing pain emanating from her left foot with every step. The gash on her toe was rubbing against her ruined slippers, causing her to wince with every step.

To add injury to insult, she did not even have the voice to complain about her discomfort.

“You have something you’d like to say?” the Imp called out from up ahead.

Not really, Lacey thought glumly. And at the same time, yes.

The Imp lifted his right hand and let his fingers roll one by one before his hand dropped back down to his side. Lacey had just enough time to wonder what he had done before she walked straight through an invisible cobweb. Its tendrils broke over her, filaments of magic clinging to her skin. Lacey gave a violent shudder, exclaiming in disgust: “Bleargh!”

Wait-

“Oh, thank God.” Lacey clutched at her throat in relief only to find smooth, clean skin.

All the filth, mud and blood was gone. Her hands skated up her arms and down her chest before it occurred to her that thanks might be in order.

She lifted her gaze to find the Imp considering her and the thanks died on her lips. This was the same creature that had locked her in a dungeon, who had used her for his means and who hadn’t been there when- Lacey swallowed. “...Gold’s dead.”

There. She had said it. Let him do his worse-

“Don’t be absurd.”

Lacey bit down on her annoyance. “Look, I know this is hard to believe, but-”

“It’s not hard to believe. It’s simply not true.”
Lacey’s hands began to shake. She forced them to curl into fists at her side. “Damn you. Listen to me for once! I’m trying to tell you- everything went wrong. Gothel had us and I-I shouldn’t have-. He jumped in front of spell- it was meant for me but Gold-”

“Did what had to be done. I know.” The Imp finished for her with a level of finality. “The power of the Ninth Kingdom is not so insubstantial that it cannot handle a simple hex.”

“A simple hex?” Lacey’s voice was shrill even to her ears but she could not control it. “Gothel sliced him nearly in two- because of me! Because I couldn’t-” The words were spilling out of her. “It was my fault.”

The Imp regarded her thoughtfully as if truly seeing her for the first time. “You have courted danger and death and yet here you still stand. Do not trouble yourself. Gold will be back on his feet by morning.”

“He’s alive?” Lacey asked, half in hope and half in despair. “But how?”

He waggled his fingers. “Magic, dearie.”

Lacey exhaled slowly. She wanted so badly to believe that she would get the chance to yell at Gold for being dense enough to jump in front of a witch’s spell and also thank him for being dense enough to jump in front of a witch’s spell. But...She could still hear Gold’s wet, raspy gasps for air. “You’re sure?”

The Imp’s eyes traced her face. After a moment’s pause, he nodded.

She swallowed back what tasted like tears. “I...I left him.”

He wouldn’t quite look at her now. “You did what had to be done,” The Imp responded, but not unkindly.

“Where is he now?”

He scoffed. “What does it matter?”

“It just does.”

“Madness,” The Imp grumbled, still not looking at her. “You don’t even know the first thing-” He bit his tongue, thinking better of what he had been about to say. “Gold is safe. You will see him again soon.”

“How do I know you aren’t lying?”

His left brow twitched upwards. “Why would I do that?”

Lacey knew it was stupid before she said it, “to...to make me feel better.”

“And why would I do that?”

She didn’t know, but something told her he was.

“Is everything alright?” came a voice from behind them. The others had caught up. Rapunzel was watching the exchange with some interest as Eugene strained his neck forward to better hear in what he hoped to be a casual manner.

Lacey nudged his snout away. “Everything’s fine,” Lacey replied. “We should keep moving.”
“About that,” Rapunzel hedged. Knowing that tone of voice, Lacey crossed her arms. “It’s just...I was talking to Eugene...and I was wondering...what will happen to him when we get to Corona?”

“I’m sure he’ll go back to working in the stables-”

“You don’t know that,” The Imp pointed out.

Eugene’s ears pricked up and he neighed a short nervous sound.

“Then, we’ll change the terms of the deal,” Lacey hissed back. “Eugene’s reinstatement as a royal stableboy instead of the crocus.”

This decision elicited multiple cries of outrage. Everyone began talking (or neighing) at once.

“- out of the question!” The Imp was declaring over Eugene’s whinnies.

“Shut up!” Lacey shouted. “She’ll hear us!”

That worked well enough for the youths but The Imp’s golden eyes just narrowed into slits. “Even if I was to agree to such an asine idea, then what? The boy will still be Enchanted. He will be isolated. Segregated. Condemned for what he can’t control.”

Lacey planted her hands on her hips. “Then, fix him,” she demanded, pointing at Eugene.

“Excuse me?”

“Fix him,” Lacey repeated. She had seen enough miracles to have faith in the impossible. “The Blue Fairy undid the cricket’s Enchantment-”

“That insect didn’t undo anything,” The Imp growled back. “How many times-”

“I saw it!”

“You saw what she wanted you to see!”

Eugene snorted a warning. He moved to stand where he assumed was between them and nearly knocked Lacey over. She stepped to the side, trying to continue her argument, but Eugene circled until his head butted against her. “Eugene, get out of my way- I’m trying to help you-”

Rapunzel was turning green as Eugene continued to spin in a tight circle. “Eugene-!” she moaned, clapping a hand to her mouth.

“He can’t even speak!” Lacey hissed. “The other Enchanted can at least speak-”

“Course he can speak,” The Imp said with a huff. “He’s just choosing not to. A lack of voice usually indicates one does not know who they truly are,” The Imp said instead of an actual solution.

Eugene froze. He cocked his head to the side and then to the other as if considering this truth.

Rapunzel slid down from his back. “Eugene?” she said quietly. “Can you ...try?”

Eugene lifted his sightless eyes to the sky, his nostrils twitching as he inhaled deeply. In the starlight, his pure white mane shone platinum and even his eyes, milky white, glowed almost silver. His jaw clenched as he lowered his head and-
“Sneezed.”

“Don’t you dare laugh-” Lacey threatened as The Imp’s face split into a crocodile grin.

“Why would I laugh?” he insisted, all innocence despite the mirth dancing in his eyes. “Rather late in the year for spring fever...but-”

It hit her without warning. Back home, it was May. She had been here for nearly half a year. Life went on. Somewhere beyond the gate, a princess wore a sheriff’s badge because Graham was dead and buried with flowers on his grave-

It was too much. She could feel tears pricking her eyes, from exhaustion, from frustration, from grief. She felt too much; everything bubbled up and out of her. Unable to contain them, Lacey fled from them. All of them.

She got about twenty feet down the path before The Imp, damn him, appeared by her side. “You’re upset,” he observed. “Why?”


“It is generally a question indicating that one does not know something. So, yes. Why?”

“Because!” She should have known she couldn’t outrun her emotions or him. So, she dug in, letting fury color her every word to mask the pain hiding underneath. “I don’t belong here! I hate this place! I hate everything about this world, including you! And yet every time I find something worth giving a damn about- it gets ripped away!” The truth of this shattered her. Her shoulders slumped as the fight went out of her as quickly as it had come. “Is it...always like this?”

He did not ask her what she meant; he knew.

“In any world...there is discord and strife. Some people suffer fates they do not deserve while others profit. But no...it is not always like this. If I had to guess...I would say that the balance of this world senses there is something here that does not belong.”

“Like a pebble in the universe’s shoe,” Lacey grumbled. She plucked helplessly at the neckline of her dress as sweat started to break out across her back. She was overwhelmed and overheated and wanted nothing more than a glass of wine and a Xanax.

“An apt description. Plus,” he paused and his mouth curled back into a toothy smile, “you have an uncanny talent of attracting trouble.”

Lacey snorted, as close to an actual laugh as she could muster. “Don’t suppose working for you has anything to do with it, does it?”

He shrugged. “Possibly, though my prior dealings did not usually involve quite this much mortal danger.”

Lacey winced. “I am glad Gold is...I didn’t mean for...him to get hurt.”

The Imp cleared his throat, looking vaguely uncomfortable. “I’ll admit, I did not...think there was any fondness between you and Gold.”

“There’s not,” Lacey hastened to say. “I mean...he’s insufferable, but he’s...just, you know.”

The Imp did not seem to know, but he nodded.
“What are we going to do about Eugene?” Lacey asked.

“I suppose...there is room...at the Dark Castle.”

Lacey grinned. “Wow, you almost got through that without grimacing,” she said. “You sure like to be on your own, don’t you?”

“You have no idea,” he said to himself.

Lacey pondered what life would be like for Eugene at the Dark Castle. Selfishly, it would be nice to have him, to have company when she returned. She would never admit it but she was looking forward to returning.

After what had happened to Gold... Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad to be safely ensconced at the Dark Castle for the winter. Better than wandering through forests or drowning in seas.

And yet...she remembered how she had alone she had felt there at first. How Eugene would feel. She would make sure he wasn’t stuck in the dungeon or in a stable but even if he had his wing to do as he wanted, she could not imagine Eugene in the Dark Castle. He would be swallowed up in those long halls, constantly afraid of what was around each corner.

“No,” Lacey said quietly. “It’s...kind of you, but I don’t think Eugene would do very well living at the Dark Castle.”

“You managed it.”

“I didn’t get much of a choice. You locked me in a dungeon,” she reminded him. “Took away my voice-”

“If you’re keeping score, I also saved you from certain death more times than I can count on one hand.”

“It’s just...I can’t imagine he would agree to go with us.”

The Imp held up his fingers, poised to snap, meaningfully.

“If you just,” she snapped her fingers,” then we’d be no better than Gothel.”

“There is a difference. The boy is an Enchanted. Of the Enchanted you have met, none have dared to let anyone else know lest they lose their lives. The girl will be reunited with her parents. If I guess correctly, there will be a great celebration and Corona will move forward into an era of peace and stability. The boy…” he shook his head. “I do not know. His path is marred. Gothel’s magic clings to him, hides his future from even my sight.”

Lacey stumbled. “Your sight-? Wait, are you telling me- you can see the future?”

He waved his hand, dismissing the question. “We’re nearly there. Less than a mile.”

Now that he mentioned it, Lacey did notice it was growing cooler. The sweat on her brow was turning chilly. Lacey looked back at the way they had come to see the fire still burning in the distance but it was growing fainter as if losing steam. The smoke was still heavy overhead, carried along by the wind.

A few feet back, Rapunzel was leading Eugene. A few snippets of the girl’s words floated up ahead to them as did Eugene’s occasional answering whinny.
“I wonder what they’re talking about.”

“She is worried they won’t like her,” The Imp answered.

“What?”

The Imp gestured back over his shoulder. “Her parents. The girl is afraid they might not like her. She is... after all... ‘a very silly child’. Her words,” he clarified.

“They’ll love her. They’ll be over the moon. Moons,” Lacey clarified as she tilted her head up to gaze at the twin orbs overhead. She sometimes forgot there was two. They stared back down at her like two all-seeing eyes. Lacey frowned. When had the smoke cleared?

A shadow crossed over both moons as if they were blinking-

Without any other warning, a hex careened past them. It landed directly between them, cutting them off from each other. Eugene reared back on his heels, screaming wildly, even as Rapunzel tried to calm him. She shouted his name, putting herself directly in range of his kicking forelegs but the nature of the beast was too strong.

“Rapunzel!” Lacey’s shout was lost in the melee of light and noise as another spell hit, this time barely five feet from Eugene’s back leg.

The Imp did not waste his breath. He drew his hand sharply toward him and Rapunzel jerked backward as if pulled by an invisible string. She landed hard on her shoulder just as another spell hit barely inches away from Eugene. Lacey bolted forward but The Imp grabbed her wrist.

“Don’t!”

“But-!” Eugene continued to scream, each one as sharp as a dagger. “He’s terrified!”

“But...” Eugene tossed his head wildly as another spell and another fell about his ears. Meanwhile, Rapunzel, afraid of thunder and lightning, was caught in the middle of a storm.

Lacey stood, helpless. “I don’t know- just- just do something!” she urged him.

A shadow materialized from the blasted patch of earth where the first bolt had hit. Wisps of black smoke solidified until Gothel stood over her daughter. Her back was turned to Lacey and The Imp but Lacey did not doubt she knew they were there.

As the magical maelstrom faded, Eugene trumpeted nervously. He tossed his head first his way and that to search for his companions. His soft, worried noises of distress drew her forward but The Imp’s hand curled tighter around her wrist. “It’d be safer for you elsewhere,” he whispered, eyes never leaving Gothel.

Lacey tried to wrench her arm away from him but he held tight. “If you banish me,” she hissed, “I will personally make your life a living hell-”

“No, no,” Gothel said as she turned to face the two of them. “The Believer’s not going anywhere.”

“Mother?” Rapunzel struggled to get to her feet. The Imp’s braid had been crushed by the fall, and hair was already starting to spill down her back to coil at her feet. “What- what are you doing?”
Gothel did not even turn to look at her. “I’ll deal with you in a moment,” she warned, lifting a clawed, arthritic hand in the air.

Rapunzel launched herself at the witch, pulling at Gothel’s raised arm. “Mother, no! Leave them alone. I’m the one you want.”

“Enough!” The single syllable was poison. “Do as your Mother says, you ungrateful brat!”

Gothel spat. Rapunzel had to scramble back to avoid the phlegm. It landed in the dirt, hissing and sizzling as Rapunzel’s eyes grew wide in terror. Beyond Rapunzel and Gothel, Eugene was shuffling along in the dirt, making sad, chirping noises, as he tried to find someone, anyone.

“Do something!” Lacey clutched at his forearm, but he only shushed her in reply.

Gothel’s eyes flicked over all of them, one by one. “So. This is who you chose?” she asked Rapunzel. “Abominations. All of them. It is time to go home now, Rapunzel.”

Rapunzel’s eyes met Lacey’s across the feet that separated them. “You can do it,” Lacey whispered, too low for her to possibly hear and yet...

Rapunzel’s spine straightened as she lifted her gaze back to Gothel. “I won’t,” she declared, in that one moment, all fear forgotten. “I’m going to Corona. With my friends.”

Lacey would have applauded but The Imp was still holding her arm in a vise-like grip. “This is her battle,” he whispered. “If you stay, you are a witness. Nothing more.”

“Oh.” Gothel slowly shook her head. “I was afraid of this. They’ve ruined you. I thought you would be worthy, but you’re just like all the others.”

“The others?”

“All I’ve ever wanted is a child,” Gothel said, reaching out to trace the curve of Rapunzel’s cheek. “But they’ve all been disappointments...until you.”

Rapunzel sucked in a shaky breath.

“How many mothers have prayed to me...begged me to heal their children? Countless...but never a queen. Not until you. Born too early, you were too weak to take the tit. They tried everything. They even fed you pure nectar from their precious Golden Crocuses but it was only by my grace that you survived the Milktooth. I visited you every night, brought you milk from my breast. You grew healthy and strong and those fools called it a miracle. They robbed me of the praise I was owed. So, I took what was rightfully mine.”

“You stole me.” Rapunzel’s voice was like ice.

“I saved you!” Gothel hissed. “It was in my right to do with you as I willed. I could have left you to the forest, sent you over the sea but no- I cared for you. I kept you safe from harm and the horrors of this world. I bound you to me!”

Eugene trumpeted again, sad and low, lost in the black shadows of his world, headed in the wrong direction, back towards the fire. Lacey was about to burst out of her skin when The Imp’s right finger jerked, ever so slightly, against the inside of her wrist. Lacey glanced down, confused, just as the wind picked up around them.

It lifted the long, long strands escaping from Rapunzel’s hair and wafted them upwards into the
night air. Eugene lifted his head. His right ear flicked as he sniffed the air. He took a step forward and then another until the ends of Rapunzel’s hair floated across his chest.

“You are mine to do with as I want,” Gothel was hissing, oblivious to the subtle ply of magic around her. “Perhaps I will drop you from a cliff for your impertinence or lock you in a trunk—”

Caught up in her fury, Gothel had forgotten all about the Enchanted. At her threats, Eugene let out a furious trumpet and barreled straight towards Gothel’s voice, guided by the strands of Rapunzel’s hair. Before Gothel could so much as lift a finger, Eugene slammed into her at full speed.

A crack of broken bones echoed in the night as Gothel flew backward to land just short of where The Imp and Lacey stood. Her body lay twisted and crooked at their feet, legs bent at odd angles. It was the most beautiful thing Lacey had ever seen.

“Hello there, Mother Gothel,” The Imp sang as he looked down at her. “Fancy seeing you here.”

Eyes lined with crow’s feet and rimmed red with age and rage narrowed. “You!” she snarled as she threw a hex at him with a twisted, gnarled hand.

The Imp dodged her hex easily but it gave Gothel the time she needed to cast another spell. Her legs cracked and jerked underneath her as the magic traveled down her broken, ancient body. The Imp raised a hand, to end it, but the air was growing hot again, so rapidly it became hard to breath.

Lacey fell to her knees, struggling to get air into her lungs as the heat beat down upon her. The Imp hesitated. For a moment Lacey thought he would let her suffocate but he waved his hands over her, murmuring a counterspell and oxygen rushed back into her lungs all at once.

Eugene had circled back to try his luck at trampling her again, but Rapunzel grabbed at him. “Eugene, please don’t, she’ll hurt you—”

Gothel had made it back to her feet. She raised her hands, supple and smooth, as she cast off the last vestiges of her harmless old woman act. “I tire of this,” she drawled. “Lesak, I have put up with you for long enough. It ends tonight.” Tilting her face to the sky, the hag began to speak in a booming, hollow voice.

The Imp also began to whisper in the same hollow, low voice, his eyes not breaking away from Gothel for a moment. Something grabbed Lacey by the back of her dress and hauled her backward toward Rapunzel. Lacey fought back against the magic but it held her tight.

“Belle!” Rapunzel cried as the magic deposited her unceremoniously in the dirt. “Belle, you have to go- take Eugene—”

“Go? Go where? We’re not leaving you!” Lacey cried back as the two voices rose as one. The horizon of the trees flickered as flames came closer and closer, a wind rising to shriek and moan as it reached out for them. Rocks and twigs started to hurl themselves through the air, whirling round and round in the narrow clearing.

Eugene had backed himself up against the forest’s edge. Blind, he could not see the debris as it hurtled towards him. He was already bloodied as sticks and stones bounced off him, and the missiles were only picking up speed. If he stayed there much longer, he was going to be killed.

With the two wielders of magic’s attention bent solely on each other, everyone else forgotten, there was a small window to save him. “Stay here!” Lacey ordered Rapunzel. Before the girl could protest, Lacey darted out to the left.
A rock promptly whizzed past her head and she had to duck as a branch broke from the tree overhead. She darted and dodged through the worst of it, trying not to think that at any moment her luck could run out. Still, she somehow made it to Eugene’s side but she could not grab for him. He was too skittish, too far gone in his fear and he might lash out if spooked any further.

“Eugene!” Lacey cried out but her voice was barely audible over the gathering magic. “Eugene!” she tried again and this time he swung towards his head towards her. Before she could say anything else, something hit her in the small of her back with enough force to knock her sideways.

She staggered forward with a grunt of pain, bracing herself to hit the ground but Eugene caught her with his snout. He whinnied in worry, sniffing at her. She grabbed hold of his mane. “It’s going to be okay,” she tried to tell him but before the words were out of her mouth, she cried out in pain as something sliced her lower leg, deep enough to cut through her skirt. “Come on, we have to- we have to get out of this.”

Eugene snorted his understanding. Trusting Lacey to guide him through sharp tugs of his mane, he let her lead him out of the worst of the maelstrom to the outer edges. Here, things still flew with dangerous speed, but the worst of it revolved around the spellcasters.

Lacey risked a glance. Both were nearly invisible as the tornado of shrapnel grew thicker and denser with every passing second. Lacey thought she could make out Gothel on her knees, with The Imp standing over her but as soon as she saw it a branch’s tendrils came flying at her face. She managed to duck it, so it only caught her cheek but Eugene was not so lucky. He stumbled as it hit him full in the chest.

Lacey braced against his shoulder and hurried them both forward. They stumbled a few more feet toward Rapunzel. The lost princess was vibrating with worry from outside the storm but she thankfully had the common sense to stay out of the danger. As they stepped over some invisible line to join her, the magic died away. Rapunzel cried out in relief, wrapping her arms around Lacey and Eugene’s broad chest before bursting into tears.

They weren’t out of the woods yet. The Imp had his entire focus bent on Gothel. Their magic barely contained. Gothel had made it to her feet, eyes glowing white as she took the upper hand.

“We have to help him!” Rapunzel cried as The Imp staggered.

Lacey shook her head. “No!” she shouted. “We keep going. He’ll- he’ll be fine.” She didn’t believe that for a second, but he had told her to trust in the power of the Ninth Kingdom-

There was a burst of magic and the maelstrom erupted outwards. Lacey barely got her arm over her eyes as a million needles hit her all at once. Everything went silent until she could not even hear her breathing. She hung suspended in the air, frozen in time. She could see twigs, stones, branches and bark hanging in mid-air all around them. Rapunzel faced away from her, long black hair streaming out behind her like a banner as she faced a nova of bright white light. Lacey had a moment to realize that light was where Gothel and the Imp had been right before she slammed into the ground. The magic explosion retreated, washing back over her, leaving behind pinpoints of pain all over her body.

Despite everything in her body telling her not to move, Lacey struggled to a sitting position, afraid of what she might find. The light had faded away. She could see The Imp a few feet away, splayed across the path. His neck was bent in an uncomfortable angle and his eyes were closed but his chest rose and fell. Unconscious.

Closer, Eugene was on his side, chest laboring heavily. He was bloodied and scratched but he
seemed to have just had the breath knocked out of him.

Only two were left standing.

Rapunzel’s hands were clutched to her mouth in horror as she surveyed the damage. “M-Mother,” she breathed. “Why?

Gothel’s eyes glowed white, mouth curled into a smile of victory. “They are mine to do with what I will. Just as you are.”

Rapunzel lowered her hands. “You...always tell me what to do,” she said to herself, her voice barely a whisper.

“Talking to yourself again?” Gothel’s laugh was ugly. “What have I told you about mumbling. Speak up!”

Rapunzel did just that. “All my life you’ve told me how to speak, how to act, what to do, what not to do! No more.” Rapunzel raised her hand, revealing the tiara that started this journey. It was twisted and mangled. One end had been ripped clean off, including part of a jewel, leaving a ragged and rough edge.

The lost princess brought it up to her throat. Rapunzel took her hair in one hand and with a long, vicious slash, severed every single hair from her head just below her chin.

As far as a daughterly rebellion went, it was beautiful in its simplicity.

“No!” Gothel screamed but it was too late. She fell to her knees at Rapunzel’s feet, smoke billowing from her body as the magic started to boil away her blood.

Tears dripped down Rapunzel’s cheeks but she did not look away as Gothel withered and twisted in a macabre dance of death. There was now only a pile of bones collapsed amongst the severed coils of blue-black hair at Rapunzel’s feet.

The sounds of the woods returned as Rapunzel buried her face into her hands and began to sob. Lacey struggled to her feet, but her leg went out from underneath her. “Rapunzel,” she tried, but her voice bubbled and broke. “-Punzel-”

Lacey lifted her hand to throat. It came away bloody. Gothel’s spell had done what her earlier spell had failed to do. Blood bubbled up to Lacey’s lips. Beneath her, Eugene breathed shallowly, his fur turning crimson. Not with his blood, but with her’s.

Despite the fire still burning, a chill spread through her. She let her eyes flutter shut, trying not to be afraid. Have faith, The Imp had said. But here at the end of the night, with morning rising in the east, she was not certain she would see the sunrise.

Someone bent to kneel beside her. Lacey managed to open her eyes just enough to see green eyes regarding her thoughtfully.

“Punz-” Lacey tried to say but the eyes were the wrong color: jade instead of emerald.

“So. You are the Believer that has given my sisters so much trouble.” Elegant fingers reached out to touch Lacey’s chin as if to check and see if she was real. They came away stained with blood. “My. How fortuitous. I could let you die here and now,” the stranger told her, a clinical sense of detachment. “Curry favor with my young sister or...endebt Malegrant to me forever.”
A sense of disconnection drifted over Lacey as the world faded away around her.

“Don’t hurry away, just yet, my dear,” the stranger chided. Something pressed against her lips and Lacey instinctively opened her mouth. Cool, liquid starlight trickled down her throat. It burned hot and fierce as it coursed through her. Every agony came roaring back as fire erupted in her veins.

Lacey gasped, jerking upright, as she sucked in oxygen. The face of a woman, beautiful and fierce, swam into focus. It was not a face Lacey recognized, but the fire in her veins insisted it was familiar. “Who-who are you?” Lacey managed, clutching at her throat which was raw but whole once more. “How am I-”

“You know-how. As for the who...I am the daughter of shadow and mist,” the woman answered. “I dwell in the land between. I have seen three of my sisters cross through to what lies beyond….and have come to see the truth of their undoing.”

Someone was crying nearby but she could not remember who it could be. Or why.

“I will not make the same mistake of underestimating you,” the woman whispered, fingertips caressing her cheek. “I see you, Believer. I see the decay in your soul behind the facades you have thrown over the rot. It is a beautiful lie but I have made it real. I have made you whole. You are wiped clean. Made new. I can give you a new life, Witch Slayer. Protection. Happiness. You will never want for anything. You will not bow in servitude. You will not hurt or despair. But you must choose. So, tell me, child. What is your name?”

The answer came to her, the sound of a Sunday morning, chimes ringing but that was not the truth. It was a lie. Her name was something else...something delicate that had holes in it, something that was unraveling, yellow with age and slipping through her fingers-

She swallowed, unsure and suddenly scared. “Belle,” she managed. “My name is Belle.”

The stranger smiled and it was beautiful to behold.

Overhead, the stars winked out. One by one.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, guys, I'm super excited about the next arc but....it's not written yet. UGH. The worst. I know. Throw out your guesses below and if anyone gets it right I'll...dedicate an hour to working on it every day for a week. How do you like those apples?

What do you all think about the Rapunzel storyline? To me, it's very bitter-sweet especially with how much Lacey grew and learned only to have it wrenched away from her with this newcomer. Leave thoughts in the comments below!

Works inspired by this Fangirling by prissygirl

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!