Brendan and the Beast

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Summary

Somewhere between 'Once upon a time' and 'happily ever after', there was a tale; of love and of bitterness, of wagers and of magic, of loss and of longing. This is an original retelling of the tale of Beauty and the Beast. COMPLETE as of May 4th 2012
In Which Our Story Begins

Once upon a time, in the beautiful French city of Amiens, there lived a wealthy and happy merchant. Though his wife was long dead, he was content because she left him with four wonderful children. The two oldest were twin girls on the cusp of womanhood, of proper manners and proud temperament. The middle child was the merchant's only son, who was studying at University in Paris. Now, the youngest daughter was the merchant's favorite child, though he would rather lose all his fortune and die before admit it and wound the feelings of the others. She had the loveliest golden tresses of all the village women, and she was sweet-natured in all things. She was aptly named: Beauty.

The older sisters were very pleased to be wealthy, and reveled in attending parties, balls, concerts, plays, and the like, no matter how far they need travel to attend them. They dressed in their finest every day and laughed at their sister, for she tended to stay at home with her father and read books rather than mingle with good society.

A great many eminent gentlemen courted the eldest daughters, for they were pretty enough, but being rich was their greatest asset. Beauty, too, was made addresses to, but she unfailingly declined their offers of marriage, claiming that she was much too young to marry. In truth, Beauty didn't like any of the preening peacocks that came to call. She often felt that they were too dull and shallow for her liking, and felt a pang of lonesomeness for her absent brother, who was always engaging and could make her laugh no matter what. No doubt he would have dozens of stories from Paris. She wished that the men who courted her were more like her brother Brendan, for he was sincere, intelligent, and kind.

It was known throughout the town that the merchant had a penchant for gambling, and so the gossip spread like wildfire when he lost his entire fortune at one go in an unlucky card game. He told his daughters, shame-faced and teary-eyed, that they must move into a smaller house in the country, and he could no longer pay for Brendan's education. The older sisters wailed and bemoaned their fate, that they would no longer be among the social elite, and that they must all pawn their fine clothes and all but the most modest of belongings to pay the family's debts. Both sisters claimed that their suitors would marry them, and that they need not suffer such a fate as poverty, but they were mistaken. Their lovers slighted and forsook them in their misfortune. Beauty, meanwhile, wrote a regretful letter to her brother explaining the calamity and requesting that he return home. She was at first very grieved at the loss of her good fortune, but she took one look at her poor father, who seemed greatly aged and much changed in demeanor, and put on a brave face for him and went about packing what few items were left after the auction.

So the now poor and unhappy merchant and his three daughters moved into a small country house in the rolling wooded land in southern France. Not near enough to the sea nor any grand city for the twins' tastes. Their new home was small and thatched, and in need of much repair. And while the merchant went about the business of learning to make a living in the country, Beauty set herself to the household tasks, since they of course no longer had servants. She made many mistakes and it was hard for her at first, but she quickly learned the proper ways to cook, clean, and run a household. The older sisters applied themselves to gardening and husbandry, complaining loudly all the while.

It was many weeks before their brother could make his way to his new home. They saw him come up the dusty road, bags in hand, and they all ran out to greet him. Beauty was much taken aback at her initial sight of him, for it had been two years since she had last looked upon him and Brendan looked very much like a man.
"My sisters! You look more radiant than ever," exclaimed Brendan, embracing his older sisters with a smile. "Father..." He stood silent, for a minute, in front of the merchant who cleared his throat and clapped his son heartily on the back.

"I'm glad you are returned, my son." He said nothing more, but even Beauty could hear the silent apology in her father's voice.

"It's good to be with my family again," Brendan said noncommittally. His face brightened considerably when he looked upon Beauty, and they embraced with enthusiasm, Brendan even picking his little sister up and swinging her about joyfully.

"Beauty! Look how tall you are! Just look at you, the pretty little maid. Country life suits you."

"Paris must have suited you as well, brother! You've grown! And your hair is so much longer..." She pulled impishly at a long curling strand of his chestnut hair.

He smiled widely and ruffled her golden hair teasingly, and said, "Why in Paris it's the only way to wear it! If you are a young gentlemen, and your hair is not long? It speaks more ill of you than any lack of breeding ever could." The young man threw a small wink to Beauty, and turned again to face his family.

Beauty watched her brother with a smile as he acquiesced to the twins' pleas and told them of Paris fashions. She had missed him. It must have pained him to receive the letter announcing his schooling in the city was over before its due time. But he put on a braver, happier face than she ever could! She admired him so; he would put to rest her father's guilt, and help her sisters adapt in this place that was so different, and where life was so hard.

In fact, Brendan did help, more even than his youngest sister had ever suspected. Not just in acquainting the family with their new life, but with turning their small, barren cottage into something more than livable. It fast became a home. He had taken a job in the village as a clerk at the local general store, and with the money from his pay, began to bring home to his sisters small luxuries he knew they missed.

For his eldest sister, he brought home one day a bolt of plain, soft cloth, and not much of it, though it was a pretty color and supple to the touch. For his second eldest sister, he brought home a wristlet of simple silver make, adorned with a single, river-smoothed stone the color of the night sky. And for his youngest sister, he kept her in good supply with the things he knew she would appreciate most.

The family had been getting along swimmingly for a few months, when just as the seasons were changing from warm to cool, a letter arrived for Beauty's father. She returned that day with her brother, having walked him back from the village when his day's work was finished. They approached the front door of the cottage, and Brendan opened the door for his sister. As she entered, he surreptitiously pressed a candle from the store into her hand. This was the fifth candle he had given her to read by at night. She was very grateful, for oil lamps were hard to come by and she often went without any light at all, reading by the window in the waning light until her eyes hurt from the squinting as the night descended. But the two siblings shared a passion for the written word, and he understood her need exactly.

They were greeted in the small parlor to the left of the entrance by their smiling, seated father, and their two sisters.

"Good news," Beauty's father said, holding up an opened envelope and a folded piece of parchment. As Beauty and her brother soon learned, in a joint narrative by her father and two sisters, a shipment of valuables their father had invested in had just arrived in a port on the Mediterranean. He would
have to travel there to retrieve them, and when he did, "We will be served a new fortune, my children. It will not be near so much as we once had, but I promise you...Jubilation! Our fortune is remade!"

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The very next morning, barely after the sun had crested the trees that surrounded the hills, the siblings stood outside their home and watched as their father hitched up their only horse.

"Father, won't you take a cart along?" Brendan asked, for what was probably the fifth time. His father barely cast him a sideways glance.

"There will be no need. When I obtain our properties, I will hire a cart at the port. Anyway, the cart we have is rickety and unreliable." Once their father had mounted, and had his traveling items secured to the horse's saddle, he looked down at his four children with fondness.

"I wish," he said, "to bring you each back a gift from the city. Tell me one thing you wish for, my children. After this venture, I am sure I will be able to afford it." Brendan, standing behind his sisters, cast a doubtful glance towards the ground. If this 'venture' was anything like the last one, they were going to end up not only poor, but seriously in debt. His first sister, filled with blind optimism, had already stepped up.

"Oh, dearest Father, bring me back some silk slippers and velvet hair ribbons. I am tired of looking like a milkmaid."

The second sister broke through her two sisters to look up at her father, batting her eyelashes.
"Father, bring me back a brocaded dress! White, father, with glass beads sewn in!"

"White for purity, no doubt." Brendan muttered, wryly. She shot him a venomous look.

"Yes," she said, pointedly, through clenched teeth. Her father peered past her two taller sisters at Beauty.

"And you, ma chere Beauty. What is it you desire?" Beauty ducked her head a moment in thought, and looked up with most humble disposition at her father.

She contemplated only a moment before answering. "A fine reading lamp, father."

"A lamp?"

"Yes," She nodded. "and if we got a new yoke for the horse, we could start a garden next spring."

Her father smiled indulgently, and nodded. Such a modest request. Such a sweet girl, his youngest Beauty. He would bring for her the finest lamp in the city. He readied to leave, when Beauty piped in, "Brendan, what would you like Father to bring back for you?"

Brendan said nothing for a long moment, and then looked and met his father's gaze, who had halfheartedly stopped to hear his son's request. They held a shared, wary look for a moment, Brendan's eyes conveying clearly his lack of faith in his father's ability to keep a hold on anything of value.

"If Beauty wants a garden, then I ask for a single rose, Father, to clip and plant beneath my sisters' windows," he said, quietly. "That is all I request from you." His father spared his son a momentary
glance, nodded curtly, tapped his heels against his horse's flanks, and started along the dusty path towards the sea.
It was during the fifth day of uneventful travel that the wind began to bite with chill teeth, and the merchant wrapped himself tightly in his cloak. His large farm horse plodded along steadily, heedless to the grabbing branches that formed an arched hallway around them. The merchant hadn't seen any other person on the road for many hours, and it was approaching dusk. The forest was thick, the trees twisted and gnarled, and he did not see any sign of an inn or village.

"I'm beginning to think we may be lost..." he muttered. The branches overhead were laced together so tightly that he didn't realize it was raining until a drop unerringly found its way down the back of his collar, and thunder rumbled in the gray sky. The merchant pulled up his hood and hunched low over his horse's neck, kicking it into a trot. Intent upon finding shelter, he urged his horse onward, following the trail with the hope that it must lead somewhere useful.

He must have dozed off, lulled by the rhythmic taps of the rain falling upon his cowl and the steady gait of his horse, because he awoke suddenly when his mount pulled up short, snorting nervously. He looked up and gasped. No village, no simple country inn stood here at the edge of the twisted forest; a huge tiered castle loomed over the countryside like a malevolent landlord.

"Who could live in such a fearful place?" he asked breathlessly. The cold wind gnashed at his cloak, and lightning streaked the sky. Gathering up his courage, the merchant made his way down the bare path towards the castle.

The stony road lead to a great wrought iron gate, set between the arches of a grand boulder wall. If iron could be spun by spiders, the result would be much like the great tangled web that sat on those rusted black hinges. Beyond it, the stones continued on towards the castle, all at once straighter, more uniform in their size and shape.

He hesitantly dismounted and pushed one side of the gate with a trembling hand, feeling cold and clumsy and quite uneasy. The gate did not swing open easily but inched open reluctantly with each push, hinges shrieking like a dying thing all the while. He stepped past the black mass of bent metal, tugging his skittish horse along with him.

Twisted bushes, gnarled and dark, made rows on either side of him all the way to a set of great wooden doors. Each door had upon it a wrought iron handle, meant for knocking, not for opening. The castle itself was made of huge, thick grey stones. Its corners and eves were guarded by winged gargoyles, hulking and glowering at anything that dared to approach their perches.

The merchant reached a trembling hand toward the knocker, swallowing down an almost overwhelming sense of fear. He raised it and let it fall. The sound the heavy iron made when it struck the hard wood of the door echoed thunderously, and the horse shied away, tugging fitfully at its reins. The merchant trembled all over, fingers clumsily rewrapping around his horse's tether.

The cumbersome door creaked open with a great effort, seemingly of its own volition. The merchant's eyes widened, and he felt frozen in place for a moment, before taking two hesitant steps forward. And then, quite out of the blue, a hand touched his, stealing his horse's reins away. He turned in alarmed and watched in dumb amazement as his horse was lead away down a path that circled the castle, the end of its reins floating in the air. Nobody was there! And then with equal abruptness, he felt two hands, soothing and calming in nature and friendly by their touch, take hold of his arm and guide him inside the doors, removing his now dripping cloak as he stepped over the threshold.
That night he was treated to a fine meal; and new, dry clothes; and a big, soft bed, all by these strange invisible servants. Every room was lit immediately by torchlight when he entered, and plunged into darkness again the instant he left. While the unseen servants were at first unnerving, he cautiously grew to appreciate the comfort they offered. He had often heard tales in his childhood of a magical castle lost in some fearsome wood, and found it easy to accept that this may be the enchanted castle of nursery-room legend.

In the morning, he was woken by a soft insistent tugging on his shoulder, and guided out of bed and into a clean set of clothes. He was escorted to a light breakfast laid out on the magnificent dining table from the night before. On his way through the halls, and once seated in the grand dining room, he realized the true elegant splendor of the place as the bright daylight spilled in through the huge vaulted windows.

Countless rooms branched from the hallway, and with each glance he took into each one, he saw different unique wallpapers, lush carpets on the floors, and shelves decorated by priceless baubles and musty books. The dining room was grand, the ceiling high, the walls painted burgundy and gold. The table itself was hugely long, and made of thick polished mahogany. Despite all the beauty of the place, he still felt a need to depart (a feeling not assuaged or dispersed by very intent and firm guiding of the invisible hands) and so he did not hesitate to follow when he was guided through the ornately carved foyer, and out through the front doors which were much less intimidating in the lovely light of day.

The sun was bright, but did not quite dispel the chill of autumn. In the sunlight the garden around the castle was beautiful. His horse was saddled, fed, brushed, groomed and gleaming with its mane tied in braids, waiting at the foot of the stone steps. Beside the horse sat two large leather saddlebags, their flaps open, displaying their gleaming contents to the sun.

He started in shock where he stood, than ran with near-gleeful abandon to kneel before them. Gold. Both bags were filled to overflowing with gold! The sum that faced him alone was thrice as much as his business venture could ever have yielded. They were rich again! His twins would have their dresses and baubles, his darling Beauty would have the finest and brightest lamps in all of Europe to read by. He would joyfully take this freely offered gold instead of wasting another week or so of travel. Let his former business partners take care of the ship and its modest cargo!

He quickly and carefully heaved the saddlebags to his horse's back, lashing them there tight, and then turned once more to the great castle, taking the reins in hand.

"Thank you!" he called gratefully, before turning and starting down the slate path towards the gate. Calculations ran through his mind as he stepped lightly over the stones. His daughters would have their finery. He would order his Beauty the best lamps from Paris- No, indeed they would move to Paris, to a five story manor on the Seine! They would all . . .

Oh, wait. Paris. His son. He recalled his son's impertinent request for a single rose. He glanced about, and suddenly realized, as if a blindfold had been removed from his face, that the most fragrant and beautiful roses he had ever seen surrounded him. Having been distracted by his newfound wealth, he had not noticed them, and felt foolish for it. Upon closer inspection still, he realized the great, bountiful rosebushes to be the same gnarled briars he had passed by the previous night.

"What kind of boy asks for a flower, anyway?" He grumbled, leaning back over the saddle to twist the head of a sunset-red rose from its stem.

"Snap."

The merchant instinctively cowered as a dark shadow fell over him, and his mount reared up,
neighing shrilly, and dashed away in panic. As its great body surged forward, both the merchant and the saddlebags slipped from its back and spilled over the ground, leaving the fallen merchant bruised and frightened on the cobbles amidst the twinkling coins. Upon gaining a sense of where up was in comparison to down, his eyes fell upon feet. Clawed feet, like a wolf's. Fear soaking his limbs as a sweat, the man slowly looked up. The clawed feet led to muscled legs, bent backward at the knees, clad in dark leather breeches. A narrow waist broadened to wide shoulders, the loose sleeves of a white shirt billowing around thick arms. The hands…like the terrible mating of an animal's paw and a man's own hand. Horrified, not wanting to look but almost compelled to, the merchant looked into the face of a monster.

"Is this how you repay my generosity, craven?" Growling low and guttural, the Beast dropped to all fours and slunk around the shivering merchant, baring his gruesome fangs menacingly. He shoved his monstrous face close to the merchant's, an angry snort from his nostrils blowing back the whimpering man's hair. The merchant's eyes were wide and white, his pupils tiny pinpoints of fear. He'd never in his most horrid nightmares imagined a face as fearful as this one. The cruel cat-lips and overhanging brows that shadowed the strangely human brown eyes, the furred nose crinkled with disdain and fury. Long spiraled horns sprung above his eyes and swept back along his shaggy head. A golden mane surrounded his leonine face like flames, and pointed elongated ears sprouted from this demonic mane, both lying back low with anger.

"I had my servants supply you with everything you desired, and I kindly even bestowed this small wealth upon your ungrateful head! And you repay me by taking the one thing that was not freely given. One of my roses, which I prize above all things."

The merchant gaped like a fish, then found his voice, dropping his gaze to his hands to avoid those cold gimlet eyes. "I-I-I'm so sorry, M-my Lord, I didn't mean any harm..." Unconsciously the merchant backed away. "I of course am so grateful for the g-g-gifts you have given me, my humblest apologies, My Lord-"

"Call me by no lies!" The Beast roared at the merchant, his voice itself felt like a great blow to the cowering man. "I know what I am." The furred creature drew himself up to his full imposing height, picking the quaking man up with one claw. "Call me Beast, plainly, for that is plainly what I am."

"Y-y-yes," the frightened man stammered. "B-beast."

"You," the savage figure growled, "will pay for the death of that rose with your own."

"My own," the merchant uttered, horrified. "My own death? Oh, no! Oh good sir, good Beast! Do not take my life from me! It is merely a flower! Surely the broken stem of a rose cannot be worth the life of a man! Oh! Please don't eat me!"

"And what care I," seethed the Beast, "for the worth of a man? These roses are better company than any human. They are not selfish, they do not take anything but the sunlight and the water and the air, and only so that they, in turn, may grow. For me." He lifted one wickedly curved claw against his chest, a gesture of possession. "They are mine. Everything here," he motioned that same claw around, "Is mine. You have taken what belongs to me. First you took what I offered you, and then you took what I DID NOT!" The Beast's gravelly voice reached a thunderous roar at the end of his sentence, leaving the merchant quaking and cowering once more, not that he had stopped, particularly, in the first place.

"Sir Beast," the man pleaded. "I would that I could pay you for this rose with my life. But it is not just my life that would be ended. I have children, four of them, and they are without a mother for near sixteen years." He clasped his hands together and bowed his forehead to touch the back of his thumbs. "I beg you. Spare me for their sake."
The Beast snorted, viciously, derisively. "Your children's futures are of no concern to me. I do not wish to know of your," he spat the word from strong, cat like jaws, "family. I care only to deal with your indiscretion."

The terrified merchant glanced despairingly towards the gold coins that littered the stones he knelt on. "Then allow me," he cried, "to return to you this gold that was your gift, to repay you for the blossom-" he was silenced by a furious roar. He quickly rethought his strategy. "I...I will make you a wager!"

The Beast stopped, eyeing the merchant a moment with a small snarl, and threw back his muzzle and let out four great, bellowing roars, that frightened the merchant so badly he curled to his knees, cringing and shaking. It took him a scant few moments to realize it was the Beast's laugh.

"A wager? Surely you jest."

"Not at all!" The merchant assured the imposing creature. "After all, I am now supplied with much gold, fine clothes, and a fine, temperate horse." The Beast watched him, silently, judging him, then nodded, something akin to amusement shadowed in his eyes.

"Your offer amuses me. Very well. We shall see if you can win yourself back in a game of cards."

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The merchant took another long gulp from his glass of wine, which was perpetually filled thanks to the invisible servants that attended the card game. The merchant eyed his cards, and chewed his lip. He had a decent Numerus totaling 39 points in his hand, and was debating his next move for a bit longer than necessary. He glanced over his cards to look at the Beast, who seemed to be examining his fingernails. He looked purposefully at the merchant, and extended his razor claws, which made a small schnick sound as they were unsheathed.

"...I'll hold," the man mumbled, and met the Beast's bet. Unfortunately for him, the merchant's Numerus 39 was narrowly beaten by the Beast's Primero 40. They played several rounds, the merchant losing each, and growing more panicked with each loss. Each defeat brought on an anxiety attack, and the merchant would throw around a few more promises, a new wager, and the Beast would indulge him, letting him dig himself deeper.

By the eighth hand, the merchant had not only bet his life, his horse, his gold, his house, his clothes, and each item he had brought to the castle, but also the entire fortune that had awaited him at the ocean in the south. He was now, understandably desperate, but also and rather more importantly, in the vice-like grip of gambling fever.

"All in," he said, throwing out his most eager and confident grin, which the Beast saw right through.

"All in?" he echoed.

"Yes," the merchant said, and began bluffing in earnest. "I'm vying everything I got, and declaring my bid at Fluxus 45," which was the lowest possible Fluxus hand. The merchant actually had a Fluxus 70, and the only thing that could beat a Fluxus 70 was a Chorus, or four of a kind, and what were the odds that the Beast had that? If he had any sense, he'd fold. But just in case the Beast thought the merchant was bluffing, and laid down a Fluxus higher than a 45, the merchant would triumphantly lay down his 70.

"Fluxus 45," the Beast repeated, thoughtfully. The merchant's skin crawled with anxiety. When the
Beast folded, then it would win the merchant half the gold on the table and surely the winning streak would continue from there!

"I revie." The Beast placed in front of him a fine ivory comb with a design picked out in emeralds.

There was a moment of silence before the merchant choked out, "You're raising? But...I don't have anything left!"

"Well. You'll just have to think of something." The voice of the Beast was silkily dangerous. "Just what is it you prize over all things?"

The merchant nodded slowly, in the full grip of gambling fever. He must win. There was no way this horrible creature could beat his hand. Therefore he felt quite confident as he said, "Tell you what. I'll throw in my daughter, too.

The Beast sat, perfectly still, blinking golden brown eyes at the desperate man sitting across from him. "...Your what?"

"My daughter! Her name is Beauty, and her name is enough to describe all of her!"

"Wait, wait. Your daughter?"

"She is sweet, kind, quiet and lovely in everything she does. Beautiful to behold, and a pure spirit." He spoke like a carriage-dealer driving a sale.

"You're willing to wager your daughter? ...You're a despicable person, I hope you know that."

Beast paused, drumming his claws on the table. "Bet accepted! You win; you walk out of here alive, and with all your belongings and gold. You lose, and I get your daughter," his eyes narrowed to menacing thin slits of russet. "Or your life, if you try to back out. Your choice, old man." The merchant nodded and grinned boldly, and laid down his final hand.

Which he lost.
In Which the Merchant Becomes Ill

The horse trotted with high spirits towards its home, oblivious to its master's dire situation, looking forward to a good brushing and hot mash in the warm barn. It stopped when it felt a tug on its reins, and stood still as the merchant slid from the saddle to the dewy grass.

Beauty had found time enough for a respite from the daily chores. She lifted her face from a book of poetry at the sound of the jingling bridle, and carefully drew the strip of ribbon that served as a marker across the page. She stood and moved to her windowsill, then leaned her head out of the open window.

She cried out, "Father's home!" and there came from inside a sudden clamor as the merchant's three daughters rushed out to him as quickly as they could. Their brother followed at a more leisurely pace, hands in his pockets, tucking away the white rag he had just been using to wipe soot from his cheek. He stopped, standing next to his little sister, and quirked an eyebrow at his father's brooding face.

"No cart, I see," he said nonchalantly. "Trouble at the docks, Father?" His father's eyes turned towards him, face reddening, and he growled.

"You! Here's your accursed flower!" He threw a crumpled, silky ball of petals at his son. It struck him on the chest and fell, a few deep red petals littering the ground. The young man looked from the fallen rose to his father, and remarked in an extremely dry tone, "I take it the venture didn't go well."

"Your flower," his father bellowed, "cost more than anything you could ever dream! Anything!" He then went off in a rage, ranting about many things that, to his children, were completely nonsensical; including, to the best of their comprehension, invisible people, evil rosebushes, a haunted castle, a giant cat, something about the unlikelihood of some chorus.

"Were large quantities of wine involved?" his son asked gently after a long pause.

"You would mock me, my own flesh and blood? Ungrateful boy!" The merchant bellowed. It was then the eldest sister discovered the saddlebags lashed to the horse's haunches, as the ties came free with her tampering and heavy coins pounded the soft earth. She gasped loudly, and interrupted her father's ranting.

"Mon Dieu! Look at all this gold! We are richer than kings!" she cheered delightedly.

"Is it worth your poor father's life?" spat the merchant, and his children blinked, collectively.

"Whatever do you mean, Father?" asked Beauty, laying her slim hand on her father's shoulder.

"We must move from here. We must leave immediately! I must rush you away, my Beauty." This earned him several confused looks. He shook his head. "Come inside, my children. I have a tale to tell you." He spread his hands wide to usher them in. "A harrowing tale . . ."

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The family sat in stunned silence long after the merchant had finished speaking. Brendan was the first to speak.

"So . . .wait. I don't understand. You took this rose, and then a 'beast'," his tone was skeptical,
"showed up, and demanded that you give him your youngest daughter." His father solemnly nodded his head.

"...How did he know you had a daughter?"

"That's not the point!" His father answered, flustered at being caught in his lie.

Beauty's brother persisted. "And how did he know you had more than one?"

His father snapped harshly, "It's not important! You and your logic. Obviously he is a magical beast! I do not know how he knew, but he did! He demanded that I die or I give him my daughter. He said he would give me a month to say my goodbyes, or to ready my youngest daughter for her journey. But Beauty!" He moved to the girl and clasped her porcelain smooth fingers in his own wrinkled hands. "My dear, dear, lovely Beauty. He shall never lay his filthy paws upon my daughter! And he won't lay them on me, either, if we get out of here fast enough."

There was a shocked silence, then the first twin exclaimed, "But Father...!"

"No buts! We can move far away, to Istanbul. He'll never find us there."

"I thought you said he was a magical beast," Brendan said practically. "Couldn't he find us wherever we--"

"Enough of your talk! We have to leave!"

"Father," came the protest of the second twin. "While you've been away having your fantastical run-in with a 'beast', I've gotten engaged! I'm not moving anywhere! The banker is a good man! The only one around here with any money at all, and he knows how to treat a lady."

"Still going for white, then?" Her brother muttered, earning him a poisonous glance from said sister, and a small stifled smile from Beauty.

"But we must leave! We cannot stay," the merchant insisted. However, each of his children agreed. The story was far too far-fetched. They would stay where they were, and perhaps in a month's time they would see what happens. Beauty felt ill at ease and torn, not sure whether to believe her dear father's tale, or to believe her brother's cynical logic.

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A month passed, and nothing happened. The merchant was more at ease than he thought he would be after almost four weeks had passed since the incident. Taking Beauty's tactful advice, the merchant invested most of the gold wisely. His daughters were now well dressed and pampered to their liking, and all three had impressive dowries set up. Their only complaint was the size and nature of their humble home, and the twins wanted to move back to the city. His son, thankfully, had taken to working extra hours at his clerking job, though there was little need now that they had a healthy sum set aside. When he was home, the young man spent his time in the attic reading, or playing the violin the family's new fortune bought him, or outside, doing whatever it was he did.

Beauty's heart grew light now that all talk of a magical beast had been abandoned. Nothing bad had happened, and her family was still together, and their prosperity looked secure.

Yet one day, when the bite of late autumn was chasing the buds of herbs back into their shoots, her father looked rather unwell. His breathing was shallow, and his skin paled to an unhealthy, grayish
The sisters grew concerned over the course of the day as their father moved shakily from room to room, or would sit in a quiet heap beside the fireplace for long stretches of time. When he collapsed shortly after missing lunch, they each cried out in fear and had to call their brother from his practicing to determine what was wrong. He stood by the bedside a moment, trying to be strong and knowledgeable for his sisters’ sakes, though he had never studied medicine in school.

"He’s . . .ah. . .sick alright." He nodded a little. "Indubitably so. I’ll go, ah, fetch the physician." He left with haste, as the women crowded around their father’s bed, hands wringing with worry.

The doctor, upon his arrival, concurred with Brendan's diagnosis. Their father was indeed ill, though from what, he could not ascertain. In his delirium, the merchant grabbed Beauty's arm and wailed, "The Beast! It is the Beast's magical powers! He steals away my life from beyond! Oh, my children," he moaned, "I will pay for that rose…"

"This rose, Father?" Brendan pulled a red clay pot from his father's windowsill. He offered it to the group, illustrating the brilliant scarlet bloom that grew from the dark earth. It looked innocent enough, though peculiarly long-lived. Beauty wondered briefly at her brother's rationale behind putting the rose in his father's room. Knowing Brendan well, she suspected it was done in some subtle attempt to mock him.

"He's killing me through the rose! The BEAST!" The merchant pointed to the demonic flora and collapsed back into the pillows. The doctor cast a baffled expression at Brendan.

"A beast? Killing him . . . through the rose." He thought a moment. "Has he been hallucinating long?" Brendan paused as he set the pot back on the sill, then nodded with a serious expression on his face.

"Yes. Yes, he has," he said.

"Ah. I see. I will go back to the town and fill a medication that should help him sleep. I'll write up a referral as well, for a doctor in the city. This has me quite perplexed, I admit," and with that news and lingering kiss to the second twin's hand and a silent promise in his eyes, the doctor left.

The three sisters sat beside their father for the rest of the day, bathing his hot brow with lightly perfumed water. The doctor returned with medicine, and left again, and eventually their father slept, tossing fitfully and murmuring about unseen servants and card games.

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In the cloak of darkness Beauty saddled the draft horse and pulled on her traveling cloak. She breathed in deep, holding the night air long in her lungs, keeping close to the warm shoulder she guided. The stars winked down at her from a clear velvet sky, and she shivered, although not with the cold. There had been a thought and a will stirring in her heart all day, as she watched her father struggle for strength and listened to his earnest madness. She could not dismiss his pain or his sincerity. Her devotion to her only remaining parent was as great as it could be in a human girl, and so she felt little hesitation at her plan of action.

She guided the horse from the small barn out into the moonlight, and jumped in surprise when she saw the figure of her brother resting casually against the side of the barn, his lean body outlined in silver.

"Going somewhere?" he asked. Beauty fidgeted a moment, and then held her head up high and stepped forward. For a delicate maiden, she was strong of spirit and very brave. Though she thought of herself as neither of these things, they were true, and her brother knew this. Eyes glittering bright
through the dark she held her ground.

"I must go to this beast. Don't you see? Everything about the castle, and the beast, and the magic; it's all true! I know it is magic that ails our father so, and I must journey to assure his safety! To ensure that we are not orphaned. It is tragic enough that we have lost our mother. I did not know her, and you barely did. But to lose our father as well? Our poor sisters would not survive it. So I will go. I will offer myself in exchange." She lightly touched his arm, lark-blue eyes solemn. "Brendan, you are the man of the house, with father old and ill as he is. You must take care of our sisters and him in my absence." She swallowed, choking back a few honest tears. She would have regretted her choice, if it had not been necessary. But it was, and she would do what she must.

Her brother, older than she and yet so young to truly be the head of the household, so ill-suited for it and yet so dear to her, shook his head slightly. He was touched by his sister's bravery, but a bit exasperated by her martyrdom. "I will not allow it. The hell if my sister is going off to be eaten by some monstrous, vicious, possibly rabid beast," he adamantly persisted, trying vainly to frighten her. She shook her head, her resolve strong.

"I must, Brendan." He looked at her for a long time, and gently touched the side of her face.

"All right. I see that you will not be swayed. I will not stand in your way." They exchanged a brief gaze, blue eyes to blue eyes, and she started forward, leading the horse behind her.

He clipped her quite suddenly under the chin as she passed his shoulder, and caught her as her eyes rolled back in her head and she crumpled towards the ground.

"Oh, my dear, brave sister . . ." He carried her silently back into the house, and laid her gently on the chaise sofa in the living room next to the last popping embers smoldering in the fireplace.

He turned to leave, when he remembered. The 'beast' would, if he had any kind of sense at all, ask for some kind of proof that Brendan had in fact come from the merchant's home. He padded silently into his father's darkened bedroom, and deftly snapped the full blossom from its stem. He carelessly stuffed the rose into his vest. He pulled on his traveling cloak as he strode out the door and into the moonlight.

Surely, he thought, this 'beast' will listen to reason. I'm sure he's a logical person. I sincerely doubt he is a 'beast' as father would have us believe. More likely, it is an ugly man of great size who wore a fur cloak, and father was undoubtedly drunk at the time. Still...Brendan had to admit he was intrigued.

Who was this vicious man who valued his roses more fiercely than gold?

He mounted the horse his sister had so well prepared. Maybe, he thought, the man did have some sort of powers or, or...or something. The sickness did seem to come out of nowhere, and coincided precisely with the end of one month since his father's return. Nothing seemed to help it. Maybe keeping the rose in his father's room had been a mistake. "But maybe I would have known better if I'd have finished my damned education," he mumbled, then lifted his hood and straightened his shoulders, banishing such thoughts. He wasn't bitter. Oh no.

He dug his heels into the horse's side, and took off towards the path his father had taken one month ago.
Seven days of arduous, tedious, continual travel later, Brendan d'Aumale was on his way back from the ocean port. He was very confused and not very happy. There had been no great manor much less a castle, no off-woods trails, no ominous forest! And for the Virgin's sake, there had been no 'beast'! His eyes narrowed slightly as he glanced about the woods he rode through. The sky was turning black, and storm clouds were building. That was winter creeping up, he thought, and far too early. The horse shied from stark branches, stepped lightly over every stone and leaf, as if any one might leap up and bite the equine on the pasterns.

"I feel lost. Why are we lost? We followed the damn road. We should be near back to the village by now."

The sudden rumble of low, threatening thunder rolled over the hills. He bit back a curse. *I wish,* he thought, *I could just be home.* By a fire. With food. And blankets. He sighed, glancing down at the forest floor. His eyebrows raised and he smiled.

"What luck. A trail. All trails lead somewhere! Hopefully somewhere with wine and a hot meal." He guided the horse towards the narrow dirt path that cut into the grass. The horse seemed reluctant, but he urged it forward, and they were soon delving deeper into the dark forest.

It didn't take long for rain to start falling, a cold, freezing rain, slicing through the trees. Brendan pushed the horse to go faster, wanting desperately to get out of the stinging downpour. He barely noticed when the dirt path turned to uneven gravel that clacked underneath the horse's shoed feet. His hood could not keep out every stray sluice of rain, and soon Brendan felt his long hair grow heavy and matted with the wet. He was not, repeat, not happy.

The forest had opened up to reveal a craggy mountain, grey and shadowy under the darkening sky. He blinked water from his eyes. No, not a mountain. A castle. A hulking fortress of ash colored stone, tiered and massive, standing grand and terrible in the now pouring rain.

In the flash of an instant, he realized; everything his father had claimed had been true. That had been the path, this was obviously the castle, and therefore he must have made a deal with…well, someone. Probably not a real monster, and… and…

"Wait a minute. This is…northeast of our village." He paused, shocked. "He was going the wrong damned way!" The words exploded heatedly from him, his horse's ears lying back flat at its rider's displeasure. Suddenly not feeling the majesty or terror of the place before him, he dismounted, dragged the horse behind him, kicked open the screeching wrought iron gate and stormed through. "All that traveling! For nothing! That man…" Seething, but unwilling to speak ill of his poor sick father (whom, unbeknownst to Brendan, had gotten quite better the moment the rose was taken out of the household), he bit off his angry words and towed his horse over the slate path through the sheeting rain.
In Which There is Confrontation

The Beast waited, perched over his door on the gutter-eves, indistinguishable from one of the dark shapes of the gargoyles. From this high vantage point he had seen the girl ride in, swathed and bundled like a nun in her robes. When she dismounted, swinging her legs to the ground with short, angry movements, he thought her stride was rather unmaidenly and bold. But, he thought, it will take a rather unusual girl to break the spell.

He forced his mind off that thought, with a somewhat superstitious belief that if he got too hopeful, he would inevitably be let down. His shadowed eyes followed her as she made her way between the tangled roses. He could not see much of her at all through the veil of rain, just that she was slender and tall, with dark wisps of bedraggled hair peeking from the hood.

I knew that craven scum would not come himself. Ha! I bet as soon as he got sick he slapped his daughter in the saddle and trundled her off. Hmm. She's later than I expected. I was getting rather tired of waiting for her night after night.

I have to remember not to frighten her. She may be my last chance.

The Beast drew his velvet hood far over his monstrous face, and crouched low as the girl neared the door. His tail lashed once, his legs tensed, and with a great leap he landed in front of her, braced on his paw-like hands. His heavy black cloak flared out like the giant wings of a raven before settling against his bulky silhouette.

The rain-slick horse shied, tugging fitfully at its reins, pawing at the ground, frothing wildly. The girl jumped in sudden fright, and Beast caught a glimpse of the whites of her eyes, but she managed to hold onto her horse's muzzle. She backed up against her quivering equine's flanks for support as Beast drew himself up to his full height, looming over her.

"You're late," he growled softly, the words rumbling in his chest like gravel. He knew the girl couldn't see him clearly, else she'd be running for the hills.

The girl took a very small mouse-like step forward. "I didn't realize I was expected at all, sir." The voice was unsteady and soft-spoken, but quite clearly much too deep for a lady's voice. The Beast's heavy brows lifted in livid surprise. Snake-like, the Beast's claws shot out and grabbed the intruder by the shirtfront, causing him to yelp and drop his horse's halter. Beast yanked off the cloak's hood with his other sharply curved claw. The face it revealed was finely pointed, with an upturned nose and blue eyes, but it was unmistakably a man's face. The unshaven firm jaw and thin lips left no doubt of that.

Beast lowered his hooded face close to the boy's pinched and pale one, lips curled ferociously. "Who the hell are you?" he asked menacingly, each word punctuated by a growl.

Though more frightened then he'd ever been in his life, Brendan's eyes kept trying to pierce the dark of the night and rain to see his attacker's face, driven by unchecked curiosity, but the rain fell in his eyes and he could not discern the faintest detail. He could quite readily believe that this was a true beast, like his father had said. The hands that gripped him were stronger than imaginable, and the voice...! Like the devil himself! He swallowed an immense lump of fear that threatened to choke him.

"My name is Brendan…my father, he came here and, well, the rose, and my sister, so I stopped her and I thought, well..." he took a deep breath, realizing that he was babbling. "I th-thought
maybe I could talk to you so you wouldn't, er, have to kill my father. Or my sister." The hands that fisted his shirt tightened and he heard that lion-like growl again. "Or me, for that matter, sir."

With a snarl, Brendan's clothes still gripped in Beast's claws, the monstrous creature whirled around, ramming the heavy castle door open with his free fist and flung Brendan carelessly to the floor. Brendan pushed himself up off the hall carpet, noting in a vague way the fine colors and patterns and how his cloak was drenching it with slightly muddy water. His soaked hair clung to his face, and pushed the errant strands away so that his eyes could warily watch the cloaked figure address someone behind Brendan.

"See to the damned horse!" came the sharp command. Brendan quickly glanced back behind his shoulder as he slowly and shakily got to his feet, but saw nobody there. He lifted his head, shoving his sodden hair from his face and braced himself for whatever was to come next.

No amount of bracing could have prepared him for the sight of his 'host' tearing off his cloak and turning to face Brendan, stepping close and looming threateningly over him.

The young man sucked in a shocked breath and took a step backward, his eyes as round as twin moons. Oh, he believed now. It was exactly as his father had said; the low drawn brows and heavy jaw, framed by a fearsome russet and gold mane. Horns swept over the furred skull. *Dear God, he had fangs! And a tail, so help me Lord.*

"What are you staring at?" The Beast snapped, his claws clenched into fists. Brendan wrenched his eyes away and fixed them on his hands, embarrassed to see them shaking. He tried to calm down and gather his scattered wits, fighting off the insane impulse to laugh hysterically. A Beast. It was impossible.

The 'impossibility' rumbled deep in his chest and crossed his thick arms. "I should snap your neck for your insolence. Am I a freak to amuse you?" He watched a tremor pass through the boy with grim pleasure.

"I'm sorry," the boy whispered hoarsely.

"That coward merchant is your father, boy?"

Brendan nodded jerkily, shivering with both fear and the cold of his wet cloak. He didn't trust himself to speak.

"Why have you come here?" Beast demanded gruffly. "I sent for the girl."

The thought of his brave sister gave Brendan the courage he needed to meet the Beast's eyes, though every instinct told him to run like hell. "Father was...he was sick. Beauty, my sister, she wanted to go so he would be well again, but I couldn't let...let her..." He could no longer maintain eye contact with that hard, menacing, impersonal gaze.

"So why did you come, rather than merely restrain her? Did you think it was a brave thing to do, to march in the home of the Beast, or was it merely stupidity?" He curled his lips in a sneer.

"Well," Brendan began, his eyes flicking to and from the Beast's face. Politeness decreed that eye contact was the respectful thing to do, but what if the creature accused him of staring again? *Oh Mother Mary, please let me live through this day!* "To be perfectly honest, I didn't really think there was a...a...well, a beast. So, um, stupidity, I would say, sir. And well, I had to come. My sister was so worried about Father. I thought that perhaps...I could...convince you..." His words petered off into a mumble. It sounded so stupid now, when he was faced with this leviathan. "And I can't help
but feel that this all is my fault, sir."

"Call me Beast!" roared the creature, the cords of his neck standing out. Brendan ducked his head, biting his lip. "I care not for your flattering lies!"

"I'm sorry, I...I meant it in respect." Brendan could barely hear his own voice, so quiet it was. The scowling Beast waved the words aside with a claw.

"Your fault, boy? It was your fault that your thieving father stole my rose?"

"Y-yes, in a way, I think." Again he struggled to meet the Beast's eyes. "I asked him for it. If I hadn't requested a rose from him, he wouldn't have taken yours."

"...Why did you want a rose?" The Beast's startlingly human eyes narrowed.

Brendan paused. "Ah...well..." Honesty, he figured, would probably be the best course of action. "I didn't exactly have what you could call faith in my father's abilities to do...anything right, actually...so I figured I would ask for something exceedingly simple and of little monetary value as a gift from when he returned from his business adventure."

It seemed, to the Beast, there was little love lost between the two over the whole incident. "You came to save your father?" His deep voice was skeptical. Brendan nodded, gaining a bit of confidence. The longer he was alive, the less likely it seemed that he would be eaten later. He took his current condition of breathing to be a good sign.

"Er, yes- Uh, rather, no."

The Beast glowered at him. "This isn't a particularly difficult question, boy," he enunciated carefully, as if the boy was half witted. "One word answer. Yes or no."

"Not...exactly."

"One word," snapped the Beast.

"...Maybe," Brendan squeaked. The Beast fought the urge to beat the boy to his senses, or senseless, whichever came about first. Although the conversation was so far more lucid than most he'd had with, well, anyone in a very, very long time, it was difficult to wring answers out of the stammering youth, and even more difficult to refrain from smacking him upside the head.

"Try one sentence," Beast growled. "Go."

"I came to save my sister who wants to save my father by taking his place." There was a moment of silence. An acceptable, coherent sentence. They were getting somewhere.

"So you stopped her from coming here." Beast paused, and then asked, very succinctly, holding in his temper, "Why did you think this would be an acceptable trade?"

"Ah...I didn't really think of the word 'trade' at the time, in that line of thought-"

"Why," the Beast cut him off, "did you think you would be an acceptable substitute for your sister?"

"Well, I didn't really-"

"Fool! I did not ask for her on a passing fancy! It was important that I be sent the girl!" The Beast seemed to be mulling it over in a brooding, dark, but not-so-threatening way. Brendan watched the huge sinister figure as it stood above him, barely three steps away, its breathing low and rumbling.
He was looking at a fantastical creature; he could scarce believe it. A creature capable of reason and rages (mostly rages, it seemed), and, Brendan noticed with some relief, a creature that was not killing him. He felt his academic curiosity stirring, and he tried to see this Beast more clearly, for the light was dim, but from his spot on the floor, his host was shadowed and rimmed in secrets. *I'm sure no one's ever seen anything like him before...I would have read about it in my textbooks. Maybe it's a medical condition...like gigantism...only with hair, or something.*

After a moment, he hesitantly reached out one hand, leaned forward, and asked, "Here, were you born like that?"

Cobra-quick, the Beast grabbed the youth's wrist and hauled him a good seven inches above the ground, until they were face to monstrous face. He growled in outrage, eyes burning like banked coals, obviously seething mad.

"GET OUT!" The Beast roared through tightly clenched teeth. Brendan's eyes flew wide open. It hurt his arm socket to be so roughly treated, and his insides curled up with fear. But...to leave would be tantamount to suicide.

"In this weather?" He asked weakly.

The Beast was taken aback. He shook Brendan a bit, the boy's feet dangling above the rug like a doll. He snapped, irritably, "Yes!"

"But," Brendan protested, "it's freezing and it's raining, and the horse is all tired, and I don't even know where I am!" The Beast moved his face very close to Brendan's, his eyes promising many painful things.

"I don't care. Get out of my castle. Or I will eat you," he added, baring his teeth mid-sentence and hissing to emphasize the word 'eat'.

Brendan canted his head to the side, and said, "I don't think you will." He pointed the finger of his free hand at the Beast's mouth. "See, only your front teeth are fangs, and your back teeth are molars, which would indicate you're an omnivore, and thusly aren't suitable for tearing meat, and therefore probably-"

"Shut up!" The Beast yelled, abruptly dropping the boy to the floor. "What is the matter with you? Stop talking!"

"You wanted me to talk before!" Brendan pointed out, feeling that familiar tremor of mind-numbing fear creeping up again. He rubbed his sore shoulder. *Why am I still talking?*he thought, panicked. *It's like an automatic response! It's only making him angrier! I'm going to die!*

"Now I want you to be SILENT!" The command echoed throughout the buttressed hall. Brendan quivered a bit, and squeezed his eyes shut. He swallowed hard.

"Yes," he acquiesced, quietly. The Beast made an abrupt move forward, which sent Brendan cowering back a little, but he only glared at the boy. Brendan shivered involuntarily from the cold dampness that had soaked through his cloak to his very bones.

The Beast took two steps forward and heaved the boy to his feet, roughly pushing him towards the door. "Leave," he insisted. "Go."

Brendan stumbled and paused, looking at the great wooden doors with dismay.

"Do you have any idea," the Beast seethed, "how lucky you are? That you are still alive to be given
the opportunity to leave? Get out!"

"I'll freeze to death," Brendan said, matter-of-factly, unconsciously adopting a wide-legged stance, like a stubborn mule.

"That is entirely your problem," the Beast grumbled, and shoved the boy out the double doors, which opened and closed on their own.

The horse stood dejectedly in the rain, a small pool of cold water puddled on the saddle seat. Brendan stood forlornly for a moment, feeling his cloak become heavier still with even more freezing water, and trudged to his unhappy animal.

He heaved himself up onto the horse, body aching with abated fear and general exhaustion, not particularly looking forward to a long night of soggy, frigid travel. Still, the longer he sat dejectedly, the longer that ride would be, and so Brendan urged the horse forward down the long dark walk to the gates.

Inside the castle foyer, a feral growl clawed its way from the Beast's broad chest and forced itself from his throat. The roar seemed to consume the silence of the Great Hall, echoing down countless passages and endless stone spires. What a cruel joke Fate continued to play on him. His hopes had been high, and he had seen the glimmering light of promise, the promise that his curse would end. That light was snuffed with the arrival of the boy…but all was not lost. The girl would come. He could wait…he'd been patient for so long already, almost longer than he could remember. He could be patient a little while longer.
In Which Brendan is Sarcastic

There was a malcontent mumbling in the forest that sounded something like this:

"Well isn't this just fantastic. Isn't this just the coups de thrice damned grace. I'm freezing. Stupid horse. Stupid forest. Stupid sleet." The horse appeared rather disinterested at Brendan's muttered tirade, and so the young man did felt no hindrance in continuing.

"And…we've passed that miserable stump three times!" He glared at the offending gray husk of a tree. "How is that even possible?" He crowed, voice reaching a hysterical pitch, "It's a straight road!"

The horse started, took three nervous steps forward, and stopped as a chilling howl ripped through the night.


Another howl and the horse reeled around, eyes rolling, rocking on its hind feet and pawing the gravelly road. "Maybe I should have let Beauty do this," he murmured, and tried to steady his horse, wishing fervently for daylight.

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The Beast brooded in his torn divan chair, its beauty long since shredded after one of Beast's old rages. A wine chalice found its way into his clawed hand, guided there by one of the invisible servants who populated his life. He sat in the Music Room, which smelled musty and warped. Dust covered and dulled each lonely instrument and the windows were small and didn't let in much light when it was day. The Beast liked this room because of its close oppressiveness, and because of the ornate fireplace, decorated with carven lions stalking about the mantle. It was large enough to roast a whole cow. The Beast watched the flame's tongues lick the back of the iron fire screen as he sipped his wine with surprising delicacy, remembering a time when the room had been filled with people and music, beautiful music…What was that sound?

He stood, the fur on his neck and shoulders bristling. Hollow. Banging. Familiar, but from the dark, cobwebby recesses of his memory. It sounded again. He slowly recalled a time when people would use the iron ornament on the front of the palace doors quite frequently...Oh. Someone was at the door.

And then came a voice.

"Hullo?"

He rolled his eyes and gnashed his teeth in fury. A servant must have let the boy in. Damn! If I could see that servant, I'd beat him, he thought moodily, and strode towards the front entrance on all great fours. He growled as he neared the head of the staircase, turning the corner sharply, and glowered full force at-

Nothing. No one was there. Well, maybe someone was, but if they were, it was someone invisible, and therefore wholly unimportant. Beast prowled to the head of the stairs as the boy's voice floated through the hall.
"Uh...Beast? I'd like to come in, just for a minute, use your fireplace. If you don't mind..." Beast hurled himself down the grand staircase on all fours, snarling, and threw the parlor door open wide.

"YOU!" he bellowed loudly enough for the chandelier to shake, "I thought I told you to leave!" The boy gave Beast a look that said very explicitly and in every line of his face, that he was at the point of exhaustion where he didn't care about anything anymore.

"I did leave," he stated, voice flat. The heavy dripping coat that clung to his thin and weary form was suddenly lifted from his shoulders. He jumped, looking thoroughly disturbed and startled.

"It's just the servants," Beast said quickly. "Why are you still here?" The audacity!

"But there's no one there," Brendan protested, glancing about nervously as he walked over to the fireplace, the very hearth that his father warmed himself at a little more than a month ago.

"They're invisible, fool." Oh, Brendan thought. Of course. Invisible. I should have guessed. "I told you to leave, yet here you are," the Beast growled, following the boy through the grand parlor. "In front of my fireplace."

"Well," Brendan said, "After going round the sixth circle of the night on that damned road, I just got tired of trying. That and the freezing sleet and rain and howling wolves-" He just shook his head and sniffed. "I'm not going back out there." The Beast mulled this over, looking the dripping boy over once, twice.

"What's wrong with your voice?"

"I'm sick, thank you." Brendan hissed, wringing out his darkened chestnut hair with total disregard for the nice carpet. The firelight only accentuated the tired rings beneath his eyes.

"You couldn't find your way onto the main road? It's a direct trail. No curves, twists, turns, or forks in the road. It's a straight road." The Beast snorted derisively.

"Yes, I know that," Brendan snapped. "I noticed that the first time I went down it. However, on my return trip it disagreed with my memory of it. You might want to have that checked out." The Beast looked taken aback.

"The road wouldn't let you out?"

"Yeah," said the boy, sarcastically, "because the road has feelings. It's a living entity. It _wanted_ me to stay." He sneezed ferociously, and a blanket found its way around his shoulders. He warily eyed the blanket, his reason unwilling to accept the idea of an invisible servant. But, all logic aside, the warm blanket was certainly welcome.

Beast glowered at the fact that the road wouldn't let him out, that the servants were treating this boy as if he were a guest, which he certainly was not, and...just...everything...

"Get out of my house," the Beast said, broad shoulders sagging. Brendan looked at him, surprised.

"That was almost a polite request. But no, I'm afraid," He added and went back to cozying up to the fire, holding out his cold white hands.

"What happened to all that simpering and skulking and averting your eyes that I saw earlier?" the Beast growled. He was unused to people not obeying him, and he didn't like it one bit.

"Lost it about five miles and three hours back," the boy muttered, and slipped off the chair he'd been
sitting in, creeping along the rug until he could bask in the fire's warmth, if that basking was done dangerously close to the flames. He sneezed violently again, and a handkerchief presented itself to him, appearing from midair.

"Thank you," he said pleasantly to the air, wiping at his nose. He pulled a double-take at the general nothingness from which the handkerchief had come, before sighing and refusing to think about it too carefully.

"I'll be gone in the morning, okay?" He said, casting a dubious glance at the Beast. "I'll go home and pack up my sister and send her off. Just let me stay here for the night." Silence. "Please?" He half turned, gazing up at the Beast with his roundest, most blue-eyed stare.

After a very long moment of intense glowering, the Beast snorted. "Fine. You can stay the night. But-" he said sharply, holding up one wickedly curved claw. "I will not see you." Brendan nodded enthusiastically.

"Yes. Right. Of course. I'll be gone before you awake in the morning. Promise."
In Which There is Bad Weather

After the Beast had gone, growling and stalking on thick padded feet, the claws of which click-clacked over the hardwood floors very loudly, Brendan settled before the fireplace. He remained on the floor, eyes closed, letting the heat seep into his skin. He wanted badly to muse and speculate about the Beast, the so-called 'invisible servants', and the strangeness of the road; but firmly pushed aside his curiosity. He was bone-weary, basking in the radiant heat that felt deliciously like branding-hot hands.

He felt a light touch on his shoulder, and he turned his head sharply, eyes snapping open. He thought, for a panicked instant, that it was the Beast come to tell him that he'd changed his mind about eating him. But Brendan saw no one. He blinked, pulling the blanket tight over his body, and again felt the feather-soft touch to his arm.

He took a deep breath and reminded himself to be open-minded. "Hello?" he whispered. He looked down at his arm when he felt the touch again, and was amazed to see the fabric indent, as if a finger was being pressed into it.

Brendan was starting to believe.

The hands very gently pulled Brendan to his feet, and with soft nudges and pulls, led him out of the fireplace room, back to the Great Hall and then on through an arched corridor. Brendan continued trying to speak to his unseen guide as they ascended a wide, red velveteen staircase.

"Hello? Who are you?" No answer: Only a slight push to lead the young man down the right passage, which was dimly lit by candles that lit themselves at his approach.

"What is your name? Where are you taking me?" Brendan persisted, yet still there was no answer.

After along thoughtful pause and many steps, Brendan beseeched, "Can't you speak?"

He fancied, for a moment, that the lightly guiding hands somehow conveyed a sadness, and he wondered fiercely if the guide was male or female, young or old, what it might look like. On impulse, he grabbed at where the invisible's body should be. The hands swiftly left his side and Brendan grasped at nothing. The servant had dodged away.

Brendan stood awkwardly, hands outstretched. He blushed furiously and tucked his hands back under the blanket.

"Sorry," he mumbled and hoped that the servant hadn't been offended and left him in this strange maze-like hall. But the hands came back almost immediately, and continued leading him as if nothing had happened.

Soon Brendan found himself being led to a door, vines and ivy carved delicately into the red wood. The hands left Brendan's shoulder and in a moment, the door swung open to reveal a large, yet cozy, room. It had a small fireplace of its own; a great window, the panes of which were held in wrought iron frames; and a grand canopy bed. Never had any bed looked so warm and inviting in Brendan's life. A plank of wood with a sheet would have looked good.

The room was clean and obviously well cared for, but it had the underlying scent of a room long gone unused. A fire burned merrily in the hearth, and a small plate of simple foods had been set out on a table by the window.
Gratefully, Brendan sat and wolfed down three slices of fresh bread, and drank the entire bowl of warm salty broth. A jug of watery wine had also been kindly set out, and it was sweet and quenched Brendan's thirst. He looked out the window, and could barely see the ground for the darkness and the sleeting rain and absence of stars or moon. A pair of hands (Brendan was not yet quite sure if it was only one person serving him or many) removed the slightly damp blanket, which promptly disappeared to Brendan's resigned amazement. His weariness lessened any wonder by about half, and he didn't even feel more than a flicker of curiosity as to how such a feat was accomplished. Nothing would be as wonderful as sleep.

As if reading his thoughts, a corner of the bed-covers turned down invitingly. In seconds, Brendan buried himself under the warm sheets, barely stopping to kick off his boots. He mumbled, "Thank you," into the pillow before he fell into a dreamless, velvet-soft sleep.

***

The air smelled suspiciously like snow. There was no more rain. It had stopped an hour or so before dawn, and as the day had lightened, the cloud cover remained, and the sky was an expansive blanket of soft pale gray, laid out above the French landscape.

Winter was coming unusually early this year.

The Beast sniffed deeply, turning his body to view his pristine garden that thrived under the sunless white sky as well as it would have under clear summer blue. He had watched the rain stop, and the sunless sky lighten, and the flowers of the garden open their faces toward the blank clouds, and he was no longer interested. The cold creep of winter had reached them, he was convinced. That snot of a boy still asleep in his room would doubtless be even more resistant to leaving with the promise of such cold travel ahead.

Yes, unusually early. The Beast crept with his natural animal grace across the deep red carpet on the library floor and flung himself into a high backed chair that smelled of old leather and old comfort. The shelved walls of the room were colored a million ways with the spines of so many books, but he did not see a single one of them. Instead, the feral creature with noble, human eyes rested, sinking into the chair, brow furrowed.

He pictured the boy's face. Cold, pale. Wet, glistening. Hair dark brown, darker in the night than it probably was dry in the day, wild curls that dripped beads of clear water. Wide, round blue eyes. Long eyelashes, thin and dark. Heart shaped face and slightly upturned nose. Mature features still hinting of boyhood.

The corner of the Beast's mouth twitched downward. In his mind, the picture changed. Dry, hair a lighter auburn color that curled softly around that same shaped face. Maybe chestnut. Or blonde. He liked blonde. Eyes the same, but the lashes thicker. Lips not as thin; fuller, pink. Cheek softer, rounder. Nose more delicate and skin more flushed. Was that his sister? A coquettish, beautiful young girl who shared her brother's good features and, he was loathe to admit, intelligence? The Beast could hope as much, although after all the time he had waited for a girl to arrive at his castle, he was not looking to be picky. Nursing fancies of a pretty girl, the Beast closed his eyes and brooded.

***
Brendan felt, vaguely in his sleepy state, cold fingers softly touch his cheek. He murmured unintelligibly and buried his face in the soft pillow. The warm, soft goose-down pillow that smelled of lavender and talc powder.

He jolted awake at the unfamiliarity. His bed wasn't nearly so comfortable, nor did it smell so sweetly. He sat up groggily, pushing back the tangled mass of now dry hair and looked around the strange room. The plates and glass he had eaten from the previous evening had been ferried away during the night, and the fire was low, but obviously had been tended to.

"Damn." He shook the sleep from his head and swung his legs off the bed, reaching down for his boots. The light that poured in through the curtained window didn't have the brightness of sunlight, so Brendan guessed that it must be overcast. He jammed his feet into his tall black riding boots, regretting his promise to the Beast of leaving so early. Brendan felt like he could use a hot bath and some breakfast, but alas; long, cold travel awaited him.

What am I going to tell Beauty? And my father? The young man stood up, rubbing the corners of his eyes. He saw his cloak, brushed and dried, draped over the back of a chair, next to the large oak wardrobe. His curiosity had been revived after his sleep, and his eyes darted around the room, trying to find some hint of the so-called invisible servants. "Hello? Is anyone there?" He fastened his cloak, unsure if he could find his way back down the Great Hall.

The door creaked open, and Brendan cocked his head inquiringly. Hesitantly he stepped out of the room and into the hallway. He found, as he walked, that his way was lighted with candles even in daylight. He followed the path of lit candelabras and down the stairs, until he found himself standing in front of the huge main doors. He heaved a sigh, but gamely adjusted his cloak and pulled open the double doors.

A white flurry of snow blew in, the wind aggressive and biting, extinguishing many of the hall's candles and stinging Brendan's skin. Brendan quickly slammed the doors shut, and stood pressed against the wood for a few seconds, rather stunned. Snow? But...it's a month yet till winter!

Nonetheless, the small mound of quickly melting snow lying piled at his feet was testament to the contrary. Astounded, Brendan strode to the side window and peered out. His eyes grew round in bewilderment. "It's a blizzard out there! In November!"

He could barely see twenty yards away, the sheer white landscape fading into a smooth icy wall. Trees were bare and frosted; no trace of the cobblestone path could be seen beneath the shroud of snowfall. He could see the mounds of rosebushes, and was amazed to see the red blossoms, though covered in snow, still alive and thriving. The snow was drifted two feet thick against the very window he looked out of.

"What are you still doing here?" The deep rumbled voice had a hissing quality, like wet silk over slate. Brendan's spine stiffened and he felt that familiar icy spike of fear. Slowly he turned around and faced the Beast. "Good m-morning..."

"Shut up. Why aren't you gone yet?" The Beast crossed his arms over his broad chest and lifted his chin with the unmistakable air of commanding regality.

"Well, ah," Brendan once again tried to keep eye contact and failed, looking nervously down at his feet. "It's snowing rather heavily, and—"

Blinking, Brendan wondered why he was on the floor with his back against the door, and it was only when his chest began to hurt that he realized he'd been knocked down.
The Beast loomed over him, snorting angrily. "That," he growled meaningfully, "was for lying."

"That was amazing," Brendan croaked to himself, slowly getting to his feet. "I didn't even see you move…" He rubbed his chest reflexively, shrinking away from the Beast. "At the risk of getting hit again, I wasn't lying."

"What do you take me for, a fool?! I was outside not twenty minutes ago. Are you telling me that… that…" The Beast's low drawn eyebrows climbed in surprise as he finally noticed the whiteness outside. He pushed Brendan aside and opened the door a crack. The icy wind and snow whipped inside, undeniable proof of the freezing conditions.

Beast shut the door, as much stunned as Brendan was. He looked at the boy, who was concentrating very intently on the floor. "I don't care. Go."

"It'd be murder to send me out in a blizzard," Brendan observed steadily. "And you know it."

The tension was palpable, as the Beast stood motionless, expression unreadable. Deliberately, he walked past the boy and halted before a beautiful tapestry that, from Brendan's estimate, must have been skillfully woven in medieval times. The Beast looked thoughtfully at the tapestry, as if admiring it. Then with a suddenness that made Brendan jump, the Beast tore it from its hangings with a deafening roar, shredding the lovely relic in seconds. Brendan stood frozen, hand to his mouth as Beast snatched up a vase that looked like it must be worth several thousand francs from a table and hurled it at the wall. It shattered, bits of painted white china skittering across the floor like a broken star. Brendan's sensibilities were appalled at this blatant disregard for antiquities, but his instincts screamed that he might be the next thing to be thrown against the wall. Trying to be unobtrusive, he backed away from the Beast, whose shoulders heaved like moving mountains and whose talons were clenched into tight, meaty fists.

"You..." Beast whipped around and shook a claw in Brendan's face, his leonine features twisted with rage. "You...you..." It was very clear that he very badly wanted to blame Brendan for the inclement weather. The Beast turned his back on Brendan, took a step, then spun around once more, his eyes burning fury. "When this storm is over," the Beast's voice was brimstone and granite, "the very second it stops. You. Will. Leave."

Brendan found himself once again eaten with curiosity, his eyes flickering over the Beast's twisted horns and snarling cat-like mouth, and tried vainly to think of some practical, logical explanation other than magic. Outwardly, he shrunk under the fierce monstrous glare and turned his head to the side, tangled hair falling into his eyes. He was thankful for the shield it provided against the Beast's eyes.

"IS THAT UNDERSTOOD, BOY?" The Beast bellowed, near spearing Brendan through the chest with a sharp rap of his claw.

"...yes," Brendan said meekly, not allowing himself to back away in cowardice.

And maybe everything would have gone according to the Beast's plans, if the snowstorm had indeed abated.

Which it didn't.

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"It doesn't make any sense," Brendan told the room. "I've never seen so much snow in my life! Is it
snowing like this everywhere, or just here, d'you think?" He imagined that his invisible friend shrugged and he heaved a loud sigh, examining himself in the mirror. "I wish you could talk," he lamented softly as a glass of wine was pushed toward him. Brendan picked the fine crystal up from the table and wet his lips with the deep red liquid. He sighed and ran a comb through his hair for what felt like the trillionth time; there wasn't much else to do. "I've only been here two days, including the day I got here, and it feels like forever. Confined to this one room and the water closet. I'm bored." Brendan had four times tried to leave the room and go exploring, but every time he started to creep down the stairs, the Beast had either heard with his keen bestial ears or been alerted by his unseen servants and bellowed from wherever he was in the castle, "If you're bored, I'm sure the dungeon would be much more interesting, boy!" and Brendan would turn right back around and wisely pad back to his room.

And so Brendan sat in the chair by the fireplace, every now and then glancing out the window to see if the monotonous fall of snow had slackened, or lying on the crisp-sheeted bed humming to himself, or rummaging through the not-so-well stocked wardrobe to find something his size. Many times he tried to establish some sort of communicative link with the invisibles, but they did not write when he set a pen out with some stationary he'd found in the table's drawer, nor did they tap his hand 'once for yes, twice for no'.

He longed for a book to read, and even more he longed for a harp or a violin. Some music would lighten his spirits considerably, and he remembered in a yearning kind of way, his days at the University and the classes he missed so much. Music had been one of his favorite subjects, along with history and science. Thinking about school brought a kind of bittersweet taste to Brendan's mouth, for he missed learning, but also it made him remember other times and people, one person in particular, that were still painful to think upon. He didn't especially feel like picking at metaphorical scabs, so he tried drawing a bit and asking unanswered questions to the air as the afternoon passed by.

So the young man was greatly surprised when a slip of folded paper was brandished from thin air and set before him. He blinked, and eagerly read what was written, in an elegant but strangely archaic hand.

You might as well join me for dinner tonight.

We shall talk about your sister.

-B

Well, at least it was something to do! Brendan felt a little stab of superstitious apprehension, and hoped rather ridiculously that he wasn't slated as the main course.
In Which There is a Dinner

Brendan took several deep breaths to soothe his nerves as he approached the cavernous dining hall. The castle halls were typically still, and dark, lit only by quietly rustling flames that went out as soon as he passed them, and lit just before he arrived. The lush red carpet gave way to a gold-hued hardwood floor, and Brendan felt entirely too conspicuous as his boot's heels creaked with age and made soft, echoing noises on the new surface. He peered around the corner, feeling his heart thud in his ears, his long fingers curling around the oak molding. He felt a slight shove at his back; the touch was light, but it startled him enough for him to jump out into the open.

The fireplace that the long table sat before was the largest he'd ever seen. Peacocks were carved ice-like around the mantle and tigers prowled round the sides. The table, however, drew his more immediate attention as it was simply covered with food; Brendan's blue eyes widened at the array of glazed meat and candied fruits and braised quails and tall spires of foie gras poached in sweet wine. There were haricots verts a l'anglaise, goat cheese quiches with hollandaise sauce, civets of egg with shallots and cognac, wild mushroom soufflé, beef filet en croute with browned walnuts, and—oh, he couldn't even put names to some of the delicacies! Even when his family was rich, Brendan had never eaten such rare and elegant foods.

The Beast cleared his throat, and Brendan flinched, having forgotten his host in his amazement. He tugged a bit self-consciously at the hem of his vest before crossing the floor and sliding gracefully into his seat. He glanced surreptitiously up at the Beast through the fringe of his hair. The twisted horns shone bone-white in the firelight. The Beast glared at Brendan as if he were an especially offensive piece of refuse that had impudently decided to grow legs and join him at the table.

"Are you wearing the same thing you wore yesterday?" The tone the Beast used made Brendan wish very much that his answer wasn't 'yes'.

"Ah- as it seems...yes...."

"You come to my table in those filthy garments?" Clickity-click, the Beast tapped his long claws on the table's highly polished surface.

Brendan cleared his throat and looked at his hands, folded on the table's edge. "There was a disagreement about my wardrobe."

Beast blinked. "With whom?"

"The invisible servants," Brendan said, cheeks flushing.

"And..."

"Well. Ah. I didn't want to wear what they wanted me to wear."

The Beast sucked in air through his teeth, searching for patience. "What did they want you to wear?"

"Um."

"Go on."

"...Taffeta, mostly. With bows," Brendan told the table, his cheeks deepening in color to a brilliant scarlet.
There was a very uncomfortable silence, wherein Brendan wouldn't raise his head for embarrassment, and the Beast was quite torn between confusion and amusement.

Fortunately, the invisible servants began to pile food onto their plates, and Brendan gratefully began eating his salmon rillettes.

"This is wonderful!" he exclaimed after he swallowed. "I've never seen such a splendid table of food."

"Hmmm. You are a guest in this house, despite my wishes to the contrary." Beast propped his arm on the table, a glass of red wine dwarfed in his shaggy hand. The look he favored Brendan with was very sardonic. "And I am a firm believer in hospitality, no matter how annoying the guest."

Brendan chuckled, which seemed to surprise the Beast. They ate, for a few minutes, without speaking. He'd never been a glutton, but Brendan ate every delicious morsel that was placed before him and still craved more. He noticed that the Beast ate very little, and what he did eat was mostly light, and he drank a bottle of wine without appearing to be affected by it. A tiny fearful part of Brendan's mind relaxed when he observed the Beast eating salad and other such non-meat items.

When it seemed like the boy was slowing down, the Beast finally spoke. "I have many questions for you."

Brendan washed down his bite of oysters in muscat with dry, smoky wine. "Go ahead." He still didn't know what he would say to the Beast's queries about his sister; his brotherly instincts told him to protect Beauty at all costs.

"Your father. Did he keep the rose?"

Brendan blinked, surprised at the question. "Why, yes. But I took it with me and…oh."

"What?"

"I…I've quite forgotten about it. It must be in the room, somewhere, I would assume." Brendan resolved to check when he got back to his room.

"Hmm. It matters not." The Beast waved a hand, and plates of food began to be carted away, apparently floating on their own. Brendan watched in open-mouthed amazement. "Tell me about your family."

"Ah…" It took a moment for Brendan to wrench his attention away from the culinary spectacle. "Well. Our family name is d'Aumale. My father, that is, Etienne d'Aumale, used to be a rather successful merchant—or as successful as one can be without being born to nobility. He met my mother while he was traveling abroad and fell desperately in love with her. She came back to France with him and they got married. First they had the twins, Marguerite and Catherine, who were named for Father's favorite dead aunts. Then I was born, and named after my mother's Irish godfather. Then my youngest sister was born, and named Beauty after mother. She died in childbirth with Beauty. After that, Father got…well. You've seen what he's like. Thank you," he told the air as a fresh glass of chardonnay was poured for him. His belly was full, he was warm from the fire, his limbs were beginning to feel a bit tingly from the wine, and it was apparent that he wasn't in any imminent danger. Brendan was feeling good.

"Tell me about your sister." The command made no room for argument or sidestepping. Still, he gamely tried.

"Which one?" asked Brendan lightly, sipping his drink and letting the bubbles tickle his tongue.
Beast slammed a hand on the hard wood table. "You know damned well which one!" Brendan set down his drink and again examined his hands, startled by Beast's outburst.

"She's. Well. Beauty is, of course, very lovely, from an objective viewpoint."

Beast quirked a large bushy eyebrow. "Objective?"

"Of course," Brendan spoke quickly, his face starting to redden, to Beast's bewilderment. "I mean, she's my sister. One does not think of one's siblings as pretty or ugly." He certainly didn't mean to name other reasons why he might be indifferent to his sister's looks.

"Your father mentioned her disposition. Was he lying then, as well?"

"No!" Brendan protested in offense, and then rethought his answer. "I mean, yes. She's quite a brat. Spoiled. Self-centered." He bit his lip and shifted his eyes, as he was prone to do when lying. The Beast peered at him distrustfully. Brendan voice trailed off a bit. "Being the youngest, you know…"

"And the elder sisters?"

"Oh, well they're pretty awful," Brendan stated truthfully, glad not to lie again. "I love them to death, but honestly, they're very cold and egotistical. Greedy, you could say," he added, flipping a hand expressively.

"So," Beast asked, steepling his claws before his chin, "out of all your mother's children, you are the only one who is selfless and kind? Are you, then, the good son among wicked daughters?"

Brendan flushed furiously. "Well, no…that is…" his clever mind worked to find something to say that wasn't backtracking or contradictory to his previous words. "That is not to say that my sisters are without their good qualities. I was merely voicing their bad ones."

"Of course."

Brendan caught the sarcastic tone in Beast's voice, and glanced at him somewhat sharply. "No need to be acerbic. I am well aware of my own quirks and faults." The Beast didn't make any sort of response, so Brendan kept talking to fill the uncomfortable void. "I'm awfully stubborn, as you well know, and I suppose I can be just a tad obnoxious."

Beast looked amused.

"But I consider my curiosity a virtue, rather than a fault," Brendan firmly decreed, drinking more chardonnay and brushing hair out of his eyes. "It got me quite far at the University."

"Did it?" Beast heard the words slip from his mouth before even having realized he was curious.

"Mmm, yes. I got top marks in science and history. Mathematics though…not so good." Brendan smiled to himself. "Music, however, I found to be an especially engaging class. I learned a bit on the flute, the harpsichord, some guitar, but I excelled at the violin. And cello…" A shadow passed over Brendan's face, and he looked deeply into his half-full crystal goblet of green-gold chardonnay as if contemplating it. The Beast wondered, briefly, what about the cello so saddened the boy.

"And Beauty? Does she play?"

Brendan slowly drew up his head. "What? Oh. No. Well, a little. All the girls had harp lessons when they were younger, but none of them were very serious about it."
"I see. Is there anything else Beauty likes? I should like to prepare things for her arrival." There was an obvious challenge in Beast's seemingly innocuous words.

Brendan met fierce, lambent eyes boldly. "There is nothing she wants that you can give her, my gracious host." And my sister will arrive here over my dead body, he thought rather forcefully.

There was a long tense pause, the Beast's expression giving away nothing.

Beast's wineglass was lifted by a helpful servant and more blood-like liquid poured in. Brendan saw a single drop of wine splash up and leap like a fish over the rim of the glass. The escapee fell almost in slow motion to the white tablecloth, ominously staining it deep purple-red.

In one swift, bestial motion, Brendan's snarling host snatched the goblet from midair and flung it into the fire, which licked greedily at the wine. His talons snapped like a whip to point at the space where the bodiless servant stood.

Brendan felt, rather than heard, the silent shriek of pain. It crawled terribly up his spine and scrabbled at the back of his brain like the tiny clawed hand of a squirrel. The agony of it made him shudder, gooseflesh prickling over his skin.

Beast stood there, breathing heavily, his brows drawn so low they almost covered his glaring eyes entirely. Brendan hunched low in his seat, his pulse racing. Shocked for a moment, then saddened by the thought of that servant, in mortal pain or maybe even dead; nameless and faceless, with no one to remember it or mourn it. But this sorrow was tempered by fear. Brendan was growing rather tired of that emotion.

The Beast slowly swiveled his head to look at his guest. "Go to your room."

Grateful to get away and more than a little confused, Brendan obediently slipped from his chair. He turned back, belatedly remembering his manners.

"Thank you for dinner. It was the best I've ever eaten," he said truthfully in his most polite voice. The Beast's mouth twisted to the side, as if he were pondering something.

"If the snow stops, then you will leave. If not, we will talk more tomorrow."

Brendan nodded, unable to meet the Beast's eyes.

"And wear something clean, will you?"

"...Certainly." Brendan spun on his heel and walked as quickly as etiquette allowed toward the doorway.

"Boy..." Brendan halted, and suppressed a flash of annoyance at being called 'boy'. He didn't turn around. "Yes?"

"I'm allowing you admittance to my Music Room. A servant will show you the way, if you wish it."

Surprised at this unexpected kindness and confused by the Beast's hot to cold mood swings, Brendan turned around, where a "Thank you..." died on his lips. The Beast had vanished.
In Which There is Unexpected Affection

Once back in his quarters, Brendan looked around the room for any sign of the unseen servants, and then felt foolish for doing so. The fire was blazing hot, so he pulled his tunic off over his head and sat down at the edge of the bed.

"Hello?" he asked softly. He felt a soft brush of air on his skin to indicate that one of the servants was there, and so prompted, said, "Look, would you happen to know where that rose might be? I thought I might have left it here in the room, but it's not here. Have I dropped it somewhere?"

The bed curtains wavered, as if someone was leaning against the bedpost.

"Well? Do you know? I'd be very grateful," he added quickly, remembering how callous Beast was to these servants, and somehow felt obliged to make up for it.

Brendan felt someone take hold of his hand, and lay his or her knuckles against the heel of his palm. Slowly, and with seemingly great reluctance, the hand unfurled and the rose lay revealed. For an instant, Brendan fancied he could see the outline of invisible fingers over the petals.

"Thank you," he said, reaching for it with his other hand. The servant snatched its hand and the rose away, in such a way that it was obvious that the servant was clutching the rose to its chest possessively.

Brendan's brow furrowed in puzzlement. Why on earth would this person want his rose? Did it have so little beauty in its life? "Please?" he asked.

And then the presence was gone, to Brendan's disappointment. Spare seconds later, he felt a hand tentatively brush his bare shoulder, and he was presented with the rose, placed in a delicate vase.

"Thank you very much," he smiled, taking the proffered flower and setting it on his nightstand. "I...I just feel like it's very important, is all."

Very soon, with his belly full and his body warm, Brendan fell asleep, hands nestled by his face, hair splayed over his closed eyes. Gentle and hesitant, transparent fingers brushed the chestnut locks aside.

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The next day, after he arose and ate the small breakfast that was laid out for him, Brendan decided he would try and find the Music Room. He threw open the wardrobe doors, and was pleased to see a selection of clothing befitting his size and, even more fortunately, gender. He chose a lightly frilled linen tunic shirt from the array of brocade and silks, and plain black breeches. After moving to the country, he'd gotten used to simple clothes and felt uncomfortable in the kind of court finery he used to wear. All of the clothing in the wardrobe, he noticed, seemed to be cut in a fashion that was popular many decades ago.

After he had washed and dressed, Brendan stepped out of his room and chose a direction. He decided not to ask one of the servants to guide him, for he had been slightly unsettled by the night before and wished to explore on his own. Seemingly heeding his will, the hallway torches remained unlit even as he passed them, as the cavernous halls were lit with pale, cold light that came in from the immensely tall windows at the end of each corridor. The wood floors and paneling of the walls...
were dark and fine-grained. Long red runner carpets covered the cold wood, smelling like old things but looking clean.

Most of the doors he passed were shut. At first, walking past door after heavy wooden door, he felt uneasy. At one point Brendan stopped, and reached one arm out, grasped a filigree brass handle and pushed. It was locked. After that, he assumed the rest were, as well.

His walk was neither short nor long. Time didn't really factor in to the feel of his surroundings; it was ageless and still somehow very ancient. The light never wavered, the general look of things never changed. In each new hallway, there was a different runner carpet, and occasionally some sorts of expensive looking baubles and tapestries that were sometimes torn as if by claws, but other than that it all looked the same.

He had just come down a very brief flight of stairs. Six steps, a landing, and six more steps, and he found himself in an entirely different hallway. It was wider than the others, and was hung with great faded tapestries. There were no doors at all. He stepped down off the last step, and the worn heel of his boot clicked softly. No carpet. He glanced down, a short exhalation of breath escaping his lips. The sound echoed back at him.

A great tile mosaic, also faded and slightly worn from age, was inlaid into the ground. He noticed then the room smelled different—pleasantly earthy, not musty. He took a few steps forward, head tilted sideways to carefully take in the details of the picture. The image of a white skinned woman, cream colored cloth draped and folded around her shoulders and legs, was forever stretched languidly against a verdant flower-spangled background, her arm reaching ahead and one slender finger pointed at the two large white marble doors at the end of the tiled hall, where carved ivy and morning glories twined up the arched ivory doors.

In awe of the aged beauty of the place, Brendan strode quietly up to the door—the silence was too serene to mar with his clicking footsteps. He carefully stepped over the woman's face, with the courtesy of simple admiration for art. There were no handles on the doors, so he slid his fingers over the carved leaves. He jumped, startled, as the doors, being very delicately balanced on their hinges, silently opened inwards.

"Dieu," he breathed in wonder. The word 'garden' didn't begin to describe the beautiful pillars and steps, the sunken turquoise pond surrounded by orchids and snapdragons, the leafy green ferns in tall pots along the tiled walls, and ye god, the roses. So many roses!

Gape-mouthed, Brendan's eyes were drawn upward. The blue and green tiled wall and columns reached as high as a man's height, and then turned to glass, slightly yellowed with age. Brass bars stretched up, curved like ribs and met in the very center, and through the glass Brendan saw the grey clouds, still streaming snow. The garden, however, was warm, and Brendan's tunic began to stick to his skin with the humidity. The columns by the walls were covered in clematis and dappled ivy, and there were small round fountains placed around the vast conservatory. It was very lovely, and yet somehow, with the age of the glass and the violently bright flowers, it seemed savage and dangerous.

Dazed, feeling as if he were wandering through a dream, Brendan walked down one of the blue-tiled paths. Now and then he would stretch out a hand to touch velvet roses that were as red as fresh welts; delicate spider flowers as pink as skin; nodding orchids that were the same blue-purple of new bruises, yellow violets the same muted golden as those contusions that have just begun to fade. Strange, and so exquisitely lovely.

There were roses with long prickly thorns, so that he had to skirt around them to avoid being scratched. Some were yellow or pink or champagne and, of course, red. Many were more exotic, like the sweet-smelling violet blooms that lay close to the ground, or the odorless roses that were so
purple they were black, standing far apart from their sister blossoms on the bush as if they disliked one another's company, and some roses as white as bone and with a scent as cloying-sweet as death.

Brendan loved flowers. He didn't know how long he walked among the garden, eyes wide trying to take it all in, smelling the sweet tang of earth and pollen. He dabbled his fingers in the pond, and was delighted to see two fat fish swim near, one white, one black. He might have wandered in a blissful daze for hours, but for looking up at the sky and realizing with a jolt, that evening wasn't too far away.

Reluctantly, but promising within his heart to return soon, Brendan left the fierce, beautiful garden, again courteously stepping over the mosaic woman. He'd forgotten about his search for the Music Room, but felt more than compensated for the temporary loss. Now, he was expected for dinner.

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Brendan felt only slightly less apprehensive than he had yesterday as he walked into the dining room, where Beast was already waiting, even though Brendan had consciously come early in hopes of seeing the food being carted in on invisible hands. At least he had fresh clothes on. He wore a simple grey shirt with laced cuffs, and a silver-blue embroidered vest that fitted closely around the hips, with matching grey breeches and high black boots that shone like a beetle's exoskeleton.

Brendan made a small bow to his host before seating himself. Beast nodded curtly, which was about as polite as he got, and waved a furry hand for Brendan's glass to be filled. Brendan thanked the air where he thought the servant should be, and sipped his wine absently. He watched the Beast carefully.

As he was changing in his quarters, Brendan had come to the conclusion that anyone who kept a garden as magnificent as that couldn't be such a monster, despite his fearsome appearance.

In silence, Brendan ate what was placed before him, savoring the delicious gravies and meats. It occurred to him that if he ate like this every day, he'd be quite round before too long. Of course, any day the snow would stop and he'd be out on his tail, but it was an amusing thought nevertheless.

"Did you visit the Music Room?" Beast asked in a somber voice, making quite clear by his tone that he couldn't care less one way or another.

"Oh, no. I couldn't find it."

Beast looked over his goblet at Brendan, one heavy brow bushily quirked. "Didn't the servants show you where it is?"

"Um. No, I went alone. I just sort of…walked around a bit in hopes that I'd find it." He laid down his fork and tried to converse while looking the Beast in the eyes, but once again he couldn't bring himself to do it. Every time that mane bristled, or the muscles bunched under the royal-blue vest, a frisson of fear brushed up Brendan's spine, and he looked away.

"Ah." Beast managed to fit a lot of 'you're rather foolish, aren't you?' into that one word. "Then I'm sure you've found that many rooms are locked. Those that are locked are old and have been unused for many years. But some rooms," here Beast's voice grew more menacing and he growled lightly, "some rooms are locked because I do not wish for anyone to enter them. Do you understand, boy?"

Brendan had to bite his tongue to stifle a nasty retort to 'boy'. Schooling himself into politeness, he replied, "Of course. You like your privacy." It sounded infantile and obvious as soon as he said it.
"Perhaps you should tell me which rooms you would rather that I stayed out of, to avoid any…um, conflict."

The Beast assessed Brendan for a long second before answering. "You have proved to be a most curious specimen, boy. I am more wise than that, to tell you what is forbidden to you, and thusly in your mind, desirable." Beast snorted, and it was almost a laugh. "Just know that the servants will keep you away if you get near."

Brendan nodded, for it was the only thing he could think of to do in answer. "That garden isn't off limits, is it?" he inquired before he'd even meant to ask.

"Have you been to the Garden Room?" Beast asked, incredulous. He had been circling his glass with a talon to make it ring faintly, and now his claw was poised over the goblet in astonishment.

"Yes…" Brendan answered, unsure if this was the best answer to give. There was a long, drawn-out pause.

"No, it is not off limits." The Beast sat silently, nursing his wine. Brendan felt compelled to say something to break the tense silence.

"It's very beautiful." He felt the Beast's eyes upon him, and went on truthfully, "and yet, sort of frightening."

Beast tilted his head, almost understandingly. "Do you like gardens, then?"

"Oh yes," Brendan quickly replied, then felt his face flush red. Liking flowers wasn't exactly something for a young man to list as a virtue. His father had often jibbed him about it. Unexpectedly, his inquisitiveness forced words to trip out of his mouth. "May I ask you a question?"

Beast leveled fierce eyes on Brendan, looking daggers. "You may," he rumbled, "but I may not answer."

"Right." Brendan swallowed. "Who are they? The servants, I mean." He met Beast's eye for an instant before looking away. "Why are they…the way they are?"

Surprise flitted across Beast's leonine features. *I'll bet he expected me to ask about how he came to look the way he does,* Brendan thought. Curious he might be, but he wasn't crazy.

"The servants? They are…my servants. They always have been. Most of them."

"But…I mean, why can't they be seen, or heard? And invisibility—I just don't understand how it's possible." Brendan leaned forward in interest, relieved that the Beast seemed willing to talk.

"It's obviously possible, isn't it? Or else it wouldn't be so." Beast took a long draught of his wine before continuing. "They are bound to me by great sorcery, obedient to my will, and tied to this castle. Most of them have always been my servants, even before…they became invisible. They are unable to communicate in any way besides that of touch. It has been so for years."

"But…how do they eat? Where do they sleep?" Brendan's hand flipped in the air expressively. "Don't they…well, there are a great many practical things like that I am wondering about. Just who, exactly, are they?"

Beast pulled back a little, inwardly bewildered. "They're just servants. They serve…that's what they do. That's who they are."
"...I see." Brendan said, looking sharply down at his lap. And he did see. The Beast was quite clearly noble-born. It was highly likely that to him, the servants had always been nameless and faceless even when they had been visible, and after they had faded from the world of sight, he had ceased to think of them as people at all. Brendan could understand it, in a way, but it saddened him nonetheless.

"You said 'most of them'. Who are the rest?"

Beast's voice was as cold as the sleet outside when he spoke. "The others are those who have since come to my castle to gain from my wealth, making false promises and twisted lies."

Brendan smiled wryly. "Could you elaborate a bit on that, please?"

The Beast didn't seem to even be listening to him. "A few were con men and snake-oil sellers, proclaiming false cures that could be purchased for extravagant sums. Some were men of business who came to make deals, hearing tales of my wealth and power. Some were women who came hearing those same rumors, and made false vows of love, all the while looking over my shoulder, hiding the revulsion in their eyes." There was another pause that Brendan didn't dare interrupt. "Some came by accident, like your father, and took advantage of me in some way. Your father was not the first to take the one thing that was not freely offered. They all sought to acquire something from me; my wealth, my title, my land. So I acquired them."

Brendan bit his lip, and thought of his father, fading away. He shuddered.

"That was long ago, when people still knew of this castle, and of its Master. Now no one remembers the story is more than a nursery tale, and the only ones who wander into my land do so by accident. Or, in your case, by lack of common sense." The uneaten food was being carried away by the unseens, and Brendan's glass was refilled.

"Ah. Well. Thank you for, um, answering my question," Brendan said softly, in a strange way more frightened of the Beast than he'd ever been, and he made a private vow to never, ever try to use the Beast for personal gain, not that he could even think of a way to do so in the first place. Still, even more questions had arisen from the Beast's answer, but his tongue was reluctant to ask anything more.

"Are you finished?" asked the Beast calmly, indicating Brendan's nearly empty plate.

"What? Oh, yes. It was very goo-" 

"Yes, yes. I will show you the Music Room, if you wish it." Sweeping out of his high-backed chair, the Beast stood. Quick with his manners, Brendan swiftly followed suit, again taken aback by the Beast's mercurial moods. "Yes, please," he stated simply.

Brendan quietly followed the Beast. They had ascended a long flight of stairs that Brendan reckoned he could find again, due to the great marble griffons on either side of the handrails. Brendan hadn't been in this wing before, and admired the many long paintings that adorned the hall. The ceiling here was buttressed and very grand.

"Here," the Beast grunted, turning abruptly to the right. He pushed open a large door—third down on the right, Brendan told himself—and stood to the side, looming tall like a monolith that breathed and was covered in fur. Hesitantly, Brendan walked past the Beast and into the room.

There were two crystal chandeliers with their candles lit brightly, and the first thing Brendan saw was the enormous fireplace. It was practically another room in its own right! It was very ornately
carved, as most fireplaces in the castle seemed to be, this one with great hunting cats and peacocks. He glanced back at the Beast, who watched him impassively, and then swept his gaze over the room. There were many chairs and divans, most of their upholstery torn to rags. A large black harpsichord sat near a small window, a thick layer of dust accumulated on its surface. Brendan stepped over to the music racks by the wall as if drawn magnetically.

He sucked in a breath with delight. Nearly every instrument he could name, and a few he couldn't, were neatly displayed along the wall. There were violins and violas, flutes and slender piccolos, five different types of guitars and citterns, cornets and French horns, oboes and clarinets, a Russian balalaika, a hammered dulcimer and a zither, three fiddles, and even a musette. Turning, he noticed a large Irish harp in the corner and one small Greek lyre on a stand next to it. He knelt to touch a lute, and his fingers came away coated with the dust of many years.

"Tsk," he clicked his tongue, and began to brush away the grime with his finely embroidered sleeve. It didn't clean it as well as he might have wished, but soon, coughing a little at the dust, he saw that the lute was a fine piece of craftsmanship, the wood a lovely honey color. He strummed experimentally, and winced at the sharp discordance. It needed tuning. All of them probably did, strings sagging with dejection at their long abandonment. Brendan plucked at a string, carefully twisting the tuning pegs. He closed his eyes, concentrating on the right notes. He jumped when he heard Beast's voice over his shoulder.

"I could have the servants dust the instruments," the Beast had stated loftily.

"Oh!" He'd forgotten that the Beast was even there. "Could you, please? That would be...um..." He watched in wonderment as invisible rags were swept along each appliance, cleaning each fret and groove. One of the unseens politely took the lute from his hands, stripped away the dust, and handed it back to him.

And so all the instruments sat shining, some still faintly humming from efficient unseen hands. Brendan glanced at the Beast, who was looking at him expectantly. He bent his head back over the lute, and in a minute had it fully tuned. To test its timbre and to get a feel for the instrument, Brendan softly played a child's song, one that was most often used for quick test runs in his old music classes.

The lute's voice was sweet and thrummed with vitality. Again forgetting about his host, Brendan sat down in a relatively untorn chair and played a few simple bars of 'J'ai vu le loup'.

"J'ai vu le loup, le r'nard, le lièvre. J'ai vu le loup, le r'nard cheuler. C'est moi-même qui les ai r'beuillés..." He softly sang to himself, and stopped with the song unfinished, hands resting lightly on the lute's warm face. It felt like it had been forever since he'd last played.

"Play something else."

Brendan looked up, startled. Though it sounded more like a command than a request, Brendan was secretly pleased to have an audience, and took the Beast's appeal as further evidence of humanity, somewhere deep inside. His fingers moving almost of their own volition, he strummed a mournful tune. *This really should be accompanied by a harp, but ah, well...*he thought.

"One pleasant summer's morning

When all the flowers were spring, Oh

Nature was adorning
And the wee birds sweetly singing, Oh
I met my love near Banbridge Town
My charming blue-eyed Sally, Oh
She's the queen of the Country Down
The Flower of Magherally
Adam wasn't half so much plazed
When he met Eve in Eden, Oh
Her skin was like the lily white
That grows in yonder valley, Oh
She's the girl that I love dear
The Flower of Magherally."

Beast watched the boy play as if he were in a trace, his blue eyes nearly closed and unfocused. He had a surprisingly strong voice for such a slender lad, and his tones were clear and well trained.

"I hope the day will surely come
When we'll join hands together, Oh
And let them all say what they will
And let them reel and rally, Oh
For I shall wed the girl I love
The Flower of Magherally."

Brendan sat back, the song finished, and looked askance at the Beast through his bangs.

"That wasn't a French song," The Beast said. "The words were French…mostly… but that was very clearly not a French song."

Brendan blinked. "No, it isn't. It's Irish." He ran a finger along the lute's bridge. "Many of the best songs I know are Irish songs."

"Irish?" the Beast asked quizzically. "You went to a Parisian school, did you not?"

"Yes." Brendan swallowed, not liking where these questions were headed at all. "They taught us only French songs, of course, but I've always liked Irish ones better. They've got so much more… truth. And fire." He sat quiet for a while, fingering the lute.
"Where, then, did you learn that song?" Beast shifted his weight from one footpaw to another.

Brendan opened his mouth, and found himself wordless. He tried again. "A friend taught me. A schoolmate. He was Irish." Mon Dieu, it hurts to even think about... "I am very tired, gracious host." Swiftly, Brendan stood and placed the lute back in its place.

"Tomorrow I will come here and tune all the instruments properly." Not meaning to cause offense, he quickly added, "Forgive me for saying, but they have been very badly neglected."

The Beast scrutinized his guest carefully. If he was surprised at Brendan's sudden change in mood, he did not show it. "Yes, they have been. Tomorrow after dinner, I'll come and hear you play some more."

Brendan smiled.

"Weather allowing, of course," Beast added.

"What?" Brendan was confused. What did the weather have to do with music?

"If the snowstorm ceases, you will leave, of course," the Beast's words were as sharp and brittle as icicles. It was clearly a dismissal.

"...Of course." Of course, thought Brendan as he made his way back to his room with an unseen servant as his elbow, have I forgotten that I'm not exactly a welcome guest? All this finery and music had muddled my mind. It's Beauty he wants.

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Half an hour later, Brendan didn't feel the gentle hand that traced his face, for he was asleep in the large curtained bed and merely twitched his nose like a rabbit. The covers shifted and there dipped a depression low in the mattress, as if someone was curling up at Brendan's feet, careful not to disturb the slumbering young man. He dreamed no dreams.
Brendan wallowed in a lazy half-slumber, caught between the rosy twilight realm of sleep and the clear ice land of the waking. It was the cold that brought him fully awake, and dimly, in his mind, he knew that the fire must have been neglected and the warmth-giving embers were dead. The only part of him that was warm was his feet. In fact, his feet were very warm indeed. It felt like a cat was laying on them. A very large cat. How strange.

He lifted his head and began to sit up. The weight on his feet jumped, and he could feel it scramble off the bed, leaving the covers flounced and in disarray.

Brendan blinked, nervously twisting the covers in his hands. All right, the invisibles are really starting to disturb me now… he hazily thought. He thought of…of someone lurking around him, silently watching him, curling up at his feet when he fell asleep… Oh, stop being so melodramatic, he told himself. I'm sure the poor souls are just lonely and crave attention. Or rather, the poor soul, for he was becoming convinced that he had one particular invisible that attended him rather than many.

"It's alright," he said aloud to the invisible servant. "Really, it is. Could I have some tea, please?" He slid out of bed and shivered. He was clad only in his smallclothes, and quickly grabbed a dressing robe and wrapped it around himself to ward off the chill. He walked over to the water basin and washed his face, and felt considerably livelier afterwards. When the tea was presented to him, it was steaming hot and had the fragrance of violets. He turned to the window and sipped gently, careful not to burn his tongue. He heard the sounds of the fire being rekindled as he looked outside.

The snow had lessened considerably, but the wind still whipped through the shivering trees like a hunting cat among young birds, and the snow blanketing the road would have come up to a horse's belly.

Brendan turned his face to the south, toward his village. He thought about Beauty and his family and wondered if they were worried about him. Well, Beauty probably was. In fact, knowing her, Brendan figured that she might have tried to follow him. If Father hadn't stopped her, then the snows certainly did. He thought about what the Beast had said about the road not letting Brendan leave a week ago. Why? And was the road also keeping Beauty out?

How strange that the thought of a sentient road doesn't seem like such a fantasy, he mused, draining his tea with relish. Dwelling on the strange qualities of the road and the weather put him in mind of the castle itself and its inhabitants, mainly the Beast. How did it all get this way? From what Beast had said, things had been so for a very long time, and the outdated fashions in the wardrobe began to make more sense. Frozen in time, perhaps? There are so many questions he had!

"I wish you could talk," he said ruefully to the unseen servant for the umpteenth time. "I have so many questions about this place. Ones that I am afraid to ask the Beast." As he talked, he picked out some clothes from the wardrobe, settling on a rust-golden tunic with dark blue breeches. He dressed quickly, suddenly very conscious of the possibility of the servant's eyes upon him. It unnerved him, not knowing whom the servant was or if it might be watching him. Perhaps it fancies me, he thought and chuckled aloud at the idea, fastening the ties on his breeches. Ridiculous, of course. But perhaps it does feel sympathetic…maybe I can convince it to provide some answers about this place. I doubt it will, though. Judging from the way Beast punishes his servants, I doubt any of them would dare to disobey him.

"Look, can you—Well, maybe help me find some answers? Please?" The unseen servant did
nothing, but Brendan felt a sliver of tension in the air, as if the servant was agitated or distraught.

"Please?" he wheedled. "Maybe you could just take me to one of those rooms the Beast mentioned I wasn't to go into. Oh, I promise I won't disturb anything. It's just that I don't understand any of this, and I swear I won't bother you again if you just help me."

The servant felt reluctant, but Brendan sensed that he was close to persuading it. "You won't get in trouble, I promise you that. If he finds me, I'll take the blame for it, alright? Oh, please? Please?"

Suddenly the servant grabbed his hand and dashed towards the door. Startled, Brendan followed, out the door and down the stairs.

The invisible went quickly, keeping a brisk pace down long corridors flanked by suits of iron and Greek statues. Brendan tried to keep track of how many halls they went down, but was soon completely lost as he was led down a passage of stairs that he hadn't even seen before, half-hidden behind a massive tapestry. There were countless turns and twists, and three more flights of stairs they descended.

*This place is even more immense than I had thought,* Brendan wondered. He was peripherally amused by the sight of his arm floating before him, in the grip of his invisible guide.

They came to a great set of white double doors, which parted slowly. Brendan gaped in astonished delight. The servant pulled him onto the floor, and Brendan went followed, stumbling a little in his wondement.

Mirrors. It was a Great Ballroom completely constructed of mirrors and gold filigree. A great chandelier hung from the mirror ceiling and brightly lit the reflective walls. Brendan looked down and saw himself from the feet up, for the floor too was a great long mirror, a white faience polished so highly it was as if he were looking into glass. He laughed and spun about, seeing a thousand other Brendans do the same and grinning back. *Beast must hate this room,* came a strange, unbidden thought.

Impatient, it seemed, to be on their way, the servant took hold of his hand again and led him past the brightly shining mirrored ballroom and through another set of doors, cunningly made to look like part of the mirrored wall. There was yet another long passageway, and then another door hidden by another tapestry.

He trotted down a very poorly lit staircase and found himself at the end of a short, dark, dead-end hallway. There were no adornments or artifacts lining the walls, just three doors; one on each side of the hallway. He felt the servant release his hand and lay its fingers across the small of his back. It gave him a gentle push towards the door in front of him. Brendan turned to look where he thought the servant should be, and ventured a smile in thanks.

Taking a deep breath, Brendan stepped up to the door. The wood looked old and uncared for, the twisted metal handle was broken and half-snapped off. There were deep gouges in the wood. Brendan had to put his full weight against the door to push it open. The hinges keened like a mourning widow and reluctantly fell open. He peered into the dark room, frowning.

"Now where is—oh, thank you," he said as a lit oil lamp was pressed into his hand. The efficiency and forethought of the servants was simply incredible. It was like they could anticipate whatever was needed.

Holding the light before him, Brendan entered the room. It smelled like dust and mice and lost memories. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness, he became aware that the room looked as if a storm
had been through it, or a pack of wild animals, ripping the tapestries and scoring deep marks in the walls. There were overturned chairs and couches torn asunder, ragged fabric guts spilling onto the floor. Paintings had been ripped from their frames. The sheer fury of the devastation made Brendan falter back a step. The dust of ages coated every inch of the destruction.

The only thing in the room that was unharmed was a simple small table in the center of the room. A thin book lay there as if waiting for him, with a simple red cover without mark or title upon it. Brendan set his lamp on the table and opened the book eagerly, dust spilling into the air and causing Brendan to sneeze. The writing was spidery and fine, and with wide eyes he began to read.

"Once upon a time," he read aloud, "there was a handsome prince who lived in a great and beautiful castle. Now, this prince had everything he wanted, for he had many servants and chamberlains and vassals to do his bidding. His father, who lived very far away, provided a constant source of money, as he did for all of his sons.

"So the prince had absolutely everything that a young man could desire, yet his royal heart was cold and unkind. He was a cruel man who had no love for anything or anyone. He was prone to rages and great fits of temper.

"Many a young lady came courting, and each was mocked and turned away. The prince cared nothing for companionship and very soon, despite his wealth and station, no one wished to be his friend. He mistreated his servants, and neglected his duties as prince, and his people grew discontent.

"It was on the prince's twenty-second birthday that an old crone came to the castle doors, and would not be turned away by the servants. The prince came to see what all the noise was about, and found a hunch-backed old woman yelling at his doorman, screeching like a blue jay.

'What is the meaning of this?' the handsome prince demanded.

'Oh, good sir,' said the ugly old woman in her querulous raven-voice, 'I am just a poor old woman with no place to call home. My children were too poor to keep me, so they turned me out in the street. It is cold and my old bones ache. Might I stay here for the night, good sir?'

"The prince laughed at her. 'You, an old crone, stay here at the palace? For this you bother me on my birthday? Go back to the street from where you came, hag!'

'If you turn me out, good sir, I will surely perish in the cold. Have mercy on me, and let me stay the night! I can cook and I can mend things, if such services you need.'

'I have servants for that. I need nothing from an ugly old woman,' the prince was becoming impatient, 'Again I say no! Now be gone before I have the guards on you.'

'Do you three times turn me away, cruel prince?' The old woman looked at him with a glint in her crafty eyes.

'I turn you away a hundred times, you feeble thing. Begone!'

"But before the prince could call his guards, the old woman stood tall and threw off her rags, and her ugliness melted away. A young woman more beautiful than the moon stood there at his doorstep, her black and silver eyes hard and unforgiving as ice. She was clad in shimmering gossamer and her silver-onyx hair danced as if alive.

"Even in his pride, the prince fell to his knees before her, for it was clear that she was a powerful sorceress, and an angry one at that.
'You have three times turned away a person in need, arrogant prince.' Her voice was the tinkling of slow waterfalls, crystalline like stars. 'And thus you are three times cursed; once cursed with bondage, twice cursed with solitude, and thrice cursed with ugliness. For you and those that willingly serve you are bound forever to these castle grounds, to which I give a life of their own. You shall be ever alone with yourself, for your faithful shall dwindle and diminish till they are naught but invisible wraiths, bound to your service. Your family shall not know you, and your father the King will support you no more.

'Because your beauty is a lie, your heart shall be turned inside out,' she declared, and the prince felt a great pain come upon him, and he writhed on the doorstep and screamed as he was twisted into a monstrous form.

'Now you are truly a Beast,' the lady told him.

'Oh, great lady,' the prince-beast begged, 'do not leave me forever this way! I am sorry I turned you away, I beg you, please! Have mercy on me!'

'You did not show mercy when you thought I was but a harmless old crone. You have showed that there is nothing but ugliness in your heart. But I do not leave you without hope, o selfish and pitiless prince.

'Like a Beast you shall remain, forever, frozen in time as your heart was frozen in bitterness, until the day comes when you learn to love, and are loved in return, in spite of what you have become.' With a sound like the rustling of a thousand feathers, the sorceress disappeared and was never seen again.

"And the Beast despaired, and secluded himself in his great castle with his invisible, silent servants. Soon his people, glad to be rid of such a terrible monarch, turned to other lords and soon forgot about the prince.

'What woman will marry such a thing as I?' moaned the Beast in anguish, and grew ever more insular and even more quick to rages than he was before. And so it was such for two hundred years.

"But then there came—"

Brendan flipped the page breathlessly. It was blank. He thumbed through the remaining pages, all of which were equally empty. Of course, he told himself. The story isn't finished yet.

Closing the book thoughtfully, Brendan picked up the lamp and turned away from the book and the battered room, which he knew now was destroyed by the Beast himself. Contemplatively biting his lip, he walked out of the room and pulled the worn door shut. He paused to run his fingers over the long scratches in the woodwork. He felt the unseen hands take the lamp away from him, and a certain kind of questioning flowed from the servant to Brendan.

"Yes. Yes, thank you. I understand now."

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"I'm afraid I'm going to have to disagree with you there. When Michael Drayton wrote Poly Olbion, he was trying to preserve antiquity, as so many Renaissance poets did. He wasn't disparaging druids and bards; he was lamenting their loss."

"Ah, but then you are classifying Drayton as an antiquarian." Beast clicked a talon on the table, making a rebutting point.
"Well, of course he was."

"I beg to differ. He's a monumental historian."

"Oh, semantics. Now you're just playing Devil's Advocate." Brendan grinned widely.

"Not at all. Drayton could not admit to a forgotten past; nor could he allow a foreign history to take place of his own."

"Mmm. Well, he was British, through and through." The pair sat, their cider gone cold and their dessert forgotten. They were both leaned forward over the table in avid discussion, as they had been for hours after they had eaten a fine dinner.

"Exactly," Beast nodded with satisfaction.

"I can see your point. Drayton adhered to the Galfridian tradition, because it gave Britain such an old, illustrious past, I'll give you that. But I still say that he wrote Poly Olbion with an antiquarian slant."

Beast's mouth curled in thought. "Hmm. I suppose I can see that. Still, John Seldon shared Camden's outlook on Galfridian mythology…"

And so on and so forth. It wasn't until much later that they both came to an agreeable concord on the subject of Renaissance poets and then paused for reflection.

Brendan watched the Beast sip his cold cider from under his lashes. With his fork he played uninterestedly with his strawberry crepes, and thought, So he wants Beauty so she can fall in love with him, and he can be freed of the enchantress' spell. It makes perfect sense now. He mulled over that for a while, then smiled at his next boyish notion; I'm dining with a prince!

There was a question regarding Beauty that niggled at his brain, and he cleared his throat. Beast looked at him expectantly.

"Ah- I've been wondering this for a while now." Beast's oddly expressive face grew cold, closed. I'll bet he expects me to ask why he's a Beast, Brendan thought, and felt a strange mixture of pleasure at finding the answer on his own (well, with a bit of small help) and a smidgeon of shame for prying.

"When you caught my Father, and told him to send Beauty, well, why did you ask for her? How did you know that my father even had daughters?"

Beast blinked with surprise. It seemed this boy caused that reaction a lot. "He told me himself he had children."

"Oh." Brendan's brow furrowed. That didn't exactly fit with what his father had told him. "But why did you…" he waved a hand, searching for tactful words. "Why did you demand her like that?"

The Beast didn't like this sort of questioning. He didn't need to explain his actions to this whelp of a boy. He snorted angrily and answered in a huff, "Look, I won her fair and square. It was my right to demand—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold on!" Brendan held up his hands and interrupted. "What do you mean, 'won her'?

Beast cocked his head to the side. "You mean your Father didn't tell you?"
Brendan had a black, sinking feeling in his stomach. "No. Tell me what?"

"When I caught him wantonly destroying my roses, he begged me to spare him. He even went so far as to offer me a card game, to win his life back. This amused me most greatly, so I agreed. Your Father, might I add, is the worst Primero player I've ever had the misfortune of playing. He lost so much that he became desperate and wagered his own daughter."

"Beauty." Brendan breathed. He stared at the table, eyes glazed over.

The Beast made a noise of affirmation, then leaned forward to get a better look at his guest's blank expression. "Are you alright?"

Silence.

"He didn't tell you that?"

"Of course he didn't!" This exploded from Brendan all in one quick word, and he threw up his hands in ire. "If I'd have known—of all the—that…that…man—I swear to God—it's—he's…" The words bubbled haltingly like lava, Brendan's livid face growing crimson. "His own flesh—sent to certain—I can't…how dare he!"

Beast was taken aback. The boy was absolutely furious. How fascinating. "I can't say I'm surprised that he didn't see fit to tell you."

Brendan pushed his chair back and folded his arms across his chest, sucking on his teeth and every now and then shaking his head in disbelief anger. His blue eyes flashed with fury. He would say nothing more, except for harsh, disgusted sighs.

Beast shifted on his haunches in this sullen, tense silence. He opened his mouth and found himself at a loss for words.

"Er." He tried again, extending a paw forward in a conversational way. "Well, ah…hmmph." No good.

"I was almost looking forward to hearing him play some music tonight. Now it looks as if he's too angry to do so." Beast beckoned for a servant to refill their cider mugs. Over the last few days, Beast had very, very grudgingly admitted to himself that things were a touch more interesting and maybe, yes, just the teeniest, tiniest bit less lonely with the boy's company. The absolute smallest bit, of course.

"I can't believe that man." Brendan piped unexpectedly. "He's never brought our family anything but misery. To think--! To think that he wagered his own favorite daughter! He meant, to do such a thing knowing that if he lost, Beauty would be turned over to a…" he paused, mouth open. His anger apparently caused him to speak before thinking.

"To a Beast?" his host asked in a rumbling timbre. He quirked one furry eyebrow in amusement.

"That's not what I—well, yes, that is what I meant." Brendan looked up at the Beast, trying to explain properly. "He wagered her to a Beast. And he thought you were going to eat him, or subject him to some cruel torture, yet still he put Beauty in that same danger! It doesn't matter whether or not the true case of your…er, appetite tended toward humans, what mattered is that he thought it did. He didn't even know what I know, that you're a—" Oh, damn. Why do I say such things? Brendan wondered wildly.

"A what?" Beast lowered his head, and unconsciously Brendan's eyes swept over his horns and mane, those dauntingly wide shoulders.
"A…well, that you're not as my Father thought you to be." We were discussing poetry not thirty minutes ago, Brendan thought, if that's not a sign of humanity, then I don't know what is.

Beast's voice was laden with sarcasm as he rose from his chair. "I am gratified you think so highly. It has grown rather late; I should like to retire to my quarters."

"Oh," Brendan also stood up, placing his napkin on the table. His eyes were disappointed.

"I thought you would care to join me in the Music Room, my cordial host, as you indicated yesterday eve." I don't want to be left alone again with that invisible phantom. There's only so much one-sided conversation I can stand before I go mad. I wonder what it'd be like to live with only mute invisible servants for two centuries? God, probably awful. No wonder he's so…well, beastly.

Beast's brows lifted with gracious surprise. "I had assumed you were in no fit state to engage in recreation tonight."

Brendan ducked his head and smiled diffidently. "Oh, I am always in a fit state to play for an audience."

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"There was a youth, a cruel youth,
Who lived beside the sea,
Six little maidens he drowned there
By the lonely willow tree.

"As he walked o'er with Sally Brown,
As he walked o'er with she,
And evil thought came to him there,
By the lonely willow tree.

"O turn you back to the water's side,
And face the willow tree,
Six little maidens I've drowned here,
And you the seventh shall be.

"Take off, take off, your golden crown,
Take off your gown, cried he."
For though I am going to murder you
I would not spoil your finery.

“Oh, turn around, you false young man,
Oh turn around, cried she,
For 'tis not meet that such a youth
A naked woman should you see.

“He turned around, that false young man,
And faced the old willow tree,
And seizing him boldly in both her arms,
She threw him into the sea.

“Lie there, lie there, you false young man,
Lie there, lie there, cried she,
Six little maidens you've drowned here,
Now keep them company!

“He sank beneath the icy waves,
He sank down into the sea,
And no living thing wept a tear for him,
Save the lonely willow tree.”

Brendan came to the end of his song, looked up from the violin and shook his chestnut hair from his face. The room was merrily bright, the old chandelier lit and also all the candles along the wall. It was quite a change from how Brendan had first seen it, all dust and age and darkness.

"The Irish are certainly a tragic people, aren't they?" Beast remarked, something very like a smile upon his face.

"Oh, that wasn't even the really sad version.." Brendan laughed. "Nearly all the songs I know are just tragically romantic, full of clay-cold lovers in the grave and mountainsides of blooming heather."

"You play the violin well enough. What else can you play?" The Beast waved a hand at the assorted instruments.
"Just about anything with strings," Brendan claimed, a tad boastfully.

"Ah. Play something on the cello then. I rather like a sonorous tune on the cello." The Beast reclined on his side upon the red divan, propping up his bristly chin with a paw. He looked at Brendan expectantly.

The boy faltered, looking troubled. "The cello?"

"Why, yes! I thought you could play anything with strings," The Beast jibbed. "Isn't that so?"

Brendan set aside the fine cherrywood violin and ran a slow hand over the cello. "I will play it." He took it back to his chair, positioned it on the ground before him, and took up the bow in his hand.

Beast sighed. "Stop dallying and play, will you?" Now that he was aware of it, Brendan recognized the imperious command that only one born to royalty can make.

"I will play it," Brendan repeated softly, and stroked one long, tenuous note on the straining strings.

He played a slow and tender song where singing had no part, and would only mar the pure aching notes. He skillfully stretched out the resonance, drawing each longing note out like moans, the cello's breath catching mid-note and sighing sweetly. Beast found himself inexplicably moved.

When Brendan was finished, he leaned the instrument on the side of his chair and folded his hands in his lap. His eyes had gone dark and his lips were pale.

"Hmm. Well played," Beast rumbled, inwardly thinking that Brendan's piece was one of the loveliest tunes he'd ever heard. It was morose and grieving, yet sweet as summer and just as warm.

"Thank you," Brendan said quietly. *He looks quite tired*, thought Beast.

"Perhaps you can play again tomorrow?" Beast politely inquired, making it quite clear by his tone that he personally couldn't care less one way or the other, and he was simply humoring an unwelcome guest.

The boy allowed a smile. "Perhaps. I'd like to try my hand at the harpsichord. It'll need a lot of tuning, I'd imagine."

"Very well." The Beast rose to his feet, and Brendan was again taken aback by his great size, though he was coming to be familiar with the bent-backward knees and golden pelt. It was the fangs and claws that he still had problems with. "Good night, boy."

Well, he wasn't used to being called 'boy' all the time either, and it still irked him. "Good night, Beast."

***

Brendan sat at the foot of his bed, looking in the dancing fire. *Why do I torture myself by dwelling on the past? Why can't I just let it go?* His eyes burned, and he rubbed them with the back of his hand and swallowed a heavy leaden lump in his throat. With a sigh, Brendan turned and rolled down the covers, but before he could slide into the soft oblivion of sleep, he felt a cold, timid hand rest upon his shoulder. He nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Ahh! Blessed Virgin, don't do that!" He clutched his chest, heart racing like a frightened mouse.
There were two long depressions in the bed, the only evidence that someone was kneeling on the mattress next to him. Brendan felt considerably uneasy, as if the servant might pounce on him or something equally ridiculous.

But the invisible did nothing other than lightly touch one finger to Brendan's cheek. Brendan flinched and pulled away, his hand unconsciously following the servant's example and felt the dampness on his face.

"I wasn't crying," Brendan snapped defensively. His father's voice came into his head unbidden; You cry too much. What kind of a boy likes flowers. What is wrong with you?

"It's just...well. That song I played. On the cello. It always makes me think of the person who taught it to me. A friend I had at school." The invisible sat silent, its knee-grooves in the bed unmoving. Brendan felt strangely compelled to keep talking, to pour out everything to a silent listener who wouldn't judge or demand any explanations; wouldn't name him unnatural or wrong. His memories sat heavy in his chest, needing to be said to someone. Anyone.

"Well, not a friend. More than a friend." Brendan rose and stood near the window, looking out at the dark snowscape and bruised, starlit sky.

"His name was Kieran. I'd been three months at the University, and I was a very shy when I was sixteen, so I didn't have many friends. The teachers were very kind to me, but some of the older boys were not. I got teased mercilessly for being small the first week, until I fought back and roughed up one of the bullies. They left me alone after that, for the most part, but I didn't have many friends.

"Then Kieran came, mid-semester. He was the second son of a very, very wealthy Irishman, and was sent to Paris to be educated properly. I remember when the Headmaster introduced him at assembly. He was everything you'd ever think a real Irishman would look like, green eyes and red hair and freckles and everything. I remember being so nervous when the Headmaster introduced me at assembly, but not Kieran. He just grinned, just radiating this kind of charm. Everyone was taken with him, the teachers, the students, everybody. He was small for his age, like I was, but the older students respected him regardless. The younger children looked up to him, worshipful. I didn't like him at all, then, I just hated him. He was good at everything, and I felt threatened and jealous.

"Then once after lunch, during free time, I saw him sitting with his back to a tree, looking very concentrated over a workbook. I was curious, so I walked a little closer and saw that he was struggling with a music assignment we'd been given, a few bars that we had to compose ourselves.

"'You can't put that sharp note in after the half-rest,' I told him. I'd meant to be spiteful about it, proving I knew more than him, but he didn't take offense at all. 'Oh yes?' he asked, wrinkling his nose at me. 'And what would you put there, then?' 'Well, if you're going to do a crescendo like that, it should start with C,' I answered, a bit less venomously. 'Anything else would sound funny.' And he looked at his workbook with this concentrated intensity, and pointedly changed the note to a C. Then he smiled at me again. 'I've seen you around. Brendan, isn't it?' Kieran scooted over on the grass, giving me room to sit next to him. I resisted his innate charm for all of two seconds before I plunked down on the grass. 'Doesn't the music professor have a nose exactly like a pickle?' he said very seriously, and I laughed.

"And well, then we were the very best of friends. We did everything together, and told each other our life stories. He came from a simply enormous family, with three younger sisters and two younger brothers, one older brother and five older sisters. Eight sisters, by God, can you imagine? I have three, and that's bad enough. He didn't have any sort of responsibilities ahead of him, because his elder brother would inherit the family estate, so Kieran was just out to have fun with life. He...he was my first real friend. I could just talk and talk for hours and he'd devour my every word like it..."
"Then I started to…I don't know. I loved the sight of him. I liked to watch him brush his hair out of his face, to hear him talk in that lilting accent, I liked the way he moved, I liked…I liked the way he looked at me sometimes, when we were alone, just talking or working on schoolwork, or when he taught me Irish songs. I didn't understand why, of course…I just knew I liked to be near him.

"I didn't fully understand why until one day after classes were over, and we were walking back to the dormitories. I was chattering on about nothing, and he suddenly pulled me into a side hallway, pushed me up against the wall, and right there where anyone could have seen, he kissed me. I was stiff with shock, at first, but he pressed his lips against mine so fiercely and with such fire that I…I just melted against him and we were kissing right there in the hallway. A girl kissed me once back in my town, but this was nothing like that; I just…it was wonderful.

"After that, our friendship was changed. It took on this secretive, exciting allure, and he'd squeeze my hand quickly when we parted for class, or sneak kisses behind trees, or…I can't believe I'm telling you all this."

Brendan laughed self-deprecatingly and turned away from the window. The invisible had moved closer to the edge of the bed, poised as if listening intently. "I've never told anybody about this before." He ran his hands through his tangled hair. "It's good to have someone listen.

"This went on for about two months, this...courting. I came to understand that the way we liked each other wasn't exactly normal, but of course you heard about it now and again, in whispers and insults. But Kieran told me that he'd kissed a boy before, and that he knew about men back home who lived together and were happy in love, and like a fool, I believed him.

"Love. Yes, I was in love with him. It was impossible not to be. He just had this fire inside of him, and I was like the moth that would burn itself just to be close to that fire.

"When we turned seventeen we were given our own rooms and didn't have to sleep in the common dorms anymore. So one evening, greatly daring, I snuck over to Kieran's room and rapped on his door. He opened it a crack, and then pulled me inside. He laughed—it seemed like he was always laughing, looking back—and I kissed him with my fingers in his hair, kissed him with my lips and tongue and...God, how I burned. I couldn't imagine anything more splendid than kissing him."

Brendan stared into the fireplace as he continued, clearly transported by the telling, almost unaware that he was still talking aloud. "While I was kissing him, he tugged at my shirt and I barely noticed until he broke away, pushed my arms up and pulled my shirt off over them. I was suddenly shy, and he touched my skin gently until I relaxed. He ran his hands slowly and almost reverently over my chest and stomach, like...like I was something precious. I stripped off his shirt and kissed his throat, touching him softly like he had touched me.

"Then he closed his open mouth over mine and guided me towards his bed. I was very afraid of that bed, for I knew that it might mean something that I wanted very badly, but was too afraid to do. But Kieran laid me down and soothed my nervousness away; and after long minutes of kissing and twining our limbs together, very soon neither of us was wearing any clothes at all. I remember...God, I remember how I could feel his bare rasp of stubble when he mouthed my collarbone...and I remember exactly how the bones of his hips felt when I ran my hands over them. Exactly.

"And we touched each other, silent but for our breath, and we pressed together...I remember how he said my name with his lilt, and—" Brendan suddenly shook his head as if driving off the lingering memories. He was silent for long minutes, his arms loosely crossed over his chest. The servant shifted very slightly in the silence, and the sheets rustled minutely.
Brendan broke out of his reverie. He strode over to the fire and folded himself in front of it, legs crossed butterfly-style. He grabbed the iron poker and prodded the glowing logs malevolently.

"He left school, you know. Last year. His brother died, the older one, so he went back to Ireland to claim his inheritance. He sent me letters. At first they were very ardent, love-letters, and he promised he'd be back or he'd arrange for me to visit him…and then he sent a letter that said…that he…" Brendan swallowed hard.

"He got married. To a girl. The letter he sent was like…it was like there was nothing more than schoolboy friendship between us. It was as if he were pretending the whole thing had never happened. It was completely platonic and friendly and he said he was very much in love with Aileen," he sneered a little as he said the name. "Something that was so wonderful and made me feel, I don't know, like my heart was overflowing with happiness—I've never been so happy—we had that, and he pretended like we'd just been good school chums. After I made my peace with myself and with God for having such anomalous desires, to receive a letter like that…! I was so angry with him. I didn't send back a reply, and I never received a letter from Kieran again."

He spread his fingers in a gesture that said 'that's all there is' and fell into a sullen silence. He felt those cold tentative fingers being laid on his shoulders, offering comfort. "Thank you for listening. I am really very gratified. I hope you weren't too bor—mmMPH!"

The invisible had slid off the bed, grasped Brendan's face between its hands and kissed him, hard and fast, on the lips. Alarmed and seriously disturbed, Brendan wriggled backwards like a trapped animal until his back slammed painfully into the footboard of his bed.

"Mmmph!!" he protested, effectively trapped between the servant and the bed. It was one thing to be waited on by an anonymous, voiceless and bodiless person; it was a completely different matter to have one make romantic advances towards you.

Brendan felt hands grasp his shoulders as the mouth bore down on him. He squirmed a bit, too stunned to really struggle. Then a hand dropped to his thigh, and Brendan squealed as he forcibly shoved the invisible off of him and jumped to his feet.

"Oh, good Lord!" Brendan exclaimed, extremely unnerved. He was breathing heavily, adopting a hands-up warding-off sort of stance. The thought of…that with a person he couldn't even see or talk with…he didn't even know what gender it was, though he suspected that it might be male. Women usually weren't that insistent.

"Okay, NO. Just—I—that—not good. Not good at all. No. I…Look. I'm, ah, very, um, flattered, but that kind of thing is going to have to…stop. All right? I appreciate the, ah, the s-s-sentiment," he stuttered with the shock of it, "but really. I can't return the…Good God, I'm talking to an empty room, aren't I?"

He tentatively reached out a hand and groped around. There was little doubt that the servant had bolted. Brendan was left blessedly alone. Or was he? How could one possibly tell? Was there someone there, watching him, haunting him?

Suffice to say, Brendan didn't sleep very well that night.
In Which There are Truth and Lies

The thing with enchanted corridors is that they are always rather mysterious. There are no long or short shadows because the whole place is a cobweb of shadows, colored with hues of illumination cast by self-lighting orbs. Well, not precisely self-lighting. The Beast, despite his many long years in the grand place, had yet to discover just exactly what was done by the servants and, more mysteriously, what was done by the very place itself.

For all his haughtiness and arrogance, he had been an intelligent man, and once he was no longer a man, he became feral and vicious and unapproachable by magic or the mundane. And once the initial fits and furies had passed, there had been a long time for him to adjust to his isolation, to grow ponderous, but also moody and more violent towards the occasional couch or drapery that was unfortunate enough to be nearby.

So, while pondering, he would wander. The palace had once been his own, a perfectly ordinary, if overly ornate palace; but after the Incident, (for he no longer liked to refer to it as what it really had been--the Cursing), he found that hallways were longer, stairways led places they ought not to, and in general, if one did not watch one's feet it was quite easy to get disoriented and lost.

There were some places he could get to easily, without effort. In fact, he found if he simply thought about where he wanted to go, doors and hallways would commonly lead him there no matter which way he chose to go. The Greenhouse could be found at a thought. The Dining Room, the Music Room, and the Library were others. He could always find his way to the Armor Room, but he intensely disliked it; all the plate metal acted like mirrors, and were the only reflective surfaces he did not destroy (besides of course the Great Ballroom, which was viciously unpleasant for more reasons still).

Save one mirror, which was in the wing he had forbidden Brendan to enter, though he doubted the boy could find it even if he tried.

Beast paused in step, doubling back over his thoughts. He could have sworn he'd just referred to the boy by his first name, but that was something he'd made a point not to do. If he did, that would mean several things, all of which were unpleasant, and not the least of which was that he was losing bits of his control.

He slunk out of the shadowy hall, for the lights were never lit too brightly before he passed and dimmed quite quickly after he had, into the cool darkness of night inside glass. The roses never slept, for whatever reason. Their petals were always open and upturned, velvety cold in the moonlight. The evening silvered black fern fronds, and the water was a placid pool of mercury.

Beast no longer sat by them as much as he first had. When everything else alive in the castle had ceased living—as it were—but the roses in the glasshouse remained, he would curl beside them and watch them with fear, trepidation, and wary panic. They couldn't last. The rich, moist petals would turn papery and pale and fall to the tiled floor. The stems would lose their glossy green hue; go dull and dark, retreat from their corners and climbers, and eventually go gray with death until all that remained to remind one of the beauty they had once held would be thorns. Beast would watch them until they did. Until he could be sure.

But day after month after year after century, they stayed open, frozen in their living unlife. Beast had then found an odd solace in the fact they seemed to share the same predicament.

Much the same way they comforted him now. He prowled regal and silent among the untrimmed
bushes, deep-set russet eyes sweeping over them. He began again to try and picture the girl he had been promised, his Helen of Troy, this Beauty; but his mind niggled a bit and his thoughts were dragged back to Brendan.

The boy was intelligent. Quite talented, as well. A bit fiery, and prone to bouts of prattle and argument, but even sort of lovely in his own kind of way… and that was certainly more than enough of that! Beast shook his head, mane rippling with an uneasy tremor and he stalked around a rosebush to look down at the shallow reflecting pool. He studied his feline features, his heavy angry brow, his long pointed ears. Monster.

His Beauty. His salvation. She was the one; he could feel it. He turned alongside the tile-lined cobbled path and ever so softly cradled a rose in his paw. It glowed like luminescent blood in the moonlight, defying darkness and death. The end was close. Beauty would come, and he would be free. Free.

"Yer gonna be stuck 'ere forever, mate. I don' 'ave a calendar or nothin', but that's a bloody long time, I kin tell ye that."

Beast ignored the voice at his back. There was a little splash of water and a scaly laugh.

"Wot I mean is, you gorra get someone to fall in love wiv ye, now. An' since yer, whaddyacall, manners is somewhat lackin', s'gonna be bloody hard, innit?"

"I did not ask your opinion!" Beast's roar echoed in the stillness of the garden. He tore his gaze from the roses and stalked out through the huge marble doors, which obediently shut behind him with a gravelly moan.

In the garden, the velvet crimson rose trembled in the wake of the Beast's touch. A raspy voice, subtly different from the first one, rang out.

"Well. 'E's rather in a mood, in't 'e?"

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Brendan, with both hands occupied, blew an errant bit of hair from his eyes. The impudent strand stuck onto his eyelashes, effectively distracting him from his harpsichord repair. He stood up straight, careful not to hit his head on the soundboard, and arched his back. He'd been working all bent over like that for some odd hours, and he wasn't ready to even begin thinking of tuning. The young man tucked the trailing wisps of hair back so they could join their fellows in the ponytail. It was a long, meticulous job, but Brendan enjoyed it. It got his mind off of….things.

Fortunately, the temperature and humidity of the room was kept relatively constant, thanks to the enormous fireplace of the Music Room, so the insides weren't warped beyond repair, as he'd feared. He'd wiped down the beautiful yellow-ivory keys with denatured alcohol and painstakingly cleaned the harpsichord's interior strungback with a dry cloth earlier that day, before dinner. He'd been very glad to see that mice hadn't made a home inside, as that could have seriously damaged it further than Brendan's skill to repair.

The invisibles had been a great help in providing the appropriate oils and cloths, although initially Brendan had plunged into the work with the intention of forgetting about the unseens. He'd been disturbed very deeply by the servant's amorous advances the previous night, and lately his mind felt like it was spinning in all directions, spread out too far for him to gather and understand, so he thought he'd apply his brain and hands to some healthy, difficult work. Besides, he was starting to
get cabin fever, looking out of his small room at the prison of snow outside. During his customary supper with his host, Beast had given him leave to work on the harpsichord rather than play for him, as had become custom over the last few days.

He ducked back into the instrument with gusto. *Let's see,* he thought, mind racing, *the soundboard is cracked, but not on a bridge line, and the pinblock is intact so it should be all right. Otherwise, the casework is in fine condition; just needs a good wiping down. I'll just finish lubricating all the moving parts, aaand…there. All the plectrums pluck the strings smoothly, but—tsk. Look at these strings. This A here and this G are rusted over at the wrest pins; damn, can't really avoid those notes being harsh. And I suspect this C and the F are going to be entirely flat no matter how long I work on them. Mother of God, this is going to be hard to tune.* Brendan sighed. Harpsichords got incrementally harder to tune with every year of neglect. This one had been neglected a very, very, very long time.

Brendan had nearly finished tuning when an invisible brought him a cup of cool water, with mint leaves for refreshment. He took it with thanks, laughing at how accustomed he was to the supernatural servants. He set the drink down on a nearby table and glared at the harpsichord's rusted A string, eyes narrowed. It would be delicate work to tune it, as it could snap with too much tension. He weighed the risk of trying to tune it; it was either leave it alone and have an annoyingly dissonant A, or break it trying and have no A at all. But if he managed to do it skillfully, he might be able to coax it to be easy on the ear.

As he twisted the wrest pin ever-so-gently, he tapped the A key. Brendan leaned closer to the strings, closing his eyes to better concentrate.

There was a tiny sharp sound like a crystal breaking, and Brendan heard a swift swish by his ear. He jerked his head back quickly, opening his eyes. The A string curled and bobbed in the air, broken off at the wrest pin.

"Damn," Brendan muttered. *I'm lucky that it didn't slice my face open.* His cheek felt very warm. He put his hand to it and winced as the sharp pain stabbed through his face. His hand came away bloody. *Oh. He clapped his hand back over the cut as his vanity panicked. Oh please God, don't let it scar!*

"What's going on?" Brendan spun around at the deep imposing voice. The Beast was standing in the doorway. "A servant grabbed my arm and…dear Lord, what happened?"

"I…the string…it snapped, and-" Brendan waved at the harpsichord in explanation, feeling all at once glad and embarrassed and awkward. Beast stepped towards him and looked at Brendan's face. He lifted the boy's hand from the cut gently but with authority. Brendan, stunned by Beast's—was it concern? Was the Beast actually concerned for him?—complied and let the Beast examine the wound. It began to sting fiercely.

"It's bleeding quite a lot. Come, you should have that tended to." Brendan followed in dumb astonishment as Beast led him out of the Music Room and down the hall, his blood-slick hand covering the laceration.

The Beast turned down a hall and as Brendan quickly followed, he found that he was in the Dining Room. He stopped in his tracks. "But we were upstairs! How did we-"

"Yes, yes, the halls go where I need them. Come along, you'll get blood on the rug." The Beast beckoned impatiently, going through the servants' entrance into the kitchen. Brendan shut his eyes tight and took a deep breath to stop his reeling brain and protesting logic, and went after his host into the large, empty kitchen.
"It was stupid, I knew it would probably break, I shouldn't have had my face so close to it…"
Brendan kept up a penitent litany as he stood on the dark hardwood floor, leaning on the oaken counter as Beast opened the drawer next to him and fished out a white linen cloth. A big green bowl, leaves painted into its sides, had been set out on the counter and filled with clean, clear water.

The Beast dunked the cloth into the bowl and then wrung it out. "Come here," he rumbled to Brendan. Brendan hesitated for only a moment, before padding closer to the Beast. This is so strange, thought a very bewildered Brendan. He's the most unpredictable man–for I now know he still is a man, under all that fur and rage–that I've ever met. Was it only a week ago he was threatening my life?

"Here, take your hand away…there." Beast made a little click with his tongue. Brendan nearly laughed as he was reminded of his old governess.

"That doesn't look too deep. I don't think you'll need a bandage. Here, be still." Brendan stood in wide-eyed amazement as Beast bent down and dabbed at the cut. Brendan flinched.

"Stop twitching," Beast ordered with annoyance, effectively stilling Brendan by trapping the boy's chin lightly in his other paw. He pressed the wet cloth to Brendan's cheek, his expression closed and unrevealing.

Brendan gasped as the linen touched his tender cut. "Cold," he said, and tried a little laugh that quickly died of nerves. Why is my heart beating so fast? "Thank you," he breathed, eyes cast down in confusion. He was suddenly very aware of Beast's proximity, the paw on his face, how closely they stood near.

Beast dipped the now-pink cloth in water between daubs. "You're welcome. It wasn't very clever of you to get bitten by the harpsichord, I will say." Brendan's eyes made a halting journey up to Beast's face. The furry hand on his chin was softer than it had any right to be, and very hot. The Beast's eyes were distant and betrayed no emotion, but Brendan could see that they were brown and honey-toned, like autumn leaves and woodfires. He could smell the crushed velvet of Beast's red jacket and another scent too, like clean musk, which shook Brendan. He felt suddenly panicked, and shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked Beast softly. Beast's hand froze in his ministrations. Brendan mentally cursed himself for speaking before he thought.

"The servants aren't very good at medicinal things. I'm nearly done." Beast frowned, thinking, Why am I doing this? Why do I care? Why didn't I just say, 'go down in the kitchens and get yourself cleaned up,' rather than take him here myself and act like a fussing aunt? This is absurd. Another thought struck him; This is the first time I've touched a person in over a hundred years. He felt very odd, and quickly took his hands away from the boy's face.

"There. See, it wasn't all that deep. It's stopped bleeding. I'll put some iodine on it and that will be that." Beast left the cloth afloat in the green bowl and turned from Brendan to pick through one of the cupboards. Brendan felt a strange mix of relief as the Beast turned away and a little bit of dread at the mention of iodine.

"Do I really need the iodine? I mean, the cut doesn't even hurt anymore…"

Beast snorted, one hand in the cupboard, and was customarily sarcastic. "No, you don't really need iodine. And in two days it will get infected and scar. Is that what you want?" To which Brendan had no answer but to shake his head contritely. Beast found the small brown bottle, unscrewed the cap and filled the dropper with the yellow stuff.
"Now this time, no fidgeting." Brendan stoically bore the nasty sting of the iodine with no more than a wince.

"You seem to know your way around the kitchen," he mentioned as the Beast put the medicine away.

"Ah. Does this seem strange to you, that I would know my way around my own kitchen?" Beast wore such an expression that Brendan couldn't tell if he was serious or joking, but it seemed that he was amused with Brendan.

"Well, I'd just thought…with the servants…"

"Mm. Sometimes I like to do things for myself, boy." Beast crossed his arms over his broad chest and watched Brendan with a half-smile.

"You know, I do have a name!" Brendan snapped, color rising to his cheeks. He was immediately sorry for losing his temper, but would not back down and gave no outward sign of remorse, meeting Beast's eyes challengingly.

Beast's smile vanished so quickly it might never have been there. "Really? I hadn't noticed." He swept past Brendan and paused with a hand on the wooden door. "It's very late. Go to bed." He pushed through the door, leaving Brendan standing there awkwardly, cursing his too-quick tongue.

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The roses were even more beautiful at night than by day, Brendan mused. It was well past midnight, the falling snow and the stars seeming as one through the glass ceiling. Brendan wandered the starlit paths of the garden, trying to align the thoughts in his head by speaking them aloud.

"Okay. One: I'm in an enchanted castle. There are invisible people, halls that lead wherever they are needed to, roads that circle back on themselves when they feel like it, and a two hundred year old transformed prince. Okay. I can accept this." Brendan circled a cluster of irises and walked alongside the night-silvered pond.

"Two: my father bargained Beauty's life to the Beast. The Beast needs Beauty to fall in love with him, so he'll magically transform back into his princely self, and then they will be married and live happily ever after, the end. He doesn't want me here because I am in the way of his plan. Which is fine with me, I'm not especially ecstatic to stay here much longer.

"Not that I don't like it here. I do." As he said them, Brendan realized the words were truth. "It's like a story, all this magic and everything. It's wonderful. It feels like I'm on a different world altogether. And when you come right down to it, there's not much waiting for me at home. It's just that...I keep expecting the Beast to eat me, or do something equally vicious, even though I know he's still human. I know he is!" Brendan folded down onto the stone tile next to the pond with a heavy sigh. There were long reeds and lilies that thatched over the water's mirror surface, a latticework of shadow lines.

"And I don't want Beauty to worry about me. I want what's best for her; I want her to be happy." Brendan tilted his head to the side and dabbled his fingertips in the water, watching the ripples spread. "Beast would treat her well. Like a queen. She has a good heart; she could learn to see past his appearance in time. Maybe she'd break the spell, and then she'd get her happily ever after.

"So why don't I want her to come here? Why does my every instinct scream 'no'?" Brendan threaded his fingers through his hair. "Why do I feel so damned confused?"
"Love'll do that to ya, laddie." Brendan nearly fell into the water with fright. The voice was coming from ahead of him, but he didn't see anyone there across the pond. He squinted as he tried to make out any shapes or movement.

"Who's there?! Where are you?"

"Down 'ere," Brendan looked down dumbly. Beneath the quicksilver skin of the pond, two long shapes twined and stuck their heads up above the water.

"You're, you're, you're…fish." Brendan gaped.

The white one grinned toothlessly, whiskers curling with pleasure. "'Course. Koi, actshally. Not the blushing flirty kind, unnerstand. Koi with a K."

The black one, more difficult to see in the darkness, winked a bright pale eye at Brendan. "Naw, not the coy kinda koi. How are ya."

"Uh…” Brendan swallowed. "You'd think I'd be used to things like this happening around here. Um, hello."

"Hallo, then," chirped the white fish, "nice ta meetcha."

"**Enchante.**" Brendan cleared his throat, hands folded in his lap. "Are you enchanted people, too?"

The black fish jumped into the air and flicked his tail in derision, landing with a noisy splash.

"'Course not! We were never humans," it answered upon resurfacing, disdain in its scratchy voice. "The nerve o' even arskin'."

"Sorry," said Brendan reflexively. "I didn't mean any offense." I'm apologizing to a fish. God, my life has become weird. "So, um, have you always been here, then?"

"Sorta," the white fish swam a lazy figure-eight. "We two were imported, we were. Long time ago. Didn't useta talk then, o' course. When the castle went all wonky, and all the two-leggers went either ka-poof or ka-roar, we got smart, we did."

"Aye!" The black fish bobbed idly. "We're the rarest kind o' fish; the wise kind, d'you fathom? Go a'ead, arsk us a question, lad. Anythin' at all."

"But be warned, younglin'. When it comes to personal questions, one o' us answers truth, an' the other speaks lies." The white fish snaked around the black one, moon-pale and shining.

"All right." Brendan thought for a moment until he came up with a question that no fish could possibly answer. "What's 7,392 divided by 16?"

"Four hunnerd an' sixty-two," piped both fish at once. Brendan blinked.

"That sounds about right…I think…” This was, by far, the oddest thing that had ever happened to him, up to and including the invisible pouncing him.

"Trust us, it's right." When they twined together, it was difficult to tell which fish was speaking.

"620 times 12?" This one, he knew the answer to.

"7440, that's easy."

"Squared?"
"86 an' a quarter." Both fish grinned. A grinning fish is a disturbing thing to see. Brendan tried another tactic. Mathematics had never been his forte anyway.

"Who wrote the 'Flower Duet'?"

"Leo Delibes."

"Hmm." Brendan thought for a moment. "Okay, what year did William the Bastard conquer England?"

"1066."

"Tch. I will not be bested by an ichthyoid!" "All right, wise guys, what did my sister Marguerite want for her fifteenth birthday?" He lifted his chin triumphantly.

"She asked yer father fer a ivory brooch, but wot she really wanted was Catherine's opal earrin's. She stole 'em from Catherine's nightstand an' when you caught her at it, she made ye promise ye'd never tell or she'd tell Father ye snuck out at night ta ride 'is best gelding." The fishes' eyes twinkled like pearly gems.

Brendan's mouth hung open in shock. "How...how did you know that?"

"Aw, we know lotsa stuff, m'lad!" exclaimed the black fish, swimming close. The dim light slithered worm-like on its scales. Brendan didn't think he liked the black fish very much. "Ye might even say we know everythin'."

"Yah, there's a word for that..." the white fish put in thoughtfully. "Nippy-something. Nippotant. Nipple-tent..."

"Omnipotent?" Brendan adjoined helpfully.

"Aye, that's the one!" sang the white fish. "We're omnipotent fish. Omnipo-fish. Heh, heh." Both koi laughed a warbling chuckle, pleased with their wit.

"You know everything but you didn't know the word for it?" He quirked an eyebrow skeptically.

"Aw, shurrup," said the white fish. Brendan didn't think he liked the white fish very much, either.

"When you spoke before, what did you mean by 'love will do that to you'?" Brendan leaned forward with his palms to the cool stone, trying to keep his eyes on the fish as they swam beneath the overhanging bushes and leaves.

"Oh ho, 'e wants to know about love, does 'e?" the black fish shorted. "That's a mighty personal sort o' question, lad."

"And you answer only either truth or lies, is that right?" Brendan kept his eyes on the fish, intent on outwitting them. "Fine then, which one of you speaks lies?"

Both fish nodded their heads at each other. "E does."

"Ah ha! But if you speak the truth," he pointed at the white fish, "then it's you, the black one, that lied when you said that he did."

"Oh ho, but wot if e's lying, oi?" Brendan deflated. "S'a good guess, lad. Go a'ead, try again."

"Okay." Brendan thought hard and nibbled a fingernail, and remembered hearing a riddle like this
once before in a book. He tried to recall the hero's ploy. "Okay. You, black—if I were to ask the white fish if you were the liar, what would he say?"

The fish clicked its tongue in good humor. "Getting' clever, are we? Well, 'e'd say that I was, yes."

"Ah ha! But then if he said yes...then you'd be telling...the truth! Yes, I've got it. So then he'd be the liar! But if you are lying, and he said no, you told the truth...then you would have just lied. Um. But then the white fish would be a liar too...wouldn't he? Wait a minute...is that right? It's too late in the night for logic puzzles! thought a very confused Brendan.

The white fish laughed, a bubbly raspy sound. "Uncross yer eyes, kid, ye'll go blind. S'no use tryin' ta figger out which one o' us is truth an' which one is lies. We'll never letcha know."

"Well than what good are you?" he snapped, very annoyed.

"Tut, tut. Manners, lad. You an' 'im would make a perfect match, ye would." The koi started making sinuous circles around each other under the reeds, making it nearly impossibly to tell who was talking.

"Me and who?" he asked, perplexed. "Could you please come out where I can see you?" They didn't oblige him.

"You an' Mary Queen o' bloody Scots, who d'ya think I'm talking about?!" There was an aquatic snigger under a leaning flush of lilies.

"I don't know what you mean." Brendan tried to peer into the inky shadows.

"Course ye don't. S'too early yet," said one fish cryptically. The other added quickly, "Or rather, it's too late in the day, s'wot we mean. Ye should be goin' off ter bed, aye? Getting' a mite tired, I'd wager."

"But you didn't answer my question! And I am not tired." Brendan protested, then a traitorous yawn split his face.

"So I'm a little tired. Can't we talk some more?" He wasn't sure if he liked these fish or not, but they certainly were intriguing, even if they were confusing enough to give him a headache.

"Oh, there will be plenty of time for that, two-legger. Off wiv ye, now!" Both fish leapt out of the water and dove down deep to the bottom of the pond, splashing Brendan in the process, and wouldn't resurface or speak again.

"Oh, well," Brendan muttered, pushing himself to his feet. "Talking fish. By God, what next? Dancing silverware and enchanted footstools?" He snorted and picked his way down the garden paths, out the great marble doors and across the lovely tiled mosaic woman

"I suppose you speak in riddles and rhyme, hmm?" The woman lay still with her silent unchanging smile as Brendan passed by.

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When he got back to his room, yawning with sleepiness, Brendan found the fire had been tended to and a glass of wine had been set on the nightstand, next to the slim vase that held the rose. He called out his thanks but no one answered or brushed by to let him know they heard. Probably for the best,
Brendan figured, remembering the awkward romantic fiasco the night before.

As he shed his clothes and slipped down under the heavy coverlet, he looked at the rose, still in the full bloom of health, its petals port wine-red in the firelight. "You realize that this is all your fault," he told the rose. He paused a moment, just to make sure it didn't talk back, and then lay his head on the pillow and fell into slumber.
In Which There is a Hunt

For the first time since Brendan had arrived at the castle, he awoke to a blue sky; crisp and clear, and everything in his chambers seemed a little more focused and real. He slipped out from under still-warm sheets and shivered slightly at the wintry feel that had crept into the room. The fire was crackling softly, and looked new. Everything had a type of newness to it, and feeling awake but distant, as if some dread was trying to form in the pit of his stomach, he pulled on clean breeches, and a thick woven sweater that was laying on the back of a high wooden chair opposite the window.

He left his boots where they were, and moved to the cold glass to wipe away the soft blur of condensation. His eyes traced over his pale reflection, looking for any hint of scarring. He sighed, face quirking to the side with annoyance, and stepped back. Not a scar yet, he thought sourly. But still a damned scratch.

He stepped out of his room and looked down either side of the hallway. There were not torches today, but warmly glowing lanterns, and they seemed more pleasant. The hallway itself was less oppressive than was the norm, and he padded down the soft tread of runner carpet, in the direction of the Dining Room.

As he approached what was usually the end of the hallway and the beginning of the stairs, he noticed an open door; one he could not recall having noticed before. Either it had been closed, or it had not been there at all, and he turned away from where the stairs should have been and walked through.

There was a small foyer, plated with dark wood and a thick cherry-colored rug on the floor. It was as ornately decorated as any of the rooms, but there was nothing to truly catch the eye; just minute detail upon detail, depicting flowers and vines in gold and silver paint. Beyond the warmth of the foyer, there were arched glass doors with bronze handles in the shape of small griffons, already swung open and poised against the inside walls, opening onto a stone balcony.

There stood Beast, hands clasped regally behind his back, wide shoulders just slightly sloping downward, strands of his mane waving smoothly in the steady breeze like plants under water. Brendan sniffed a little, tucked his arms around his thin frame, and stepped out, his own chestnut locks slipping down across his eyes. The stone seemed to leech warmth from the soles of his bare feet, and he wished that he had thought to put on his boots.

"It's cold out. Or does that not bother you at all?"

Beast looked down, unsurprised at the boy's appearance; he had heard him come in. He kept his brow low, his eye stern and controlled. Brendan looked almost comical swathed in the absurd expanse of crème colored wool, but Beast subconsciously noted that the style suited him. He had not however, answered the boy, and forced himself to do so politely, "No, it does not, in particular, bother me." He swung his head back to look out over the wintry garden, and the skeletal woods beyond.

It was then Brendan paused, and said with an unreadable voice, "It's stopped snowing."

The two gentlemen regarded the morning stillness in silence that was not quite companionable. Brendan started, tersely, "So, with the snow all...not falling and such..."

"You are quite free to leave," Beast finished, his dark bass just slightly overlapping the younger man's smooth alto. His words had not at all implied that he wanted the boy to leave. Then again, they didn't imply he wanted him to stay, either. Again, they were quiet.
"Although . . . Snow must be extremely deep," Brendan stated, cautiously glancing at Beast out of the corner of his eye. Beast did not look at him. "Would be suicide to leave, even if the horse could manage the snow, which I doubt." They exchanged wary sidelong glances, then quickly looked ahead. "And I'm not thrilled at the prospect of trying . . ."

"Your incompetence would hinder you endlessly." Beast quirked one side of his brow at the boy, and Brendan shot him a mildly annoyed look. Slowly they turned back to face the snow.

"Then I guess I'm staying a while longer." He apprehensively rubbed his frigid toes on the back of his other leg in the following pause.

"It would appear so." Beast turned on his great feet and began to stride away, while Brendan smiled to himself, although as to why, he wasn't entirely sure. Beast's husky voice reached his ears from the hallway.

"Do you not plan on eating, then?" and Brendan turned from the room and followed.

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Breakfast had been a quick and civil affair, with fluffy eggs poached to perfection, warm croissants, light white wine, and slices of cinnamon baked apples. Beast had watched the boy spoon forkfuls of egg into his mouth with an expression of disgruntled awe. Brendan's appetite had surged with an abrupt sense of optimism, and found himself shoveling in twice as much as he usually did. The Beast inquired about Brendan's scratch, and his guest replied that it was fine and didn't hurt at all, thank you very much. There followed a polite discussion, congruent with the lightness of the meal, mainly about the courts of Paris and the current king, in which Beast seemed only half-interested at best. So Brendan moved the subject on to a topic of which he was very fond; music. They talked about obscure composers that had worked for the Medici's, mainly Italian organist Antonio Squarciadupi and Flemish polyphonic singer Heinrich Isaac, musicians that Brendan had to admit he knew very little about. Beast seemed very knowledgeable of the subject, and was in turn interested to hear about the new talents in France, such as Kerll, Pachelbel, and Froberger, all of which Brendan enjoyed immensely.

After Brendan had excused himself with a promise to his host of later demonstrating the style of Pachelbel, he went back to his room and asked for a bath. He felt a little silly saying to the air, "If it's not too much trouble, I could really use a bath, please," but felt a swift rush of air to indicate the servants' haste. The fire had been stoked to a pleasant blaze, and he waited in the uncomfortable chair at the dressing table, wishing for a book to read. The earlier conversation had sparked his interest in Renaissance culture, and he wondered where he could find some history books—though in this castle, they were probably labeled under 'Current Events'. There just had to be a library somewhere.

Then a large copper tub was carried into the room, and set right in front of the fireplace. Buckets of hot water followed and were poured in with a quick efficiency that Brendan marveled to see. He didn't think he'd ever get used to the sight of such things floating about as if by magic—but it was magic, wasn't it? This place is marvelous, Brendan thought, there's magic in the smallest things.

Then the empty buckets were carted out, a washcloth and bar of bark-colored soap set of the tub's rim. Brendan hesitated a moment before deciding it was foolish to be modest in front of the invisibles, even if one of them was the alarmingly amorous servant that had attacked him a few nights ago. He pulled the wool sweater off over his head. His breeches and smallclothes followed suit. The fire was pleasantly warm on his skin, as he padded to the round copper vessel and stuck one foot in. Prickles ran up his leg, and he smiled. The tub was luxuriously large and deep, and
Brendan slipped in and found, to his delight, that he could submerge his whole body quite comfortably. The tub he used back at home was just a trifle too small, and usually resulted in cold knees and a sore back.

Brendan closed his eyes, a contented purr in his throat as the heat soaked into his skin. He slid up to his chin in the hot water and felt the faintly rose-scented steam dampen his face.

"This feels wonderful," he murmured, assuming the attending servants were there to hear him. He laid his arms out on the cool edge of the tub and let his head rest against the rim, allowing his thoughts to drift.

"I should like to see my horse this morning," Brendan remarked softly to himself, "Maybe have a talk with those ridiculous fish. I don't know. But I would like to do something. I didn't realize how oppressive the snowstorm was until it let up. I'm all restless now." Brendan, arm dripping, picked up the washcloth and the soap and began to wash. The soap smelled sharply of sandalwood, and Brendan reveled in the decadent exoticness of it. Taking a deep breath of air, he ducked under the water, scrubbing his fingers through his hair.

When he stood up, water slicking down his body and hair clinging to his face, a towel presented itself from nothingness, which Brendan gratefully took as he stepped out of the tub onto the hot marble hearth. The towel was thick and Brendan dried himself quickly in front of the fire, beginning to feel slightly uncomfortable being naked with God knows how many invisible servants in the room. Mostly dry, he walked to the bed, where new smallclothes had been thoughtfully laid out. After putting those on and feeling more clothed, he ran a hand over his face and wondered if he needed a shave. He wished aloud that there were some mirrors around this place, but the only mirrors Brendan had seen in the whole castle were in the huge glass ballroom. It took only a moment before the servants brought in a brush, lather, and a straight razor. He considered himself lucky that he didn't need to shave very often, though he'd always been envious of the boys at school who wore beards, but if he didn't shave every few days or so he'd get all patchy, which Brendan disliked. So he shaved quickly and with only a little difficulty at the lack of a mirror, then leaned over and dried his hair furiously with the towel. He ran a brush through the damp and tangled mass but didn't mess with it too much, for if left to its own devices his hair usually dried in natural wavy curls that, Brendan would admit, he was quite fond of.

Brendan dressed himself warmly with thick breeches and the same wool sweater he'd worn at breakfast, and found thick gray socks in the dressing table's drawers. Tall winter boots had been left by the bed when he turned back.

"Merci," he told the unseens, and feeling warm and clean Brendan made his way downstairs, heavy boots clumping with each step.

Just as he came down off the last step, he realized he didn't even know where the stable was. "Is there a door that leads to the stables?" he asked the invisibles, hoping they had followed him down.

"Yes, there is." To his credit, Brendan didn't jump at the unexpected voice. Beast strode out of the left hallway, an open book in his large furry hands. He quirked an eyebrow at Brendan, a habit which Brendan noticed to be very frequent when Beast was being condescending.

"Oh. Hello," Brendan inclined his head politely. "I had wished to see my horse." Just in case Beast thought he meant he was leaving, Brendan quickly added, "Just to make sure he's all settled in."

"Mmm." Beast glanced down at the volume he held, looking very bookish with his brow furrowed and his lips pursed. Brendan had a comical image of Beast with tiny reading glasses perched atop his wide cat-nose, and endeavored not to smile too obviously. Beast slammed the book with one hand,
dust swirling, and held it out to his side, where it was promptly gathered by a gracious servant and tucked under some invisible tunic.

Beast noted how the boy looked longingly at the book before it disappeared, the very same way a man in a desert would stare at a cool jug of water.

"Well. There's no doubt that you'll manage to get lost if you go with a servant. It is this way." Beast flicked the cuffs of his wine-red coat, spun on his heel and began to walk the way he had come, hearing his guest quickly follow.

There were more windows in this wing of the castle, and the cold winter sun poured in each arched window and bathed the hallway in light. Beast slowed down a little, in his regal manner, letting the boy walk alongside him. The boy's hair was dark with damp, his face looking freshly scrubbed. He smelled of water and wool, and the faint spicy aroma of sandalwood clung to him, to Beast's keen sense of smell. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched the young man stick his hands in his pockets as he kept pace with the Beast. Brendan swung his head to look outside every time they passed a window, seeming very eager to be outdoors. Beast felt the same way, and he longed for the crunch of snow and dead leaves under his feet, the scent of trees and earth heady and intoxicating in his nose. He wanted to dig his claws into the dirt and snow and grit.

"So," Brendan interrupted Beast's thoughts, "do the servants take care of the horses? I thought they couldn't leave the castle."

What an irksome question.

"There is only your horse. The house servants and stable hands can leave the castle, just not the castle grounds. They can go no further than the outer gardens." He let his irritation color his answer. He didn't like being reminded that there were no longer any horses at the castle. Though the servants, the roses, and he himself had not aged, the same had not been so with his animals.

"Oh." The boy, thankfully, fell silent. The hallway opened to a crossroads of sorts, and Beast turned left at the age-blackened suit of armor. Here the passageway widened considerably, and the ceiling was high and vaulted like that of a cathedral.

"This certainly is a long way," he heard the boy mutter. "Castle must be bigger on the inside than it is on the outside." Beast ignored him. The walls here were decked with crossed axes and swords. He noticed the boy slow down to look at the paintings and armory, and made an annoyed growl, at which Brendan shook himself from his reverie and resumed his pace. They passed a pair of enormous doors, made of old, old oak and for the most part undecorated, aside from the wrought iron strips over each door shaped like rampant lions. It was beautiful in its simplicity, two plain iron rings as handles. He looked at the boy who looked up at the doors wide-eyed and interested.

"That's the Library," Beast remarked casually as they passed by the doors, watching for the boy's reaction. Brendan now gazed back at the doors with near-worship, his face aglow. They walked for a stretch, silent but for Brendan's boots and the Beast's click-click of claws on the hardwood floor.

"Do you think..." ventured the young man, blue eyes darting up to look at Beast and backing down again, "do you think I might be allowed there, sometime?"

Beast shrugged, indicating that he didn't care much one way or the other. "As long as you don't damage anything."

"Oh, I won't," Brendan said fervently.
"And not today," Beast added, more for the sake of making rules, and also out of the curiosity if the boy would obey, than for any true reason.

The boy nodded and smiled at him. "Thank you."

Beast said nothing for a long time, but when he did speak, it was in a voice softer than he had intended it to be. "You're welcome." They had reached the end of the hall, with floor-to-ceiling windows framing the glass door. As they approached, the door swung open. Beast let his guest pass through before following.

It was chilly out, Brendan mused as they stepped outside, but not cold. Not quite cold enough for mittens, but a scarf would certainly be welcome. The stable stood about fifty yards ahead, an iron fence lining the way. The path had for the most part been cleared, but the hard compacted ice-snow that was left crunched under his feet. Brendan squinted through the glare until his eyes got used to the sunlight, Beast again taking the lead. Roses, defiantly blooming, twined around the iron fence. Brendan felt compelled to say something.

"The roses are beautiful," he remarked, his breath written in steam on the air.

"Yes. They are," Beast said, and there was an undercurrent of fondness in his answer as he looked to his roses. A cardinal sang in a nearby tree.

The stable was quite large, and very, very empty. Each footstep echoed on the cobble. Beast stalked in, looking more ill-tempered than usual, and pushed open a smallish door just inside the entrance.

"There's sugar cubes in there, if you like," he grumbled.

"Oh! Thank you," Brendan ducked into the sizable tack room, found the sugar cubes in a glass jar, and, as an afterthought, grabbed a currycomb as well.

Beast was standing by one of the middle stalls, thick arms crossed over his chest, shifting his weight impatiently from one foot to the other. As Brendan approached, his horse stuck its head over the stall door and whinnied in welcome.

"Hallo, mon ami," he greeted his horse fondly, rubbing his muzzle. "I have something for you." He unlatched the stall door and let himself in, crisp straw underfoot. The horse whuffled eagerly at the sugar in Brendan's hand. The big gelding looked well cared for, but Brendan thought it must be lonely, by itself in these huge stables. Idly scratching his mane, Brendan said, "Did you miss me, Jean-Luc?"

Beast snorted, and Jean-Luc flattened his black-tipped ears but didn't stop lipping up sugar. Brendan turned a fierce shade of red and looked away. He'd forgotten that Beast was so close. Leaning his elbows on the stall door Beast grinned wryly, fangs gleaming in the soft light infiltrating the stables.

"What is the horse's name?"

"Jean-Luc," Brendan mumbled into his hand. "I know it's a dumb name. Marguerite picked it!"

Beast still smirked. Brendan started to brush the gelding with long, even strokes, the horse's skin quivering with pleasure. "I would have named him something else."

"Like what?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure. Something more fitting to him, like…"

"Like 'Dog Food'?"
"What's that supposed to mean?" Brendan shot Beast a dangerous look. "He's good draft stock. Got some Percheron in him, somewhere."

Beast barked a laugh. "Mongrel, then?"

"Nothing wrong with that! What makes you the resident expert on equines, anyway?" His brushstrokes were short and uneven with temper.

"I used to breed horses," Beast replied, voice dry. "These stables and the surrounding paddocks used to be filled with the best horses in all of France."

Brendan's grooming came to a close, to Jean-Luc's disappointment. The young man leaned an arm over the compliant horse's hindquarters, facing Beast. "I didn't know that."

"Oh yes. I had the best. Frisians, Arabians, and Andalusians purchased most extravagantly from Spain …" Beast's eyes fell absently on the empty stable next to them. "All of them had good names," he added with a smile. Brendan noticed, rather surprised, that it wasn't a mocking smile, but a real one.

"Really?" Brendan didn't have very much hands-on experience about horses, being city born, but he'd read a good deal about them. He tried to sound casual, not wanting the Beast to think him ignorant. "Good runners, then."

"Yes. And hunters. I had one Frisian in particular…Charlemagne." Beast wasn't looking at Brendan, but up at the stable ceiling, where sparrows and finches fluttered from beam to beam. "The best stallion in the stables. Night-black, of course, and sired by a Germanic warhorse. Never could a fox outrun him. Even the coursing hounds were hard put to keep up with him."

Brendan stared at his host, amazed that the usually so taciturn Beast was telling him, the unwelcome pest, about his pre-bestial past in such a confidante manner. In his mind, Brendan could clearly see the fleet hunting dogs, and the coal-dark shape of Charlemagne throwing himself headlong through the forest after a red wisp of fox.

Brendan watched as Beast swept his thick golden hair back from his face, noticed as he shifted his weight so his arms and shoulders rippled with muscle under the velvet red coat. He blinked and looked quickly away.

"Charlemagne. That is a good name," Brendan admitted. "Did you hunt a lot, then? What did you hunt?"

"Many things. The surrounding woods used to be rich with game. Still are, for the most part." Beast looked straight at Brendan, for the first time since they'd entered the stables. "Do you hunt at all?"

Brendan found it difficult to return the eye contact. Beast's eyes seemed to burn into him, and his breath hitched momentarily.

"When I was younger. Mostly pheasants and rabbits and things like that." He realized that they were, in fact, having a pleasant conversation somewhere other than the dining table.

"Any fox hunting?"

Brendan smiled, long fingers smoothing Jean-Luc's mane. "Fox hunting is for gentry nobler than my family, I fear, Beast. We hunted for things we could actually eat. Fox hunting is for nobles with nothing better to do with their time, no offense meant." Beast smiled, a truly amused and scorn-free smile that reached his warm brown eyes. Brendan ducked his head so Beast wouldn't see his amazed
confusion.
"There is none taken. Fox hunting was more about the hunter's skill than about actually catching the animal anyway."

"So I hear. What other sorts of animals are in your forest?" His question rang with curiosity.

Beast scratched his cheek-fur, idly. "Deer, boar, hawks and merlins…all sorts of fauna. There used to be wolves, but now I see them rarely. Lions, too."

"Lions?" Brendan asked, incredulously.

"That's right. Kings and lords used to import them from Africa and let them loose, so they could hunt them. This was all very, very long ago, of course. Before my time. They're long since extinct. I doubt the winters agreed with them."

"Huh." Brendan thought about that for a moment, giving his horse one last pat before unhitching the stall door and joining the Beast on the cobblestones. He tossed his hair back over his shoulder, smiled brightly and was just about to suggest that they go indoors for a hot lunch, when a shadow passed over Beast's face.

"What's wrong?" he asked, a worry line creased between his eyebrows.

Beast's breath puffed in the cold air like a bull's, his piercing human eyes set in that inhuman face focusing suddenly and unforgiving on Brendan's upturned face.

"I will make one thing clear. The only reason you are here is because of your sister. That is why the road let you in; because you are to serve as my bridge to Beauty. Do you understand? You are here to witness my fine hospitality, to be convinced that I prove no danger to her. She will come here and, in time, grow to love me. That's why the snow won't let you leave. That, boy, is your one purpose in being here. We are not, God forbid, friends. Do not for a moment think that you are a welcome guest outside of your capacity as intermediary. Is this clear?"

Stung, Brendan stared at Beast gape-mouthed. Where did this mood swing come from? I didn't say anything! he thought in bewilderment. He began to open his mouth, intending to snap back something cruel. He fully intended to say, 'You're a monster. My sister could never love you.' But I could, said a silk-whisper thought in the back of his mind, so shocking him that he couldn't find his voice.

"Don't forget it." Beast seemed to take Brendan's silence as an assent, and swept past the stunned young man into the open courtyard.

"Go back inside. All this talk of game has made me hungry. I'm going hunting." That said, Beast turned his back and walked away, snow crunching under his heavy, clawed feet.

***


Beast watched the hare warily make its way through the brush, deeming it too small and unworthy for good hunting. The hare caught scent of him, froze in terror, then dashed off out of sight, a flurry of snow kicked up by its feet. Beast prowled on all fours under the still, watchful trees, ignoring the
raucous scolding of crows and squirrels. He found what he was looking for: deer tracks. Wide, deep ones. Probably a buck, weighed down by his antlers. Nostrils flaring, Beast began to track.

*It's not like he didn't know that I wanted his sister here.* No, stop thinking about that. Just concentrate on the hunt.

There. More tracks. Follow those, so silent that the snow even doesn't creak under the weight. Flex sharp, thick, strong claws. Muscles tense like coiled springs. Liquid strength and power.

*It's just that he looked so hurt. Stop. Thinking. About. It. What do I care if his precious little feelings got hurt? I don't care at all. God, I need to kill something. I'm so tense, for some reason…*

There! Ahead of that grove …a young buck. Eight pointer; not bad, really. Probably just got kicked out of his herd by the lead buck and hasn't found his own does yet. Creep oh so quietly around the tree…watching. Waiting. Anticipation rippling through anxious muscles.

*He is pleasant to talk to…* Oh, Lord. *Keep your mind on the task at hand…* Well, he is. *It's been so long since there's been someone to talk to…* I hate being maudlin. Stop it. I find my solitude soothing. Much better than people always wanting something from me.

The buck moved, nibbling the tips off of a hawthorn bush, slender foreleg poised delicately. Stalk closer, freeze still as he looks this way…as completely still as a stone.

*And just what is it with him that makes me want to talk to him? He's so damned sincere about everything. And he looks at me, really looks. Not just staring over my shoulder. Like he's not afraid of me. And he's always smiling at me for one thing or another…and the way he smiled at me in the stables…Damn it! Just stop.*

Now…while his head is down. Now! Now!

Beast sprang. The young buck jumped to run, but wasn't nearly quick enough for the swift fangs and claws of the experienced hunter.

His anger and tension much sated, feeling entirely primal and savage, Beast began the long trek back to the castle, alone but for the dead deer slung over his shoulder and his own traitorous thoughts.

***

Brendan stood in front of the library doors, his hands resting on wood that felt old and warm and alive. "I said I wouldn't go in today," he whispered mournfully. "I promised." *And why should I honor that promise? After the things he said, it'd be a very satisfying act of defiance to disobey.*

That's all it will be, Brendan knew, turning away from the tempting doors and making his way down the huge echoing hall. An act. There's no point to it. *The problem is that I don't stand up for myself, oui? I should have said something. I haven't wanted to hit someone so badly since my first week at school. I'm extremely sick of being called 'boy' all the damned time.* He sighed. Well, I can see the Library tomorrow. *That's something to look forward to.*

All the way, Brendan absentmindedly tugged at any doors he passed. All were locked. He felt very warm in his thick boots and sweater. He looked ahead and could just see the main entryway and stair up ahead, when he noticed an extraordinary door he could have sworn wasn't there the first time he'd been down this passageway with Beast. It had a brass handle exquisitely carved to look like an eye, and tiny squares of glass set in the dark red wood so it glittered like a beacon fire.
Somehow Brendan knew it wouldn't be locked.

The door opened into a large round room that clearly hadn't been entered in years, cobwebs breaking and quivering as Brendan passed them. It was very cold, like a window had been left open, though there were no windows he could see at all. There were six tall mirrors set up all around the curved wall, each one shattered to pieces, the edges blackened with age. There was, upon stepping further in, he saw, one small half-moon window near the ceiling, and the light spilled down into the center of the room, where something gleamed and shone brightly in Brendan's eyes.

The room had no furniture save for a small plinth in the very center, and on the plinth was a handheld mirror. Brendan approached, his splintered reflection repeated dully a thousand times around the room, and picked up the mirror, turning it over in his hands. In stark contrast to the room, the mirror was warm to the touch. Aside from its unusual warmth, it was a very ordinary silver mirror. It looked like new. No cobwebs touched it.

Brendan held its handle and looked at his reflection. The mirror…it felt good in his hands. Very good. It seemed to fill him with a warmth and comfort that suffused through him and made his skin tingle. It felt like a warm glow in the nursery fireplace when he'd been a child; it felt like his mother's softness. It felt like sunlight through the classroom window; it felt like learning something new. It felt like reading indoors on a rainy day. It felt like playing the perfect song on a violin. It felt like Kieran's hair. The mirror felt like…home.

The mirror clattered on the table as Brendan dropped it, alarmed. A magic mirror, he thought.

Cautiously, Brendan again picked up the mirror. This time, it still felt good to hold, but not with the same engulfing euphoria. Sensory memories didn't rush to overwhelm him.

Well, he sighed inwardly, I did say this morning I wished for a mirror. Maybe I was meant to find this. And it wouldn't be like stealing, since I'm not taking it anywhere outside the castle, and it's just sitting here in this room. He hesitated a moment, then, feeling thoroughly seduced, he put the mirror in his breeches pocket and pulled his sweater down over the handle.

He spared one look around the cold, broken room before leaving. He pushed the glittering door shut and started to walk away towards the stairway that would take him to his room. Brendan glanced back over his shoulder, and a chill ran up his spine.

The door had disappeared.
In Which There is Much Agitation

Brendan poked irritably at his fragrant venison with a silver filigree fork. The dinner was fantastic—all of the food had been—and possibly tasted twice as delicious since the main course had been freshly caught and killed by the host himself. Across the long table sat the hunter himself, looking inordinately pleased with himself. Seeming enormously satisfied with life in general, the Beast appeared to be savoring his meal; occasionally making small, appreciative noises and ignoring Brendan's existence altogether. This irked Brendan considerably, to the point where he could not force the food past his gritted teeth.

Having nicely gotten rid of his aggressions and rather unexpected tensions, the Beast was poised in his chair in the manner of one who is enjoying their own joke far too much. Brendan seethed, silently.

Now, what the young Frenchman meant to say was "This is quite exquisite", or perhaps, "Could you pass me the salt, please?", but what instead came sharp and fast from between his lips, was this:

"Allez a l'enfer." There was a moment of silence, in which the Beast nearly dropped his fork right into the gravy. He looked at Brendan with round eyes.

". . . I'm sorry, what?"

Brendan stared back at him, anger momentarily derailed by the realization of what he had just uttered to his host in such an acidic tone.

"Uh. . . Pass the. . .salt." He paused. "Please," he added. The Beast continued to stare his guest down.

"...Did you just tell me to go to hell?" Brendan was not fooled by the apparent indifference of Beast's tone. He bit his lip and shifted his eyes, as he was prone to do when lying.

"Er. No."

The Beast's eyes narrowed, and he said in a clipped tone, "Then perhaps you'd care to speak louder, boy."

Brendan's eyes flashed. He was immediately out of his chair, and the echo of his hands slamming down on the table and the fine dinnerware clattering reverberated around the hall. The young man's back and shoulders were stiff with dignity.

"My name," he uttered through clenched teeth, "is Brendan Mattheus-Etienne d'Aumale."

"If I had wished to know your full name," the Beast growled back, "I would have asked for it." They glared at each other. "Boy," he added, for good measure. Brendan's eye twitched.

"Did you ever possess good manners, or have you always been a self-centered aristocratic bastard?"

His light eyes flashed blue-crystal with temper, stray strands of chestnut lashing angrily near his face. Beast was on his feet without thinking, mirroring Brendan's pose, feral teeth bared. It was only then, staring down at Brendan's anger-flushed face, that Beast had enough clarity of mind to be taken aback. Not, he assured himself, by the boy's sudden angry allure, but by the fact that he wasn't a milquetoast after all, as Beast had thought. The young man was showing some backbone; quite astonishing, really.
"You assault my manners, when I have been a gracious host; given you meals, a room, my hospitality…? Not to mention that I refrained from eating you!" he bellowed down the length of the great table.

Brendan's eyes shot daggers, and he straightened with fists clenched at his sides. "I am not entirely certain that was a courtesy," he said curtly, and began to walk for the Dining Hall door. Beast approached him with animal swiftness, bearing down on the boy's smaller frame and stood looming between him and the door.

"You," Beast snarled, "are sorely pushing the limits of my patience!" He nearly spat, eyes narrowed to slits that glinted deep brown from under the shadow of his brow. "Never have I seen such ungratefulness, and from a creature as unworthy as you-"

His white, even teeth bared in feral rage, the muscles in Brendan's arm tensed. Blindly flung, but true, Brendan punched the Beast square on his broad, leonine nose.

Beast instinctively snatched the boy's wrist between his great padded fingers, holding it painfully tight. Though the bridge of his nose stung quite fiercely, he could do nothing but gape at the furious young man before him, who did not struggle against his grip. Brendan stood his ground, chest rising and falling with each breath. Whether the labored breath came from his attack or from preventing another one, Beast could not be sure; but his shock at the boy's assault curtailed his anger, for the moment. Beast silently assessed the boy. Brendan's pulse raced against his fingertips, and his keen animal senses heard the sound of his heart pounding in his chest. His skin was flushed dark with anger, his eyes seemed fever-bright. The scents of the boy's fear, anger, and something else quite intangible came to Beast's notice. They reminded him, oddly, of his earlier hunt. He became intensely uncomfortable at the boy's nearness and the feel of his smooth skin trapped under his claws.

Brendan refused to look away from Beast's pole-axed glower, and kept his chin held stiffly upward. There was a long moment, and he could not tell how many long minutes or how few fleeting seconds ticked away while they glared and breathed and…stood…at each other. They were very close, and Brendan could not tell if he was flushed with anger, or if it was Beast's own heat washing over his body. Brendan's wrist ached, but he ignored it and kept staunchly meeting Beast's eyes, a difficult task in itself, to say the least. After another moment of waiting for Beast to retaliate, or hit him back, or do something, he dredged up his voice.

Shooting a pointed look at the entrapped wrist still in the Beast's clutches, Brendan enunciated bitingly, "Are you quite finished yet?" Beast continued his glare for another long, painful moment, before pushing Brendan's arm from him and leaning ever so slightly forward to the boy. It took all of Brendan's stubbornness not to shrink back at the dangerous, shuttered expression in Beast's eyes. "Yes. We are." And with the finality of coffins being nailed, he turned and stalked silently from the hall.

Brendan stood uselessly, not moving to rub his sore arm. He turned his head and looked intently at the carpet, trying very hard not to analyze the muddled emotions that chaotically eddied through him.

***

The greenhouse air was warm and oppressive as Brendan padded through the garden. He paid little heed to the multitude of colors, or how the glossy leaves caught the moonlight through the glass ceiling and made the flowers glow luminous and eerie. His boots made nearly no sound on the cobble path, light-toed as a cat. Finding the small reed rimmed pool, Brendan stretched out next to it.
on the loam, dabbling his fingers in the night-black water with a world-weary sigh. He had returned
to his bedroom and changed clothes, and now wore a comfortable green jerkin over a loose shirt the
color of wheat. He'd paused a moment before taking the mirror as well. It pressed against his hip
uncomfortably under his belt. He propped his head on his arm and shut his eyes.

"You look rather knackered, mate. Come t' ask more questions?" Brendan opened his eyes. The
white koi circled the pool once, then looked at Brendan past its fishy whiskers with an amused
intelligence that had no place on a fish. The black omnipofish shortly surfaced and swam a loop
around the white, but said nothing.

"Oh. Hello. I wonder if you have a moment to talk?" Brendan sat up, legs crossed.

"S not like we 'ave appointments to get to, mate." The white fish chuckled wetly. "Had a bit of a
fallin' out wiv the Master, aye? Thumped him a good one, ho ho!" Brendan looked away.

"I didn't come to talk about that. I wanted to ask you about this." He pulled the fine mirror from his
belt and held it out for the fish's inspection.

"Cor! Got the mirror, 'e has!" exclaimed the white fish to his dark companion.

"So 'e has," remarked the black fish, unsurprised. Brendan pulled back the mirror and looked into it.

"I know there's something…special about it. I can feel it whenever I touch it." He thought about his
next words, mindful of the truth/lies nature of the aquatic prophets when asked direct questions.
"How is it used?"

"Nothin' easier. That snarky enchantress left it here, all them years ago. All you gotta do is hold it in
yer hand, arsk it to show you something, look at wot it shows you, and Bob's your uncle!" Brendan's
brow creased with confusion.

"What does my uncle have to do with—"

"Anyways," the white fish interrupted, "it's a right handy little thing. Doesn't always show you what
you expect to see, though." Brendan nodded, slipping the mirror back under in his belt, saving his
curiosity at using it for another time.

"Thank you."

"Polite lil thing, in't he?" commented the white to the black. To Brendan it said, "You're welcome,
mate. Anythin' else we kin do for ya?" Brendan looked down at his hands before answering. His
voice was barely audible.

"Could you tell me why…why he…and why I…" Brendan gave up, looking at the pair of koi in
silent appeal.

The hitherto silent black fish now spoke. "Look, 's all very simple. You kin do one of two things." A
small fishy eye fixed itself on Brendan. "You kin go back home, get yer sister packed up and send
her off 'ere in your place. She'll stay 'ere for a couple o' months, an fall in love wiv the Beast."

"And then the curse will be broken," Brendan sighed. Perhaps that would be for the best, after all…It
was what Beast wanted, he knew that for a fact.

"Maybe so, maybe no." The black fish looked smug. It was a disturbing thing to see a smug fish.

Brendan cocked his head to the side. "Why do you say that?"
"I'm only sayin' that the curse is a double-sided affair, is all." Does that mean that Beast may not fall in love with Beauty, as he has intended? Brendan tried to ask another question, but the omnipofish talked over him. "So ye could do that."

Brendan fell silent. *I do not want that.* "What is my other option?"

"You kin stay 'ere for a bit, an' see what happens." The black fish gave him a conspiratorial nod, which was impressive considering it didn't have a neck, and dove beneath the water.

"Well, no use whinging, mate, 'swot I say." The remaining fish swam a little figure-eight in front of Brendan. "It'll be a new day tomorrow. Go have a sleep, you'll feel more chipper in the mornin'." Brendan nodded and stood up slowly, legs unfolding. He looked down at the pond with a small smile.

"Thanks again for your help. Good night." He turned to leave.

"One more thing, mate." Brendan turned and looked at the white koi in askance. "Bloody good punch! Just "cuff", right on the snoot! Ha!"

***

Brendan wriggled beneath the clean white covers, glad of the fireplace's warmth and the soft sanity of his bed. He curled his knees up to his chest and pondered. *What is this strange…affection I have for him? It just does not make a bit of sense.* Brendan thought of the Beast's cruel and angry words, his unpredictable rages, his frightening appearance; horns and fangs and claws. *Though he is not… ugly,* whispered a silky, familiar voice in the back of his mind. *Not ugly at all. Merely…strange. And interesting.* Brendan firmly put a stop to his unsettling inner discourse. *Like that. It wouldn't matter. It'd be foolish of me to fall… to…fall…* Again he tried to quiet his brain. *He hates me anyhow.*

In the firelight, the rose on the nightstand seemed a glowing ember in its small glass vase. Brendan watched it flicker with shadow and light until sleep grew too seductive to ignore.

***

A hand.

Fingers skidding under the sheets on the thin skin of his ribs, dipping down to his waist, tracing veins up over his arm. Ticklish soft they skimmed like water bugs along the curve of his spine. Brendan sighed in drowsy appreciation as the hand spread flat over his side, warm palm pressed against the hipbone. Fingers stroked gently there, Brendan pressing his face into the pillow at the teasing touch with a contented murmur. As the hand moved again to his spine Brendan pushed up against it like a cat, skin-hungry and lonely for touch.

A hand… *What?* Brendan woke up. It took about three seconds for him to drag himself out of warm semi-consciousness to realize that yes, there was indeed a hand touching him--rather intimately at that--and no, it was not his own hand.

Still half-asleep and muzzy, Brendan asked, "Wha' are you doing?" in a rough morning voice.

The hand snatched away from Brendan's lower back as if burned. Brendan turned his head and in
the semi-darkness, saw nothing but a slight indentation in the bed, and realized that the hand had belonged to an invisible. A fluttery, sick feeling twisted deep in his stomach as he lurched fully into wakefulness. The invisible did nothing; the depression on the mattress did not stir. It seemed to be waiting for...rejection?

Or permission?

In the ensuing silence, Brendan's manners and morality had a battle for dominance. The former suppressed his instinctive reaction of shouting angrily at the servant, and the latter curbed the temptation to pretend like he was asleep and let the servant go on with whatever it was doing. Instead he slowly sat up, pulling the sheets tight around his body, and drew his knees up to his chest. He looked at where he thought the servant was, biting his lip.

He said, "I'm sorry," his voice little more than a whisper. He looked away, hair falling over his eyes.

The servant slid out of the bed a minute later, Brendan surreptitiously watching the covers slide away from the invisible form, and after that there was no sign of anyone at all.

Brendan curled in on himself as he had not done since he was a child, knees to his chin, and hid his face in the soft palace pillow. He was glad that the servant had left, but at the same time, wished that it had stayed.

***

Neither gentleman said a word of greeting to the other at breakfast the next morning. The servants had prepared a delectable light meal of grapes, brie with fresh bread, and a lovely walnut and endive green salad, all of which went mostly uneaten save for a few bites of each dish. The atmosphere was thick with guarded tension. The silence between the two was so taut it could be cut with a limp endive.

Between bites of food, Beast sourly watched his guest, who was studiously not looking back. The boy had dark circles under his eyes, and he flinched whenever a servant brushed by to pour him more vin' d'orange. He felt a reluctant stab of hospitable obligation, and figured he'd probably better try to make some conversation.

"Did you sleep well last night?" His tone was forcibly light and civil, uncomfortably tenuous. His fangs flashed as he spoke.

Brendan's head snapped up and he stared at the Beast with huge, round eyes. Beast was perplexed to see a faint blush spread itself across the boy's face before he ducked his head back down, restlessly shoving walnuts around his plate. His voice was strained. "Fine, thank you." They both picked at their food. Brendan coughed, and felt that as a privileged guest, courtesy demanded something more must be said. "...And you?"

"Fine."

"Er...how is your nose? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"I think I'll survive." It was so wickedly acerbic and dry that it nearly left welts on the ears.

The empty quiet that fell between them was so palpable and oppressive that the prick of loneliness suddenly and sharply struck the silent pair, and at the very same moment, both gentlemen acutely missed each other's conversation. But neither one said a word.
In Which There is a Discovery

It had been difficult to breathe lately, the young Frenchman reflected, absently running his fingers in long, firm strokes down Jean-Luc's neck. Even as the oppressive fall of snow had dissipated and the clear cleanliness that characterized country winters had begun to take hold of the castle, in every corridor and each dark hall, in every square and still-fragrant garden, Brendan had come to feel more and more restricted.

He knew the castle better every day. There was no way he could begin to understand the magic, how it worked, why it changed the corridors or the doorways therein, or at what whim it did so. He was, however, beginning to develop an understanding of how to communicate with it, and show it proper reverence but also ease, and in return it did not elongate hallways ridiculously or multiply stairs when he walked up them.

It had been fully a week since the Awkwardness had begun. He stolidly refused to think that it could have been sparked by anything but the occurrence at breakfast, after the 'go to hell and pass the salt' incident. He had tried to bridge the gap between himself and his host, tried to offer up a nicety to open a conversation, to ease the tension. Each attempt had been shot down.

Then things had gotten more than terse; they'd become downright taciturn. He rarely spoke to his host, Beast having become even more unapproachable than he had previously been, which was fairly impressive. After a while, Brendan had become tired of constantly quelling the urge to cry out The library! You promised me you'd show me the library! and so had removed himself from the Beast's presence as much as he could.

It was the middle of the afternoon. The sky was a piercing shade of slate blue, and the sun was pale and edging ridiculously slowly, it seemed, towards the horizon. The forest was just beginning to turn an even shade of brown. Everything was still. Brendan sighed, absentley leaning his forehead against his horse's muzzle.

Jean-Luc snuffled at his cheek, and warm breath that smelled of hay and oats gusted across Brendan's chin. He was oddly reminded of the invisible servants. Well, a single invisible servant, at any rate. He felt relieved that no further advances had been made on his person by anything that lacked visible form, but at the same time he felt even more isolated, having turned the servant away.

At least it had been somebody. Maybe not much of anybody—maybe they had forgotten themselves by now, after so many centuries of being no one. But at least they had been warm, and, despite appearances, solid. At least they had had a pulse.

He scowled viciously at the door at the stall as he slid its lacquered door shut. Wonder if Beast has a pulse. Wonder if he has any heart at all.

"Ordure," he mumbled, without really meaning it all that much, and turned to start back for the side entryway Beast had shown him so many days previous.

His thoughts turned to the mirror that sat under a small table-runner rendering of the Capture of the Unicorn, the enchanted mirror that he had not yet dared to examine or try to work. Three times now he had held it: When awaking and feeling particularly upset or vulnerable or angry, he would slip out of his bed and move to the mahogany end table by one of his windows, and pick up the mirror and cradle it in his fingers.

It was always cold to the touch for a brief instant, and then warmed to him. It was comforting.
He had the niggling feeling that maybe he was trying to replace one magical entity with another. Similarly to his abstinence from Beast's company, he had forgone seeing the omniscient koi who lived in the garden pool since the day they suggested he leave. He really just didn't want to think about it.

And that was the immediate problem, he reckoned. I don't know what I want to do, and I don't want to think about it. But I won't know until I do. So what do I do?

About twelve steps down the hallway with the small, high, round windows and plush green runners, his path was blocked at the corner by the large, velour-swathed form of the Beast.

The two men seemed to take a few moments each to register the others' presence. Their faces then slipped into masks that were quickly becoming polished and stiffly polite. Beast stared balefully and with detached acknowledgment at Brendan, while the young man looked back with resigned dignity and what he hoped was icy indifference, but what in fact came across more as melancholy.

"My Lord," Brendan said, with much the same tone he would have used were he saying out loud to no one in particular "A tree" or "Thursday". Beast barely rose himself up a few inches, and there was a curl in his ears that was a telltale sign of barely reigned-in patience.

"Boy," he responded, voice deep and rough, as it usually was when they met now, like at the beginning. There had been a time, they both knew, recently; a space in the middle where it had been less so.

"The snow is still deep," Brendan said, beginning to feel a self conscious hum of adrenaline rush through him as he thought of the snow caught and melting in his hair, along his breeches and most likely clinging to the tops and sides and bottoms of his boots. He was probably tracking it everywhere.

Beast had indeed noticed, but focused on Brendan's face. "Yes, but at least it has stopped. I am sure, soon, the roads will open and travel will be possible. Thankfully." Brendan felt a familiar seizing in his chest. It's called a temper, a little part of him whispered. Or are you just hurt?

Beast watched with bemusement as Brendan's chest and shoulders rose, his eyes growing slightly darker and his breath turning into a long, seething inhalation. He didn't let it go.

"Something to say?" Beast prodded, voice threatening but provocative. Brendan's jaw tensed, slightly. His teeth were clenched, and now grinding slowly.

There was a terse pause before Beast drew up his shoulders and lowered his brow slightly, beginning to walk past his guest. Stupid hallway should have known better than to set us at each other's paths, anyway, he thought grimly.

"You told me you'd show me the library," Brendan said, voice edged with a despair that was raw and confused, but very adamant. It stopped the Beast in his stride.

Brendan felt immediately dazed, staring with mild shock and a removed sense of reality at the wood paneled wall, listening to the Beast's stillness, then the soft ruffle of sleek fur and heavy cloth as he turned. Brendan did not move.

Beast stared with some incredulity and fascination at Brendan's back- his defeated posture, shoulders, his hair straying from its ribbon to catch on the side of his throat. From his towering viewpoint, the boy looked very diminished, but he radiated warmth. Embarrassment, Beast noted, and more. . . He took a very long time to try and form a proper response, before he said, "I said no such thing, nor
made any promise. Nor would I have."

Brendan's eyes widened slightly and quickly turned around.

"I said," Beast continued with a maddeningly apathetic tone, all cold logic, "that I would allow you to see it. I never said I would escort you."

Brendan wanted to die. It was true. If he thought hard enough about it, it was true. So why had he created a false memory? Or rather, remembered falsely...Because you wanted it, he realized, feeling sick and wretched. Because you wanted him to take you there.

"You're right," he said. "Je suis désolé." He was sorry. He was a lot sorrier than he could possibly explain to the Beast. He began to move forward, careful to keep his head up, and straight, and not look back.

"I will take you there now, if you wish," said the Beast, and instantly regretted it. Brendan spun around so quickly he looked like he was going to fall over.

"What, honestly?" the boy asked.

Beast scowled a little. "Yes, honestly." The odd pang of—tenderness? Sympathy? Something else, but what was the word?—he had felt dissipated quickly. He began to stride with hunched back and slightly bared teeth down the hall.

"That's so...so..." Brendan was searching.

"What?" Beast asked, thinking kind? Admirable? Forgiving?

"Unexpected of you," Brendan finished, sounding thoroughly surprised, but intensely delighted.

"It will be for the best, I suppose," Beast said acidly. "You can read up and finally gain some degree of understanding about the matters which you try to debate."

Brendan blinked, and bristled with anger. It wasn't true anger, though. Something prevented him from feeling the fervently mad edge he usually possessed when arguing with his host. I missed this, he thought, and then understood. The hallway was shifting, sending them down short flights of stairs and the runners were purple now, not green. The wood was oak, not cherry. "This coming from a man been shut up in his castle for so long he doesn't even know the vernacular any longer," he jibed with a façade of anger.

Beast stopped, however, dead in his tracks and turned with frightful ease to fix Brendan with an expression that was incapable of being deciphered.

Oh, Brendan thought faintly, what have I said? His tone had been light enough that his words shouldn't have caused such a reaction. He couldn't fathom what would have cause such a look…but then Beast never was easy to read.

"What did you say?" Beast asked, and his voice was more liquid than gravely, still dark, still impenetrable and allowing no insight to his mood or motive.

"I...I said," Brendan started, racing over every word they'd exchanged in the past four days. "I said," he continued, or rather, began again, but the Beast cut him off.

"Never mind. It was clearly nothing." He turned and began forward. The lack of anger or reprimand in his voice gave Brendan pause.
So moody, he thought, and almost stumbled over his feet to keep up. They stopped in front of the same door from a week previous, wrought iron lions grinning their black sideways grins, paws poised over the great handles set in the doors' centers. His breath caught unintentionally with anticipation.

Beast wanted to say 'don't touch anything', but refrained. That would be a rather absurd thing to say going into a library. He pushed the doors open and strode in, forcing himself to shrug off the strange feelings that arose when the boy had called him a man and not a beast. He didn't even seem to notice that he had said it.

Brendan followed, swallowing his excitement. Books, he couldn't wait, surely he could find something new, something to help him clear his...

All thoughts and hopes were suddenly silenced. He found himself slack jawed and still with awe. The library was substantially more then expansive. It was monolithic. It was staggering. Beast's deep timbre was touched with amusement.

"Problem?" he whispered, and it carried like a dark warm wind to Brendan's ears.

"No," the boy choked out. "No, no problems." He took a few dazed steps forward, afraid to turn around for the fact that there might be more books behind him. What was before him was more than enough for a lifetime. The ceiling was made up of gold filigree panels and wooden bulbs that hung downward, seeming to pour out natural light, even though there was no way they could have. There were high windows that were huge and round, their panes were colored blue and peach and wedged between thick elm frames. The light that poured through them illuminated the thousands upon thousands of books, set into built-in shelves that were floor to ceiling.

The room seemed the size of a theater. The painted ceiling was probably sixty feet overhead, Brendan reckoned, and the room was slightly longer than it was wide, probably forty feet by seventy and…

"It's breathtaking," he said, feeling ready to convulse with absolute joy, eyes cast upwards, hungrily and reverently running the length and heights of the walls. "It's completely wonderful."

For a very long moment, Beast stared at the young man; bathed in cold winter sunlight and glowing with even more than that. The blatant thirst, the lust and appreciation for knowledge, for literature, was suddenly more than a dinnertime amusement. It was a tangible energy his young guest exuded. He was, for a few long moments, as Brendan began to pace dazedly in no particular direction, entirely captivated. Very few things had held his attention so raptly or for so long since the fiftieth or so year of his curse, and the feeling of wonderment was, by now, an alien one. Yet he knew it when he felt it. It was the same feeling he had still, occasionally, when seeing his roses. Beautiful, fragile, eternal. A comfort.

Keeping himself tightly composed, he moved with broad strides to one of the bookshelves, an enormously long ladder moving itself out of his way. Using a single claw, he gently edged a book clad with creased brown leather, large and clearly hand bound, from where it was wedged between two relatively similarly sized but more formally encased volumes.

"This is an epic poem you may be interested in. It is very old. It was given to me by an elder brother who had been traveling in very northern regions of the world, where the Norsemen live." When did I last think of Barnabie?, he wondered, a vague image of a tall young man with ginger hair and eyes the color of his own carrying a large flat book lingering at the back of his vision. "It may be ill-suited to your tastes. It is about violent men. But it is greatly interesting."
Violent men, Brendan thought, is a subject I am wholly interested in. The young man fought a blush clearing his throat a little and mentally kicking himself. His voice was uneven and husky when he managed to speak. "What is it called?"

"Beowulf," Beast replied, offering his guest the volume with a slight extension of his arm. Brendan raised both hands to accept it, looking up through his lashes at the Beast. Brendan had almost forgotten that he could feel glad to be in his host's company. He smiled tentatively, but genuinely thankful. Beast did not smile back, but his eyes were not hard, or shadowed. They caught the light and Brendan thought, Honey. They're the color of honey over clean, dark wood. He looked away, up towards the windows.

"Thank you. Truly, thank you, this is more than I ever expected. This is..." He smiled. "I will not feel so lonely any more."

Beast blinked, surprised despite himself. Lonely? He had not thought once that—but then, Brendan seemed surprised at himself as well. He looked self consciously downward a moment, then back at Beast, who merely regarded him silently. There was a way the light clung to the boy's eyelashes that made Beast refrain from speaking.

He merely padded to an immensely large, red chair, studded with small brass bolts, and sat. Brendan hesitated. "May I...bring books back to my room?"

Beast nodded, strong chin resting on the back of his palm, the tuft of mane on his chin splayed over his fingers. "Of course," he rumbled, and closed his eyes. He seemed to be listening to something only he could hear, and Brendan paused, holding the book against his chest. "When you've finished something, a servant will doubtless return the book for you, so you needn't worry about that."

"I think I would like to return the books myself," Brendan said, taking the moment to scrutinize Beast closely, the shape of his nose and cheekbones, long mouth and heavy eyelids lined with thick, dusky gold fur, that were somehow much more striking than just mere eyelashes. Well, generally speaking, everything about the Beast was more striking than anything Brendan had ever seen before.

He took a deep breath that was not quite steadying and looked away, as Beast spoke again and opened his eyes.

"You may take that back once you've started climbing to reach material, but all right." Brendan grinned a little, looking at Beast sidelong.

"It will take me quite a long while to need to begin using the ladders, my Lord Beast." Beast stared at him hard, then bared his teeth, in a way that was almost like a real smile.

"It would, though your nature is so contrary that you will doubtless choose some erratic way of picking books, and this will probably lead you to the ladders much sooner than you would ever actually need to."

Brendan sat the large text on a long oak table that was highly polished, and ran parallel to the wall. He moved to ladder and began to climb it and Beast rolled his eyes. Brendan smiled broadly, stopping seven rungs up.

"An extensive collection of old French poetry! I didn't realize you were such a sentimentalist." Beast snorted and did not offer a reply. Brendan began to climb higher, and reached up for a book, but wobbled perilously. Beast had tensed in his seat.

"Don't fall," he said, and it was a strict command, not a gentle warning.
Brendan didn't fall. He merely shot the Beast a sharp look of annoyance. "I'm not going to," he said, but began to climb down, relieving the great shelf of one more small, blue volume before he dropped deftly and with some grace from the third rung onto the carpeted floor.

"If I might, I would take these back to my room and change. . .I was thinking of walking the outer gardens a bit. I—if you would walk with me—" but Beast was out of his chair and walking, hunched and yet still strangely regal, mane swaying shaggily along the line of his shoulders, catching blond in the light and dark sienna in the shadow, contrasting against the dye of his cloak. Brendan pulled his eyes politely up, focusing on the chisel of cheekbone, sloping into jaw, the curve and flat of nose, plane of forehead. It was unaccountably difficult to tear his eyes away.

"I may. I have traversed the gardens too many times for them to hold much fascination for me, of course, but I may. Do not wait for me."

He left the room, and Brendan murmured to the books in the walls and the cavernous ceiling, "Of course not."

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Later, Brendan could not help but fancy himself as feeling very primal as he strode through the snow, along high banks and buttes of what could have been fountains or stairs or daises, the strange shapes and planes that made up the outer gardens. They were at a raised level, compared to the rose gardens and small courtyards lined with hedges that immediately circled the palace. Elevated and symmetrical, the outer courtyards had no walls and were separated by low shrubs, now covered with snow. They fed and fell into each other, each a strange geometrical shape or intricately designed maze of walkway. One, he found, had been paved with great slate squares that had been placed into the shape of an ouroboros, and he had followed the scales of the great serpent only halfway— from the middle of its back to the point where it ate its own tail—before entering into the next garden.

The Beast had not accompanied him, nor had Brendan seen his host since they had been in the library together. He had sat with the great volume the Beast had given him, and stroked the supple, well-oiled cover for a while before actually opening it. He had thought it strange it should be in such beautiful condition, having been shelved and unread for so very long, but chalked it up to either magic, or the attendance on the book's behalf by an invisible servant.

The poem itself was intensely captivating, and indeed very violent. The culture of the Norsemen was so foreign, and intriguing, that had the story itself not been as well crafted and gripping as it was, Brendan still would have been loathe to put it down.

Beast had not mentioned that the book was annotated, by hand, by a Frenchman. It was quite fascinating.

The book, at least what he had read of it, had left him feeling a bit wild and wanting to prowl, so he did. The garden he found himself in resembled a wedding cake: huge rectangles of white marble layered upon each other, each slightly smaller than the one before. It formed stairs that went up, fifteen steps, and then the top was a blanket of pure white, untouched and seemingly solid. He stood on the fourteenth step and looked over it.
The light was failing now. He though of the north, wondered at how it would be to live in a place where all year was this, this illusion of crushed diamonds scattered across white velvet, to catch the sun. He walked around the perimeter of the final layer of marble, until he faced the palace, the sun setting on its other side.

He smiled, then. He was excited for dinner, to sit with Beast and talk about the poem, about the gardens. He was excited for after dinner, to play again. He had not touched the Music Room since their quarrel, and now felt pure elation at the thought of playing the harpsichord. He absently touched his cheek, where a scar would have rested had it not been for Beast's timely and thorough care.

"He didn't tell me out and out that I'm a pest, today," he said to the expanse of white. "He didn't really say anything cruel to me at all." He smiled frankly, then, a victorious grin, and began to stride with great, ridiculous Viking steps across the platform.

He did not think of the mirror, or of home, or of the rose that sat in his bedroom, for the first time in days. He squinted into the last light, peeking over the ridges and eves of the castle, enjoying it despite the fact that it carried no warmth with it.

He was about to laugh, but then the ice broke, and the light was gone.

At first, he felt nothing stillness. Everything was so unbelievably cold that he wondered if he was actually feeling anything at all. Then he felt very stupid, for having not realized that it was a frozen pool he was stepping across, not a dais. Then he felt intensely afraid, because he had no breath in his lungs at all and couldn't find the bottom with his booted feet.

There was a beautiful quality to the way light filtered in through the hole he had created. Snow shimmered like mist in the water, which was dark and blue. It was like the entire sky was gray but for a single spot where he could see heaven.

Then he couldn't see anything at all.

There was a muted crashing noise, more a cracking, like something very heavy being split open and shoved aside. Then there was the sound of moving water.

Something was pulling him. He felt a hard grip, viselike, around his collar and thought, somewhat feebly, if that's Death, I'd rather he went away. I haven't finished the poem yet.

Then there was an even worse cold around him, a crushing weight on his stomach.

Brendan curled in on himself and coughed up water. It burbled past his lips in large, guilty gulps, melting the snow when it hit and freezing quickly again.

A low threatening growl permeated all of the air around him, and the words "Stupid" and "Boy" and "Trouble" and again "Stupid" tried to register in his mind, but they couldn't quite.

He was dazedly aware of being very cold, and then a huge shadow moved over him, enveloped him, and he felt warmer than he had. Beast growled, very low, and threatened, "If you fall sick again, damned if I'm allowing the servants to see to it. You've spent half your stay here sick, it will serve you right if you were stupid enough to…"

Brendan coughed and tried to say something, but all that came out was a low, weak moan.

Beast picked him up, and moved with a hunter's speed and forward momentum back towards the castle. He slammed the door when he opened it and it thoughtfully slammed itself shut behind him, to remain in keeping with his mood. He moved with blind determination through the halls of his palace,
his prison, trusting the doors to arrange themselves as was necessary.

They did, and Beast carried Brendan into the guest room without pause, and roared "Hot water!"

The tub was filled almost instantaneously.

He hesitated before beginning to strip the boy. His first instinct was simply to rip away the frosted cloth, but between the size of his paws and the nature of his claws and their sharpness, he had to take more care.

Pinching layers between the points of his feline talons, he peeled away Brendan's cloak, then the sweater, ripping when he had to, then the shirt, then the breeches. He didn't remember taking the boy's boots off, but then, that was what invisible servants were for, and he slipped the boy into the hot water without a second thought.

The color that fled back into the clammy, pallid, lithe, toned, youthful (death, he thought, reminding himself of the situation, Extreme illness and death!) body was a relief. Pink rushed into Brendan's cheeks and shoulders, and steam rose up into the air. Beast carefully and awkwardly held the boy's head above water, and cupped it in his own paw and then let it stream across Brendan's forehead and face and back through his hair, until all of him was warm.

The water began to cool. Towels were already there, as was a dressing gown and a robe. The fire had been tended all day, smoldering and slowly kindled, and so was easily brought back to a roar.

Beast noticed none of this until Brendan, breath even and clear, began to move, a little. It was mainly his head, and flutterings of his eyelashes. You, Beast thought, are a stupid, impossible, unlucky guest.

He carefully drew the young man out of the bath, and, letting him stand a little on his own, wrapped him in a towel, around his waist, then another around his shoulders. Beast eased the boy into the dressing gown, letting the towels fall away, and then into the robe.

He tried to guide Brendan towards bed with just a paw under his elbow, but the young man nearly tumbled to the floor. After catching him, Beast scowled.

If he were conscious- but even when he is not, it is demeaning for me to... His eyes fell on the table by one of the windows, where a panel of tapestry was laid out under Beowulf and the other book. He halted for a long moment, then with some resign and some trepilation, scooped the body of his guest carefully up into his arms, and carried him with fluid steps to his bed.

He began to set Brendan down—the covers had been pulled back, and an additional down quilt spread across the bed—when the boy stirred. Beast hesitated, frowning, suddenly feeling clumsy and not quite sure whether sticking the boy in bed and leaving him there was the best way to handle things.

Brendan, aware only that he wasn't hurting or feeling frozen any longer, and that he was in fact feeling particularly warm and cared for, lifted his face and pressed the side of it into the soft fall of hair flowing over the strong shoulder he was being held against. It was an instinctive knowledge, knowing that thick, masculine arms were holding him and that the strong, earthy smell that was enveloping him would be one to dream about later. It had to be an instinctive knowledge, he mused sleepily, because he was so very nearly unconscious.

He felt suddenly resistant to the blackness that wanted to overtake him and deprive him of this experience. He tried to say something concise, and managed to sigh plaintively, voice scraping the back of his throat. He clung on, and the hold around him tightened, but a careful, controlled amount. He strung his fingers in the mass of uneven locks that felt like cashmere waves. He tried to stay close
as long as he could, resisting the promise of a healing rest even as it tugged, insistently, at the base of his neck and the back of his ribcage.

The Beast held very still as Brendan seemed to be wrestling with unconsciousness. The Beast battled off his annoyance when the boy started tangling his hand in the Beast's mane and pulling his head down. *Like a child,* he thought darkly, ducking his face, leonine nose curling slightly.

When Brendan tilted his own face up, pressing his forehead desperately to Beast's cheek, rubbing his own cheekbone across Beast's jaw, and shivering once, but not with the cold, the Beast felt a part of himself seize up. *So...not like a child, then.*

He could have easily tossed the boy away, left him in the bed, in the room, alone and let the servants handle it, let the boy remember nothing and pass out to heal.

Instead, he kept still and tried to keep his breath steady as Brendan pressed his lips against the corner of his mouth, weakly and briefly, before letting his face slip down, to rest in the crook of the Beast's neck.

Brendan's body shook slightly with the deep breaths of sleep, and for a long while Beast sat contemplating the color and composition of the comforter. Eventually, he put the boy in the bed and sat back on his haunches, watching with deeply hooded eyes and an emotionless face the occasional exhalation that sank Brendan further and further into the mattress.

He did not pay attention to how long he sat before he turned to leave. He hesitated at the door, and moved to the small table to run the pad of his great clawed thumb gently across the cover of the brown leather book. It moved slightly with the motion, and Beast sighed, a deep, abrupt noise; the kind that startles birds in a forest into flight.

He withdrew his hand and thought to leave when he noticed an unevenness in the way the book sat on the table. He lifted the edge of the tapestry, and stared with an entire lack of understanding at what was, possibly, at least until very recently, the single most precious thing in all his world.

The magic mirror winked balefully up at him with the firelight, and an old, smoldering, quiet rage, the likes of which the Beast had not felt for some time, began to kindle.
In Which a Friendship is Forged

Beauty was fussing with Brendan's buttons, muttering under her breath about saucy painters. Brendan shooed her away to her seat and stood at his place, behind her chair. Their father was struggling into his best suit coat with the help of his manservant. Marguerite was giving doe eyes to the painter as he set up his canvas, and Catherine was adjusting that god-awful hat of hers, jabbing pins into it like a warrior preparing for battle. Self-consciously, Brendan fiddled with his own velvet hat. He hated it, with those horrible, big feathers in it. Hats like this were exactly the reason why he didn't wear them. And if that painter lets his eyes drift south on my sisters again, Brendan thought, so help me God, I'll –

"All right! Everyone quiet!" Etienne held up his hands and made mother-hen motions with his hands to usher everyone into their places. "Anyone who's not getting their portrait painted or painting one, please get out of the room. Now, my children, we are going to sit down, or stand up as the case may be with your brother and I, stop fussing with our clothes and hair—I'm talking to you, Marguerite, put that comb down—and we're going to let the man paint the bloody picture. Alright?"

"Father!" Beauty said with a hint of amused scandal in her voice. "You're getting all red. Come stand here." It took another few rushed moments for everyone to get situated, but soon they were all in place; the three sisters sitting side by side, and the menfolk standing at their shoulders. The artist came up to them to make small adjustments, holding a brush in one hand and picking stray lint from Etienne's sleeve with the other. He pinched a crease into Brendan's cravat, then made a move as if to adjust the scarf over Beauty's lap, but he caught the venomous look Brendan gave him, and subsided.

And so the family d'Aumale sat together in silence (well, except when Catherine hissed a little gossip to Marguerite, but Etienne surreptitiously prodded her shoulder and they both fell into sullen silence) as the painter hunched over his canvas, eyes darting from them to his work.

Brendan looked down just a fraction at Beauty. His hand lay on her shoulder, and he squeezed a little bit. She turned her face up a minute amount and flashed a quick smile.

Her face burst into tiny stars, spiraling away into the whiteness that spread around him. It was bright.

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Brendan opened his eyes and immediately regretted it. His head felt like it had been beaten with an icicle and then stuffed with cotton. He flung up an arm to block out the light, eyes in tiny slits. The curtains of the other window, still shut, were suddenly pulled open.

Brendan moaned. "Please. Bright. Want sleep. Head hurts. Have mercy." He felt a hand tug at his shoulder. He looked up blearily, which was pointless because he couldn't see the servant anyway, and croaked "What?" A heavy stoneware mug of broth was pushed into his hands, warming a chill Brendan felt clinging to his insides. "No, thank you, I'm not hungry." He tried to hand the mug back. The invisible pushed it back at him firmly. The servant's manner quite clearly said that it would brook no nonsense.

"Ok, ok. I'm drinking it." He took a small sip, and found that he was hungry after all. Extraordinarily so. And a little shaky. "Why…" Then he remembered. The cold water swallowing him, so cold it
squeezed all the breath out of his body. He remembered that through the panic, he had the clear thought of what an idiot he was to not realize it was an ice-covered pond, not a marble dais. "How did I get here? Did you...did you save me?" The air had a slight tremble of a head shaking. "No? Then...oh, no. He did, didn't he?" He took the affirmative silence for a yes. He was mortified.

"Mon Dieu, must I ruin everything? It's just been one mistake or accident after the other ever since I came here." He covered his face with his hands. "He's going to be angry. Is he angry?" The invisible seemed to waver, then laid its hand on Brendan's shoulder and gave him an encouraging pat. Following that came a little squeeze that seemed to say, "Good luck!"

That couldn't be good.

No use putting it off. He slid out of bed with care, and frowned at the loose white dressing gown he wore. It was not even remotely familiar, as Brendan always slept in his smallclothes.

"Thank you," he mumbled to the air, the thanks because he was pretty sure it was an invisible servant who had done it for him, and the mumbling because he was embarrassed and none too pleased that his clothes had been changed without his knowledge or permission. After a few tries Brendan managed to stand up on his own and then he did a quick body check. Okay, legs, arms and other such important extremities, still there. No bruises, scrapes, or broken bones. He didn't feel exactly cold...it was more like his body remembered being cold and was just reminiscing about it.

His strength grew the longer he moved around the room, pulling on the wool sweater he'd taken a liking to and splashing water from the copper basin onto his face. His hair was a tangled mess, so he tied it back with a ribbon. He felt only the tiniest bit shaky as he padded from the thick warmth of his room into the notably cooler hallway.

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The castle corridors were dark. The guttering oil lamps set into the walls were turned low, giving the castle an eerie, unwelcome cast. If the castle truly resonated with the moods of its master...Brendan bit his lip, twisting his hands in his sweater. He hesitated at the top of the main stairs, then unclenched his hands, squared his shoulders, and made his way determinedly down.

The hallway felt unsettled, as though a quiet ripple of something were creeping beneath the runner carpets or flitting from torch to torch, but Brendan was getting quite used to feeling unsettled by now. The natural light that followed him from his bedroom windows spoke of near-evening. This meant there was half a day, a full night, and another nearly full day missing from his memories.

As he walked, he ignored any feelings of trepidation or nervousness. He was sure they would have their moment later, but presently he was interested in calmly seeking out his host and understanding what the hell was going on. The color of the runner carpet changed and he frowned sharply at the hallway.

"No," he told the floor, "not to the Music Room. I want to go where Beast is." There was a long moment, and as he started down it again a turn appeared, and the familiar carpet that ran to the head of the stairs over the Great Hall lined its floor.

There, he thought, that wasn't so difficult, was it? Then he realized that he'd just bossed a hallway, and felt very strange.

There was the familiar faint crackle of a fire in the grand hearth, which somehow didn't soothe his
nerves. Brendan padded down the stairs, absently tucking his arms about himself, then dropped them again once he'd realized. If only I could do something right. Just this once I want to be able to actually articulate what I mean to say. I want to be able to tell him...I guess I don't know what I want to tell him.

He stopped in the open archway to the parlor. The high wing-backed chair was silhouetted against the lambent glow of the fire. Brendan hesitated, momentarily unsure of whether or not Beast was actually sitting in the chair. The room felt still and too-quiet. He could faintly hear breathing coming from the chair.

"Good evening," Brendan ventured, but his voice was thick and rough. He cleared his throat. Beast did not reply so much as he continued breathing, deep, heavy rumbling breathes. Oh, fantastic. He's ignoring me again. This feels familiar.

He edged toward the chair, skirting the firelight, hesitant and curious as to what had his host in a mood this time. "I'm sorry," he ventured, because it seemed like a good idea. The low growl stopped.

"Are you," Beast said, though the word 'said' could not possibly encompass the depths of Beast's tone. It was low and dangerous, the timber gravelly and the elocution like silk, flowing and deceptively soft.

Not better, then. In any way.

"Yes," Brendan managed, stepping further into the light, examining his host's posture. Beast was flung near sideways in the chair, head and shoulders hunched, profile low and heavily shadowed. It seemed to be a pose carefully orchestrated to project an air of nonchalance and, as it revealed its manufactured nature, failed utterly.

"I should have known better." Brendan looked down at his hands, twisting his fingers together. He felt foolish and embarrassed about this whole falling through the ice incident, and felt that it might go over better if he seemed contrite.

Beast made a brief, derisive snort through his nose. "Should you have," he said, in much the same voice as before, although it dripped with disdain this time. He wasn't sneering yet, but Brendan rather thought that was what was coming next.

"Yes," Brendan pressed on firmly. "I didn't even think to ask you if it were important to stay away from it--" Beast tossed his head, barking a sort of roaring laugh that petered off into a growl. Brendan was staring, somewhat wide eyed, and continued.

"--As I thought I knew the gardens well enough by now why are you being so strange?" he demanded, then wished he hadn't, as was frequently the case when Brendan opened his mouth without considering what was coming out. He didn't want to know why the Beast was being strange. He had the awful, embarrassing feeling that it had to do with his clothes maybe not being changed by the invisible servants, but for some reason his brain skittered madly away from the idea whenever it tried to surface.

"Strange?" Beast growled. "I am not being strange. I am being angry."

"Oh," Brendan said with more than a little exasperation, "Well, that's new. Never seen that emotion from you before." Beast raised up in his chair, which was sort of odd to witness as the raising up involved his head lowering significantly. Brendan was reminded of a bull ready to charge.
"You dare," Beast growled. "You would dare show such impertinence? This insolence?"

Brendan temper flared and his face flushed. "No, I'm being angry!" he shot back. "You haven't got a monopoly on that feeling, you know!"

Beast's eyes narrowed. "What right have you to be-" he started and Brendan plowed right over his words.

"Did you undress me yesterday?" There was a ringing silence. The fire didn't dare crackle too loudly. Beast stared at the slight figure before him, still looking a little weak, skin flushed from his own righteousness and bathed in gold firelight. He did not reply for a long moment.

"...Yes," he admitted, finally. "And I...put you in some warm water." Brendan had no idea what to say next. He hadn't even meant to ask the question in the first place.

"Oh. Like a bath?"

"Something like a bath, yes." Beast glowered as the silence stretched on.

"Oh," said Brendan. "Well. I see. Thank you." There was more silence. In the space of that silence, a thought started to form in Brendan's mind, and his expression shifted from its vaguely discomfited frown to a look of extreme mortification.

"That...after....you know...Um. That water was really very cold."

"You had hypothermia," Beast pointed out, finding himself somewhat distracted from his very carefully cultivated rage by the turn of the conversation.

"Yes," Brendan said, voice wavering to a somewhat higher register than it otherwise was at, "which- -because that water was awfully cold. Really, terribly cold." He saw you naked, his mind kept hissing. When you were cold. That's just not fair. The implications hung at the fore of his mind like one of his father's heavy cargos being hoisted onto a ship deck, looming and creaking over the planks.

"Yes," Beast snapped, "I am perfectly aware, due to a number of clues such as snow, chunks of ice, and the hypothermia, that the water you fell into was in fact cold."

"Well I'm just saying!" Brendan insisted, panicked and red-faced.

"I know you are," Beast yelled back, "because you keep saying it!"

"Yes, well," Brendan started, then switched tactics, "Why? You didn't have to... why didn't you leave it for the servants?"

"My touch isn't good enough?" Beast snarled, and a myriad of unhelpful images came to both of their minds. Beast pushed on. "What, are you upset my claws may have scratched your delicate skin? Now you expect the attentions of the servants? You are a finicky, hypocritical little thing, aren't you?" Brendan's mouth fell open, and for a moment he really couldn't think of something to say. It wasn't a problem because his mouth ran on ahead of his brain anyway.

"I've never shown aversion to your tou-" Beast bellowed over Brendan's words.

"In addition to being an ungrateful, deceitful thief!" Brendan blinked owlishly back at him, momentarily confused to a point beyond fear or wariness of Beast's temper.
"I--What? I didn't take your pool, I just fell into it," he stated reasonably, eyebrows quirked in puzzlement.

Now it was Beast's turn to be confused. "What are you talking about?"

"What are you talking about?" retorted Brendan, equally bewildered.

Beast flung himself from his chair and into the full illumination of the firelight with enough force that the chair toppled over. He thrust something small and silver from the shadow of his cloak and Brendan had sense enough to reel away from it, then freeze.

There was dread mixing in with the confusion, now.

"This!" Beast snarled, "This! You stole this! I have opened rooms to you that have been closed for centuries, I have given you endless hospitality, and you stole from me." A sound of disgust came loudly from Beast's throat. "Always, they take the one thing that isn't offered. But then I should have expected no less from the son of a dishonest merchant."

Brendan's eyes lit up with a sudden inner fire.

"I am not! That is entirely unfair!" he said, as forcefully as he could manage. "My father is a poor gambler, perhaps, and irresponsible and sometimes given to seeking the path of least resistance and, I suppose, he may be cowardly at times as well--but he is not dishonest! And in any case I am nothing like him!"

"You stole from me," growled the Beast. "You stole just as your father stole from me. Therefore; you are a thief." The thought stung Beast's shadowed heart; he couldn't believe he had actually thought Brendan was different from all the others.

"I did not steal from you!" Brendan yelled, surprising himself with the powerful ringing of his own voice. Beast was growling, an incessant, soft undertone that drowned out the crackle of the fire.

"Then how did it come to be hidden in your room, hmm?"

Brendan swallowed. "You never forbid me from unlocked rooms-" Brendan began.

"That door was locked!" Beast raged.

"No," Brendan countered, barely reigning in his temper, but impressively managing to do so. "No, it was not. It couldn't have been, for I touched the knob and it opened."

"I locked it myself!"

"I have no ability to open doors that are locked to me," Brendan said tersely, forcing his hackles down. "Therefore, you must be mistaken."

"Are you calling me a liar?" Beast asked in the soft, nearly human sort of tone he sometimes developed when he was about to get murderously angry.


"Oh, so the door simply opened for you, did it?"

"Yes, it did," Brendan said matter-of-factly. "The door was so sparkly and unusual, and it opened, so of course I stepped inside, since you only ever said I was barred from the rooms that were locked… and then. Er."
"Then," Beast prompted, pacing on all fours across the dark, around the toppled chair. Brendan swallowed to see him in such an animalistic mood. It seemed so long ago he had been genuinely frightened of the Beast, that to have those feelings come back at him in a rush was mightily disconcerting.

"Well," Brendan said, searching the floor for his thoughts. Unfortunately, they weren't there. "Well, it was in the middle of the room! It was just lying there, in the clear open! And...it was shiny, and...it was on a plinth! Was I not supposed to touch it?!" He flung his hands up in frustration.

"No!" Beast snapped, "No, you were not! And even if you did, you weren't supposed to take it!"

"You never said I couldn't...take things," Brendan said, though as he said it, he felt less conviction than he had.

"That needed to be spelled out?" Beast snapped, in a tone that clearly indicated how stupid Brendan would have to be if he did.

"No! I mean--possibly! What harm in taking it do my room?" he amended, frowning and shifting his weight from foot to foot. "It just—felt so good when I touched it. I picked it up out of curiosity, I swear I was just lifting it to look at it better, and then...it felt...It was warm. And it..." He stifled a sigh, looking more dejected then the Beast could remember seeing him. "It felt like home."

Beast was still for a long moment. The boy must hate it here very much to be so homesick. The bubbling anger he had been nursing grew at the thought.

"Fine," he seethed, a low rumbling sounding from his chest and the bottom of his throat. He fully intended to send the boy home, if that was what he wanted so much. "If that's how you--"

"Stop," Brendan said suddenly, in a clear, straightforward voice. The directness of the command actually worked, and Beast shut his mouth in surprise.

"Stop," Brendan repeated, more quietly. "This is...ridiculous. I did hide it. I didn't think there was anything wrong with my keeping it to look at for a while. I had enough sense to hide it, because I suspected that if you knew you would react...well. Exactly like this. So that is my fault."

"Good," Beast said, straightening up, eyes narrowing. "Then-"

"Please," Brendan said, without force or much volume. "Please let me just say these things I need to say." There was a moment's silence, wherein Beast didn't bellow or roar at him to shut up, so he continued.

"I have been your guest here," he began, "for some time, now. And I still don't understand anything. Or at least it feels that way. I keep doing everything wrong. Or at least I do things in such a way to make you very angry. And I don't mean to! I don't mean to behave in a way to upset you or...seem foolish, but I don't understand how not to. There are rooms that appear and disappear, and only this morning I found myself telling the hallway where I wanted to go. And it worked! But there are stairways I can't climb, and people I cannot see, and multitudes of books in languages that I don't even recognize. And there are these fish," he said with sudden, earnest distress, looking up at Beast's shadowed face.

"They're very talkative, and they speak with an English accent, and I just don't know...what that's about. I think I've been coping pretty well with everything else, but those fish are truly beyond my ability to comprehend." Brendan swallowed before continuing.

"And then there's you. There's you, and I don't understand you at all. I wish I did."
Beast did not interrupt, fascinated at being on the receiving end of such an impassioned speech from his normally mild-mannered guest.

"I had thought Paris and the university was an adventure," Brendan said, looking down. "I had thought... anywhere away from home was an adventure. But this has been a more bewildering and... incredible then any I had thought I could have. I feel very fortunate to be here, and I'm sorry that I'm a... a nuisance to you. I'm sorry that I've been foisted upon you, when you so clearly didn't want me. I'm sorry for taking the mirror. And I'm sorry for falling through the ice." His voice became little more than a whisper. "I'm sorry you don't want me here."

The Beast spent a long moment taking in the figure of the young man in front of him. Head bowed and swathed in the great bulky sweater, Beast was keenly aware of how much smaller the boy was than himself. Beast watched the steady rise and fall of Brendan's chest. He was quiet for a long moment.

"Was that an apology?" he asked. Brendan looked up with umbrage and opened his mouth to speak. Beast cut him off with a gentle waving of one large paw. "Never mind," he grunted.

Brendan smiled a tiny bit, though somewhat nervously. Beast righted the massive armchair with one hand and sank into it. He waved a hand at another chair being pushed up to the fire by an invisible, indicating that Brendan should take a seat. The boy did so warily. Beast took a moment to gather up his considerable social skills and eloquence, though somewhat rusted over the course of several centuries.

"I accept," he said at length, "your apology."

Brendan just barely stopped himself from gaping like an idiot.

"And," Beast continued, lifting one hand for silence, "perhaps I have been, at times, possibly, somewhat abrasive." Brendan's eyebrows inched upward, but he otherwise did not move or signify any form of agreement.

"Thank you," he said, in as neutral a tone as he could. The Beast nodded, once. It seemed that they had reached some sort of truce. Then of course, as the fear, anxiety, and dejection faded, Brendan's curiosity was the first of his natural states to make itself present.

"Why is the mirror always warm to the touch?" he asked. "And why does it feel so powerfully... nostalgic, I suppose? Or is that just me, that feels that? Why does it-"

Beast cut him off with a quiet groan. "God. You're really asking?" He lifted his head and met Brendan's eyes. "It's a magic mirror."

"Well, the fish told me as much." Brendan said. "Is everything here magic?" Beast stared at him.

"Yes," he finally said. "It's an enchanted castle. There may be a bread knife or two that remain mostly mundane. But yes. Everything here is magic. Well spotted." Brendan tried to hide a smile at the familiar sarcasm.

"So why does it feel that way?" he queried, leaning an elbow on the arm of his chair.

"I discovered the mirror in much the same way you did." Only upon its discovery, there had been much more breaking of things. They both understood this, and so it went unsaid. "I was," Beast continued, "going to destroy it. I wanted no mirrors of any kind in this place. But when I touched it... It somehow seemed to..." Beast spread his claws expressively. "It made me forget... things," he decided on, and though Brendan found that rather vague in a technical sense, it was still very telling.
He nodded slowly, indicating the Beast should continue. "I do not know what its powers specifically are," Beast said. "It is, I think, a very old magic, and it is not so straightforward as the other enchantments of the house."

Brendan's brows rose at that. The thought of the mirror being complex in comparison to the castle was in no way a reassuring one.

"It is at times a source of tangible comfort, at others a window to other places and on a few occasions, it has served as a window to the past. But why or how or when it chooses to act as these things, I do not understand or control." Brendan's expression was one of rapt attention, which the Beast noted, enjoyed, then noted that he enjoyed it, and tucked the thought away for further contemplation at a later time.


"Though usually a thing one has reason or wish to see."

"Yes… The fish told me something like that."

"You've mentioned. You've spoken to the fish, then?" Beast's voice indicated some amusement. "I wouldn't take anything they said to heart."

Brendan canted his head to the side. "Which one is it that tells lies, and which one tells truths? They were both being awfully cryptic."

"I have no idea. As far as I can tell, they're both terrible liars." Brendan could swear he saw a smile under all that fur. "Even after two hundred years, and many clever attempts to trick them into telling me, I've not discovered their true natures."

Brendan brought his knees up and clasped his hands over them. He debated over his next choice of words, but seeing as the two of them had seemed to reach a more candid exchange he said what was on his mind. "Two hundred years is a long time." Beast looked at the fire for long seconds before replying.

"Yes. It is." A silence began to stretch between them…but before it could become uncomfortable, Beast added, "You must be starving after your frigid fiasco last night. I haven't yet had the servants prepare dinner. Shall I?"

Brendan paused. "I am hungry, but still a little weak, I think. I'm not sure if I can stomach a lot of rich food." Plus the huge fireplace was warming the last remnants of chill from his bones, and he wasn't inclined to move.

"I'll have them bring up some soup, then. I've eaten already." Beast didn't mention that he'd already had dinner because he'd been expecting to have thrown the boy out of the castle by now. When this young man is involved, nothing ever turns out like I plan, does it?"

Brendan smiled gratefully. "That sounds wonderful. Thank you." His host grunted in reply as he waved a large paw, directing the invisible servants with a thought. Swiftly, two delicate tables floated in and were set beside each wingback chair. Two glasses of dark cabernet appeared on each table, and a blue stoneware mug was presented and handed to Brendan. He gratefully wrapped his hands around it, relishing the warmth of the heavy mug and the steaming fragrance of the broth.

"I was thinking I'd play a little harpsichord tonight," Brendan spoke up while taking a sip from the stoneware mug. The soup was hearty and filling. A mouthful seemed to warm his whole body right to his toes. He was pleased to spy a small pearl onion in it, always a favorite of his.
"Ah, yes. Take some revenge on it, perhaps?" Brendan grinned as Beast's mouth curved slightly at the corners, which was pretty much as close to a laugh as he allowed himself.

"I would be honored if my gracious host could attend." He was surprised to feel his muscles tense like piano strings, readying himself for potential rejection and disappointment. He'd come to value the appreciation an audience afforded him.

Beast tilted his shaggy head thoughtfully, swirling his wine like an experienced sommelier. "I may be able to clear my busy schedule."

"Good." Brendan was delighted by Beast's good humor, but in the back of his mind, a thought niggled that these periods of lightheartedness were often followed by some of the most spectacular rages he had witnessed.

They sat in companionable silence. Brendan polished off the last of his wine, and an invisible quickly refilled the wineglass. "Thank you," he told the unseen servants, as was his custom.

"Why do you do that?" Beast quirked a heavy brow in inquiry.

Brendan blinked in confusion. "Why do I do what?"

"Why do you thank them? I've seen you. Speaking to them, asking questions you know they won't answer." The Beast leaned forward in his chair earnestly. "They don't care, you know. They don't have the capacity."

Brendan stared at Beast, the mug of soup forgotten an inch from his mouth. He lowered the mug and held Beast's eyes as he asked, "Don't have the capacity?"

"Yes. It doesn't matter if you're polite to them or not." Beast began to look annoyed.

"Wha—of course it matters!" Brendan was getting a mite upset, himself. "What do you mean, it doesn't matter?"

Beast motioned with a large paw. "Just that. It doesn't matter. They're only invisibles."

Brendan's jaw dropped. "How can you say...they're still people!"

Beast looked incredulous. "No. They used to be people. Now they're just...like shadows. You don't thank your shadow. They do what they're told and cook and clean, but they don't think."

"How can you possibly know that? How can you know that they don't think and feel? Can they tell you that?" He set his mug down so hard the soup sloshed onto the table.

Beast frowned, somewhat bewildered by Brendan's ire. He was self-aware enough to be darkly amused by their role-reversal—the boy being the angry one, and Beast the recipient of that anger. "Well, of course they can't tell me. That's why—"

Brendan cut him off. "Just because they don't look like human beings, that means they aren't human beings? Is that what you're saying?" His voice progressively rose. "How can you truly believe that? I mean, look at you!"

There was a dangerous silence. "What about me?"

"You of all people think that these poor forgotten souls aren't worth any courtesy? Aren't worth respect? Or do you just think that nobody is worth respect?" Brendan pushed himself up and paced
to the fireplace, agitatedly remembering all the times Beast called him 'boy' instead of his name. "Is that it? You're the only man that deserves respect?"

Beast glowered, his paws tightening on the arms of his chair, talons biting into the wood.

"Are you just like so many other arrogant, bullying men—"

"Stop calling me a man!" Glass crashed to the floor with one sweep of Beast's paw. Brendan took a step back, watching with wide eyes. The chair tumbled over as the enraged Beast flung the little table into the fireplace, the greedy flames hissing as they licking at the varnish. "I AM A BEAST!"

Brendan felt a stabbing pain in his heart. Beast stood there among the wreckage, breathing heavily and eyes cast down, looking at anything except the young man in front of him. Brendan stepped towards him. "You're not." Beast looked up and met his eyes. "Well, when you act like this, it can be a tad beastly, but…you're not a monster."

Beast glared at Brendan skeptically for long seconds. "I don't understand you. I don't understand a single thing that you say."

Brendan took another step forward. "I don't understand anything about this place. Everything here goes against all I've ever known or learned or believed in. Magic mirrors and endless corridors and talking fish—"

"I lost my temper." Beast said it before the words even formed in his mind, but there was no saving face now. He looked away. "It's…when…you call me a man, it seems…very mocking."

Brendan was now close enough to lay his hand on Beast's velvet-clad arm, which he almost did, but couldn't quite bring himself to. "It isn't."

Beast turned his great head and met Brendan's clear blue eyes. "No. I can see as much. I…will try to not react so vehemently in the future."

Brendan tried a tentative smile. "And I will try to not infuriate you so. It's a tricky job, you know. I'm never quite sure what will and what won't."

The Beast took a step back. He needed to think, and he couldn't do that when the boy stood so close. "I believe I was the one to anger you, this time. I didn't know you felt so strongly about the servants." Who were, incidentally, clearing away the broken glass and righting the chair as Beast spoke.

Brendan looked down at his hands. "Yes. I'm sorry I spoke so harshly. It's just…I don't understand how anyone can be so devoid of empathy." His head rose up and he began to speak with conviction. "The way I see it, there are two kinds of people. There are those who don't recognize others as individuals. Rather, they are only tools to be used, or bodies to be seduced, or mirrors to reflect their own superiority. They're not real people. No one else is important. No one but themselves.

"Then there are those who see every single human being as their own person, with whole worlds of complexities in their minds. These people see that everyone has potential for greatness." Brendan paused a moment before continuing.

"So what it all boils down to, Beast, is what kind of person do you want to be? Alone and superior in the great, dark void? I imagine that must be a very lonely and frightening world to live in."

"And what sort of person are you?" asked the Beast quietly.
"The sort of person who sees worth in people. Something doesn't cease being valuable simply because you can't put a price on it, Beast."

Beast regarded the young man for a long moment, his eyes carefully guarding against any emotion. "You're very young to be so perceptive."

Brendan lifted his chin. "I don't think I'm much younger than you. I mean, minus the two hundred years, of course. Am I right?"

The Beast unconsciously took another step back. He felt exposed, as if there were layers of himself peeling back, and it unnerved him. "...Perhaps. I can't say I keep track of each year."

Brendan smiled wryly, then brought up a hand and rubbed his eyes. "I think I'm bit more tired than I thought I was." He edged over to lean against the side of hearth, then gracefully slid down to sit on the hearthrug with his knees drawn up and his elbows resting lightly on them.

Beast watched him do this, very closely. Perhaps more closely than was warranted. "You still need time to recover. It might be wise to skip your harpsichord demonstration tonight."

"I agree." Though not pleased at the prospect, he definitely was not feeling hale enough to perform a concert. He looked up at his host. From his seated position, Brendan could see that Beast was brought into sharp relief by the golden firelight, his curved horns shining. It suddenly occurred to him that Beast was the most striking thing that Brendan has ever seen, with his brooding eyes and broad shoulders. He seemed like he took up more space in the world than most men. And oh, yes, he certainly was a man... Brendan's eyes drifted of their own accord. Startled at his own thoughts, Brendan tore his gaze away and swallowed hard.

It's... just been a long time since I've been close to anyone. That's all. I mean, he is, in no particular order, a prince, a beast, and in love with my sister without even having seen her.

Beast gracefully folded his legs beneath him, seating himself on the cozy hearthrug. "Tomorrow then, if you're feeling better in the morning." Brendan nodded, still unsettled by his own thoughts. He shook off the feeling and said something he'd been meaning to say earlier.

"I would like to thank you for allowing me to stay here. As I said before, it is such an incredible place."

Beast smoothed his sleeves before answering slowly, "I had thought, earlier when we were discussing the mirror, that you had indicated that you'd rather be back home."

Brendan shook his head. "I can't say that there is much for me there. I mean..." Brendan looked down, as if his shirt cuffs had suddenly become full of great interest. "I don't have many friends back home. I never really had the knack for it."

"I see," Beast said, choosing his words with care. "I suppose it would be difficult for you, being unbearably nosy and all." The boy's lips twitched with amusement.

"Ah, yes. You're exactly right."

"Friendship is overrated. People always wanting something. Needing favors. You're probably better off." Beast looked off into the fire, deep in thought and memory, which is why he said precisely what he didn't mean to say. "I don't have any." There was a long, tense silence, wherein Beast sat like a statue, cursing himself for saying too much.

Brendan's voice came as softly as a cat padding over snow.
"You have one."

Beast was still for a long moment. His head turned the barest fraction towards Brendan.

"I suppose I do."

It was in that exact moment that Brendan realized he'd fallen in love.
In Which Fish are Tricky and a Move is Made

A friend.

An actual friend. Not at all like the old courtiers and fawning admirers that had plied him with falseness, or the royal sycophants who breathed lies. It had been so long since he’d known anyone whom he had wanted to call friend, that he scarcely knew how to recognize the feeling now. Beast spent the minutes between waking and sleeping wondering if that was what the gentle warmth that was seeping into the cold, forgotten reaches of his soul could be. It felt...nice. Yes, that was the word. Nice.

As he began to slip into sleep, Beast prepared for yet another night of animal dreams, dreams of stalking and hiding, dark and colorless save for the color of blood. Dreams he had dreamed for two hundred years.

But as he dreamed, the Beast found himself inside the sun dappled confines of the hedge maze at the southern side of the castle. He knew, as is the way with dreams, that at the center of the maze lay something very good, so he took a step to seek it out. He was so shocked to find himself walking upright, like the man he used to be, that he almost jolted awake. Then, the calm dream logic sank in and was only mildly surprised to see his boot-clad feet, to use a hairless hand to brush hair from his human face. He kept walking; left turn, right turn, three more lefts...and he stood at the maze's heart.

In the tiled center a bench stood in front of a large silver fountain. Seated on the bench was the boy with a basket at his side. Beast was very pleased to see him there, in this secret place, though a little bemused by his pleasure. Why he should be so pleased to have his privacy invaded, he had no idea. A shaft of sunlight cast its golden glow on the young man, and an errant breeze made his unbound hair wave about his face and shoulders. He smiled--that infuriatingly oblivious smile that made the Beast's insides clench--and saying nothing, indicated that the Beast should join him on the bench.

As Beast took a seat, Brendan dipped a hand into the basket at his side and pulled out a single, perfect blueberry. Slowly, not taking his eyes from the Beast's face, he ate it, the rich blue standing out in his very pink mouth. Beast felt frozen, and could not take his eyes off of the boy's lips, his tongue flicking out to catch any stray juices. The Beast thought that he had never seen anyone eat a blueberry so obscenely. Brendan held another berry out to Beast with a slight smile, offering to share its sweetness.

Before he could decide whether or not to accept, his dreams swirled and changed almost imperceptibly, becoming once again black and white and savage. He ran like a wolf over thick drifts of snow with a vague sense of loss, chasing something he could never catch.

***

Many rooms and an untellable number of hallways away, Brendan was not sleeping well. After some restless shifting, he pushed off the crisp sheets that had twisted around him and tried to lay still, willing himself to sleep. The few times he had managed to doze he had disturbing dreams about shadows and whispers, and would wake and stare into the darkness. The rose, still blooming and perfect on the night stand, caught the moonlight on its dark petals. Brendan spent a moment contemplating its soft red glow, trying to sort his thoughts out. I can do this, I can at least think it to myself. Brendan rubbed his forehead and breathed deeply. I love him.
There. I said it. I'm in love with him. Okay. Why did I go and do something so abominably foolish as fall in love with the Beast? Why? With a muffled groan, he flipped over and buried his face in the goose down pillow. A confused mess of emotions worked through him, fighting each other for dominance. One second he felt elated with the heady joy of being newly in love, and the next he felt paralyzed with the fear of Beast ever, ever finding out. Then came a curiosity paired with a swift stab of hope, wondering if there was even the slightest possibility of the Beast actually returning his feelings. Following quick on hope's tail was a scoffing pessimism, naming a dozen reasons why the Beast couldn't possibly care about Brendan, especially in that way. At the merest thought of what pleasures that way entailed, the feeling of drunken happiness would resurface, starting the whole cycle over again.

Well, there was no point in trying to get back to sleep. Brendan stood up, slipping on some clothes and stuffing his feet into some boots. He needed to sort some things out, and there was only one person in the whole castle he could talk to. Well, two people. If you could call them people.

***

The thick garden smell did wonders to calm Brendan down. The rich scent of earth and greenery took him back to his days as a young child, playing in the mud while his mother tended her flowers. It was one of the only clear memories of his mother that he had, and it left him feeling more centered and only a little melancholy.

It was dark in the Garden Room, the only light coming through the arched glass ceiling was the cool crescent of moonlight, silverying everything it touched. He knelt down carefully at the edge of the pool, raising cold glistening ripples as he ran his fingers lightly over the water.

"Excuse me," he called softly, "might I have a word?" He waited. After a few seconds, a slick black shape slithered up to the surface and made a lazy loop.

"Ye may have several. I sense with my awesome powers of omniscience that ye can't sleep, eh?" The black koi winked a bright, glassy eye at the young man.

"What astonishing insight." Brendan smiled. "Where's your ... associate?"

"'E's asleep." Brendan took a brief second to wonder about how fish slept. How did they keep from floating to the top? If, indeed, the other fish was sleeping at all. It depended on whether or not he was being lied to, and he has very little way of being sure. Another reason to look into the sleeping practices of fish.

"Ye look a wee bit distracted," noted the fish with amusement.

"Oh, sorry. Just...tired." Brendan smiled ruefully. "Listen. I think I'm starting to understand what you were talking about earlier...you know. About. Well. Love." He glanced around quickly for eavesdroppers, then felt silly for doing so.

"Ah," said the black fish softly. Suddenly a gleaming white head broke the surface of the pool.

"Hey," it said grumpily, "some of us are tryin' ta sleep, oi?" Brendan bit back a triumphant smile. He was too clever to think he'd actually he right about discovering their true natures, but he might be able to lord it over them another day.

"Shurrup," hissed the black fish, bumping into his companion. "He's 'ere to talk about you-know-what."
"Finally," grumbled the white koi. "Was gettin' tired o' waitin'. Look," the fish said to Brendan, "there's not much we kin tell ye in plain speech."

"I know, I know," acknowledged Brendan, "the truth and lies thing. That's fine. It's just...I have no one else to talk to."

The twin fish watched Brendan, and maybe they saw an lonely, scared youth, uncertain and confused, and maybe their little fishy hearts went out to him.

"There's naught we kin tell ye about your particular problem at hand--" began the white fish.

"--but we kin tell ye a little more about the castle. Things ye don' already know," finished the black fish.

Brendan looked up, mildly intrigued. "Oui? Like what?"

"Like, fer example, have ye ever wondered where all the food in this place comes from? Not like there's anyone ta go to market, is there?"

"Yes! I have wondered!"

"It jus' so 'pplens that there's magic cupboards in the kitchen. Anything ye request will appear, and then the servants kin cook it. Neat, eh?"

"Really? That's fascinating." Brendan stroked his chin in speculation, which unbeknownst to him looked very amusingly like an old scholar stroking a wispy beard. "Anything at all? Could I request roasted crocodile, or something real exotic like that?"

"Sure can. Ye can even get things that aren't in season." For some reason, the white koi flashed a quick unreadable look at the other fish before it continued. "Ye know, like beets, zucchini...even blueberries." Brendan's fancy was struck.

"Really? I love blueberries. They're my favorite. You can't get them until spring."

"Well, here ye can," the black fish said slyly. "Ye jus' need ta ask." Brendan smiled at this new knowledge. Every time he thought he had this place figured out, he discovered something new and wonderful. Not that any of this new information helped him wrestle with his myriad of emotions, but it was nice to think of something other than Beast, too.

"Thank you both."

"Oh, no, thank you," said the white fish with in a syrupy voice. "Well, we gotta get our beauty sleep, m'laddo," added the black in an over-dramatically weary tone. "Off with ye."

"Of course. Good night. And thanks again." With two identical splashes, the koi plunged under the water and did not resurface. Brendan spent a few moments walking along the paths, breathing deeply of the roses. He felt a great lassitude settle in, and decided he'd head back to his room and try once more to fall asleep.

***

Having obtained a few precious hours of restful sleep before the morning light had crept thief-like into his room, Brendan felt quite ready to get some breakfast. He was surprised to find that he was
unaccountably nervous. He looked through the wardrobe, trying to find something that complemented him, but didn't make him look like he was putting too much effort into it. This is silly. I've had breakfast with him before. He picked out a plain dark blue doublet to wear over a plain white shirt, and long plain breeches that tucked into his plain black boots. There. That shouldn't make it seem like he was trying to look fetching or anything ridiculous. He washed up with the basin and pitcher that the servants had filled for him, shaved, and pulled his hair back into a ponytail. It occurred to him that it was getting a bit too long to wear loose, and wondered if a servant could trim it up later. He'd have to ask the Beast if the servants had any barbering skills.

His host was already seated when Brendan arrived in the Dining Room, leaning on his elbows and swirling a glass of vin d'orange. As Brendan entered and self-consciously tugged at his vest, the Beast looked up from the fireplace and gave Brendan a small twist of the lips that just may have been a smile. "Ah, there you are. Did you sleep well?"

Brendan was so distracted by the smallest of smiles the Beast had given him that he had to wrench his attention away and concentrate on getting in his chair. "Um, yes," even though he hadn't, "and yourself?"

Beast looked away quickly and took a sip of his drink. "Yes, yes, fine. I take it you are recovered from your...episode?" Beast's voice was gravelly and irritated, but there was a glimmer in his russet eyes that bespoke of some good humor.

"I feel much improved, thank you." He couldn't think of anything else to say, and tried to think of something that wasn't too terribly stupid. Fortunately, the unseen's took that moment to begin bringing in breakfast. Both men began to eat their poached eggs with hollandaise and Brendan tried to think of some way to break the silence.

"Do your servants have any barbering skills?"

"Why, do you need a leeching?" Another miniature smile, fang tips barely showing.

Brendan laughed, surprised at Beast's joke. "Your knowledge of the tonsorial arts are a little out of date. I just need a haircut." He pulled the end of his ponytail in front of his shoulder to demonstrate. "It's a big longer than is acceptable." Beast grunted.

"Acceptable for whom?"

"Well...I don't know really." Brendan laughed a little. "Men's fashion, I suppose."

Beast took a few bites of his toast before answering. "I think you should leave it long. Grow it out." Brendan, feeling a little sharp from lack of sleep, bristled at what he thought was an implication.

"What's that supposed to mean? That I should look like a girl?" He looked straight at Beast, feeling an anger that had been brewing for some time. He doesn't take me seriously...calling me 'boy' all the time...

"What? No!" Beast looked puzzled. "No, I just meant...that it was quite common in my time for men to wear their hair long. That's all." He looked sharply at the younger man.

"Oh," said Brendan with a relieved exhalation. He felt foolish, and rubbed his face with his hand. "Sorry, sorry, just a little tired still, I suppose." Beast's sharp look evaporated.

"You were quite ill. You gave us quite a scare."

"'Us'? Is that like the royal 'we'?'" Brendan asked with a wry smile, chin propped on his hand. Beast
looked alarmed.

"Why would you say that?"

"Oh please," Brendan rolled his eyes. "I've figured out that you're royalty. A prince, if I'm not mistaken. I'm not an idiot, you know." He grinned, not mentioning that a certain book had helped along his hypothesis immensely. Feeling taken aback but still in good humor, Beast shot back, "People who aren't idiots don't walk on thin ice and get hypothermia."

"Touché," Brendan murmured. He stabbed an errant strawberry and was reminded of his talk with the fish and thought it would make a good segue to change the subject with.

"Hey, you know what would be great?" He chewed and swallowed the strawberry before finishing. "Some blueberries for breakfast."

Beast's head slowly rose to look straight at him. His dark eyes were very wide for some reason.

"I mean, you know, not for today, obviously. But maybe tomorrow?" He smiled reassuringly, unsure of what caused Beast's frozen expression. "We could share a basket. Maybe with some sweet cream..."

"I must go!" Beast shoved his chair back and swiftly stood up. His movements were almost clumsy. Brendan's heart sank. *What did I do now?* He stood up too.

"Did I say something wrong?" Beast didn't quite meet Brendan's worried eyes.

"No!" he growled, "You just...finish your breakfast. I forgot...I had something to attend to. I'll just...I'll just go." Beast spun on his heel and was almost out the door before Brendan called after him, "Wait!"

Beast took a deep breath and turned back, looking annoyed. "What?"

Brendan twisted his hands together nervously. "I...I'm going to get in some practice at the Music Room in an hour or so. Would you...care to join me?" He looked at Beast entreatingly.

Beast seemed like he was going to say no, and actually looked surprised at himself when he said, "Yes, all right." He stood there for a second more before making his getaway. Brendan blinked and sat back down.

"Well, that was interesting," he muttered to himself. With his unpredictable mood swings and mercurial rages, courting the Beast would be quite a challenge...*but one I'm definitely up to.* Brendan grinned broadly and swigged the last of his juice.

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Beast would have been more than slightly mortified to confess to anyone (if he had possessed any acquaintances other than the one that presently plagued him) that the matter he had so desperately needed to attend to was a bout of forceful, frustrated pacing across the thick rug of one of the castle's many parlors. When he'd finished, head spinning from more than the repetitive motion, he flung himself into a heavy wooden chair and stared bemusedly at the now-shredded floor covering.

*Damn.*
Doubtless the invisible servants had heard Brendan's request and doubtless, it would be fulfilled. Of course the master of the house had absolute will and Beast could have prevented the item being procured, but... he could not bring himself to it.

Blueberries. Of course he'd request blueberries. In a place of magic such as the palace, why shouldn't Brendan ask for that one thing above all others that would, quick as a breeze of the ocean, fill Beast's sense with the too-vivid memories of a scene not yet realized. Truth to tell, Beast had not eaten so well in more years than calendars could contain as he had since Brendan's arrival. He'd had no need; he hunted himself, and if he did not, he bid the servants bring him meat, sometimes thick breads or cheeses, only heavy, mealy things that rent well under fangs and claws. Blueberries. How long had it been since he had tasted blueberries? He could not say.

He hadn't even really remembered the details of his dream until the boy had mentioned blueberries, just strange and dim sensations. In a place of magic such as his prison, why should the boy not have requested something from the Beast's very dream? Why anything other than some convenient little lynch-pin to throw his plans--and there had been plans, eons of them coming together and hinging on the involvement of a girl who had never reached him--awry and damn him to untellable eons more of solitude, trapped in a body so familiar he could only recall his original form in dreams.

A searing, hurtful anger began to itch under his skin. Dreams of temptations he'd never before called tempting, and now the promise of seeing them realized. What could it be but a test, the way the snow had been? The question was, now, had he failed it? Should he have been stalwart from the beginning and sent the boy back to his home?

Or perhaps... and he struggled with the thoughts even as they began to form. Perhaps, before a heart so cold and feral and disused as his own could love, it needed to open to friendship. Brendan was a friend. His only one. If that was true, if he'd met that task, then no wonder he was... getting ahead of himself. With the wrong person in mind. It wasn't the boy's fault, surely; the magic was as much to blame as either of them. But still, it didn't sit right, the thought of having her brought here now, when Brendan was just well again, just acclimated to this place he'd dwelled in for a considerable length of time. Perhaps bringing the girl would be too much; an axe blow to the tender new sapling of their friendship.

No. No, but he was wrong, Beast thought, he had to be wrong. What better time than now? Newly strong, newly imbued with good spirits, and the two of them finally reaching an amicable place, a... however strangely, a place of some understanding. The beginning of one, anyway. Yes, Beast thought fervently, this new flurry of forced certitude overtaking the frustrated anger.

He remembered something the boy had told him the night before, and the words rang in his head; 'So what it all boils down to, Beast, is what kind of person do you want to be? Alone and superior in the great, dark void? I imagine that must be a very lonely and frightening world to live in.' The boy had introduced another way of living, offered a sliver of hope into an otherwise bleak existence. Beast was greatly surprised to discover that he no longer wished to be alone.

Yes, what better time than now to summon the girl?

***

An hour or so later, the Beast reclined in a silk divan while Brendan favored him with a demonstration on the harpsichord. The song was difficult, especially with the improvisations Brendan had to make to work around the broken string. However, the rest of the notes Brendan had labored so hard to tune sounded divine, and he closed his eyes to savor the melody, bowing his head
over the keys, chestnut curls escaping from his ponytail to brush his cheek where the cut had healed without a mark, as Beast had predicted.

As his fingers flew over the keys, Brendan refined the details of his Plan. After the harpsichord, he had carefully chosen the perfect song to play on the lute. There weren't very many songs he could choose from that expressed the proper sentiment with the appropriate gender nouns he needed. Finally he had picked a mournful Irish folk song that sang sweetly about love, but also warned that life was too short to waste one second. In addition, it had been a song that Brendan learned in the months after Kieran had left, for he had no intentions of singing a song that Kieran had sung for him. Brendan opened his eyes and played the finale of the cantata.

As the last note reverberated through the room, Beast looked up with an expression of mild approval. Brendan stood and made a little joking bow, trying not to show that he had hoped for more of a reaction from Beast. He had been playing at his able best, after all.

"Bach, you say? Very interesting. Do you feel hale enough to play something more?" Beast asked as Brendan crossed the room to sit on the chaise lounge across from his host.

Brendan smiled as he picked up the lute leaning against the side table and began to tune it. "I do indeed." His heart quickened at the Beast's answering smile, and ducked his head over the strings to hide the flush in his cheeks.

The invisibles chose this moment to bring the two of them some hot chocolate, a decadence Brendan had only enjoyed once at the fanciest of parties at University. The warm taste was like liquid gold as it ran down his throat, but he watched the large bulk of Beast as he drank, wondering how the other man's lips would compare in sweetness. As the Beast took his cup from the air, he rumbled a low "Thank you," at the unseen servant while looking pointedly at Brendan. Brendan beamed at the Beast, glad his host had remembered the cause of their argument last night--well, one of their arguments, anyway--and pleased the Beast was now showing some kindness toward the invisibles.

The Beast quickly looked away from Brendan's grin, fixing his gaze on the small cup dwarfed in his powerful hands. Brendan cleared his throat, nervous, but confident in his Plan. He strummed a few clear notes, plucked up his courage, and began to sing.

*Cold blows the wind over my true love,*

*And gently drops the rain.*

*I've never had but one true love,*

*And in green-wood he lies slain.*

*I'll do as much for my true love,*

*As any young man may,*

*I'll sit and mourn all on his grave,*

*For twelve months and one day.*
And when twelve months and one day was passed,
The ghost did rise and speak,
"Why sittest thou all on my grave
And you will not let me sleep?"

There is one thing that I want,
Sweetheart, there is one thing
that I crave; and that's a kiss
from your lily-white lips,
then I'll go from your grave.

"My lips they are as cold as clay,
My breath is earthly strong,
And if you kiss my cold clay lips,
Your days they won't be long."

"Go fetch me water from the desert,
And blood from out of stone,
Go fetch me milk from a fair maid's breast
That young man never has known."

"Twas down in Cupid's garden,
Where you and I would walk,
The fairest flower that e'er I saw
Has withered to a stalk."

"When will we meet again, sweetheart,
When shall we meet again?"
"When the autumn leaves that fall from the trees
Now, in his Plan, after Brendan had finished the song, Beast would look surprised. Maybe he'd arch up an eyebrow in that compelling way he had and say something like, "Are you sure you sang that right? The beloved ghost was another man?" Then Brendan would look at him archly and maybe with just the smallest fraction of a seductive smile, and say "Oh, I sang it right." Here Brendan was a little sketchy on the details, but the Plan came back into sharp focus when Beast would say, "The song is right! I am completely interested in having sex with you this very second," and then the Plan got very, very focused indeed.

But instead the Beast just sat there looking at his chocolate, with the same expression of mild approval that he wore after every song Brendan played. What was he supposed to do now? The Plan pivoted on the Beast's reaction! The Plan was being ruined! What about the Plan?!

"...What did you think?" Brendan blurted, hand still spread over the lute's strings. The Beast looked up and tilted his head to the side, a trifle vaguely.

"A good tune." He fell silent, looking thoughtful.

Brendan pursed his lips, mightily annoyed. "You weren't really listening, were you?"

"No." Beast swirled his chocolate, now gone cold. "I was...thinking." Brendan waited for a few seconds, exasperated.

"...About?"

Beast looked as if he would speak, stopped, and drank more of his chocolate. Brendan waited in confusion as he watched the Beast repeat the actions all over again--open mouth, close mouth, sip chocolate--as if he were trying to put off breaking bad news. He was about to say something himself when the Beast abruptly stood up, getting to his feet with a quick animal grace, set his cup on the side table, and clapped Brendan on the shoulder companionably. "Nothing, nothing. We can discuss it later." Beast stopped, looking like he wanted to say more, hand still lingering on Brendan's shoulder. Brendan sat perfectly still, not wanting to make a single move to startle the Beast, as if the touch were a bird he held in his hand. He felt the heat radiating from Beast's large hand and his breath caught in his throat. It was the first time the Beast had voluntarily touched him when he wasn't furious or when Brendan wasn't in danger of dying.

Beast tore his hand away with a feral swiftness and bowed a tiny fraction to Brendan. "Thank you for playing. I really did quite enjoy it. You must play me more of this Bach; we really had nothing like him in my time."

Brendan bowed back as well as he could sitting down with a lute on his lap. "Of course, Beast." He tried to not look as confused as he felt.

"I will see you at dinner." Beast made another very small, very formal bow, and left.

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Brendan spent the rest of his afternoon enjoying a brisk ride with Jean-Luc, taking a light lunch in his rooms, and perusing Plato in the library. All these pursuits, neither equestrian, gastronomical, nor scholarly would distract him from thinking about the Beast. His hands. His smile. His voice--God, that voice!
Brendan had, in weeks past, been able to rationalize his fascination with the Beast as purely scientific, but now, he couldn't keep lying to himself. His interests were anything but academic. He sighed, carefully setting the book down next to library armchair, the slanting rays of the sunset cutting golden paths across the room.

He didn't exactly know how this had happened, but it would be foolish for him to deny that it had. Even as ridiculous and impossible as he knew his hopes were, he couldn't help but think about it, to wonder if those fangs would get in the way when kissed...

He shook his head, trying in vain to clear it. Really, what was the best he could hope for? Would Beast even understand his advances? Or would he understand them and be insulted to the point of rage? Or even worse, would he feel sorry for Brendan, think he was sick, look at him with disgust in his eyes? Brendan felt like curling up and dying just at the thought.

But, a quiet voice in his head spoke, haven't there been hopeful signs? Lingering glances, touches...

I expect he's just terribly lonely. Mon Dieu, would I just be taking advantage of his long years of loneliness?

And what about the terrible curse laid upon him? Would I be in some way helping to keep him locked here in this prison, wondrous though I may find it? Is my decision to court him selfish?

And, of course, there was the dilemma of anatomy. Exactly how much of the Beast was...bestial? Brendan blushed as he considered the repercussions. Is it wrong of me to find him attractive, when he's got horns and fur and claws and everything? Does it make me some kind of...deviant?

Probably not, he decided. I'm attracted to the man, not the mane. I like how he looks in spite of those claws and things, not because of them. So then, what if, despite the dozens of reasons why this courtship couldn't work, just what if it did? What if the Beast had been secretly brewing a desire for Brendan too, as laughable as it seemed to him? How would it physically even work? Surely it was impossible.

Brendan remembered then, that he had been overwhelmed and confused when he first realized his attraction to men. He remembered being in a near panic before his first fumblings with Kieran, not knowing how the intimate details would unfold, unsure of what went where, how everything would work.

But it had worked. Quite well, in fact. Maybe he just needed to have faith that should Beast come to feel the same way about Brendan, that they would find a way. Oh, this is all a moot point anyway. He put his face in his hands and sighed. He barely tolerates me. But now, with this new understanding between us, what if... Brendan rubbed his face, groaning. His problem, he knew, his ultimate personal flaw, was that he thought too much. He could over think a problem's solution so long that the offending problem had long gone away of its own volition. Look, he told himself, I'll never know if I don't try, now will I? What do I have to lose, in trying? I know the Beast won't harm me, so what really do I have to fear? The loss of my pride and vanity? I can do without those. A broken heart? Well...I've lived through that once. I can live through it again.

His stomach grumbled a protest. A glance out the window told him that dinner was fast approaching. He stood up and went to his rooms with a firmness in his step.

***
The Garden was in fine form tonight; the scent of jasmine enfolded Brendan as he walked the path, admiring the lambent glow of white roses in the sliver of moonlight. Brendan thought that he should really stop by sometime during the day, but there was a suggestion of fragility about the place at night he felt drawn to.

Dinner had been poached fish in tarragon sauce, with garden vegetables tossed with lemon juice and olive oil. Conversation had been as light as the meal; Beast had asked how Brendan had occupied his day, subsequently they spent some time discussing the merits of the Republic as it compared to the Symposium over dry white wine. The whole time he had felt acutely aware of what he was saying and doing, second guessing the way he held his wineglass or the way he spoke. He felt like the Beast would look at him and suddenly see his intentions as if written on his forehead.

As he walked around one vine-covered marble column, he froze. Beast was about five feet in front of him, seated on one of the low benches that hid within the flora. His large hand was cradling one delicate rose blossom, and his eyes looked sad. Brendan was just about to creep away when Beast turned his head and looked straight at him.

"I heard you coming." Beast's eyes had a slight green glow of a cat's, and Brendan suddenly remembered the word for that from one of his lessons; chatoyance. "Are you enjoying the garden?"

Brendan swallowed his apprehension and stepped closer.

"Very much. Do you...often come here at night?"

"Yes. The jasmine," Beast said by way of explanation. Brendan looked over at one of the twisty trees, little white star flowers open. "They bloom only at night."

"Oh. They're lovely."

"Don't stand there like an idiot; come and sit." Beast noticed Brendan's hesitance. "Don't worry, I'm not angry. I am gratified that someone else enjoys my garden as much as I do." Brendan smiled and sat on the other side of the bench, trying not to look as nervous as he felt, seated next to the object of his affections in such a romantic setting. "I don't often get to show it off," Beast continued with a twinkle of good humor. Brendan laughed.

"Well, it's not something I get to talk about often, either." Beast's hands clenched on the edge of the marble bench. Beast looked at him inquiringly, sensing a nerve had been struck. "Oh, it's...it's nothing. Just...it's just my father always gave me hell about gardens."

"Why would he?" Beast sounded confused.

"I think it's because of my mother. When I was very little, she would take me out to her flower garden and I'd help her plant and weed. She loved flowers, and I think she passed it on to me. After she died, Father got rid of the garden. I think it hurt him to think of her. So, consequently, whenever I'd mention greenery of any sort, he'd take the opportunity to belittle me as much as possible. He said flowers were only suitable to give to girls you wished to court." Brendan smiled ruefully. "Because only girls like flowers." Beast quirked one eyebrow in disbelief.

"I had known the man was a fool, but I hadn't realized the enormity of his ignorance. Are the splendors of God's green earth restricted to only one gender?" He made a motion encompassing all the life around them, from the glistening pond to the fragrant jasmine around them. "I've always believed that an appreciation for growing things showed strength of character." The men smiled at each other. After a moment of companionable silence, Beast looked at his claws, entwined in his velvet-clad lap. He ruminated on how best to break the news to his new friend; the last time he had mentioned bringing Beauty to the castle, they had quite a row. In fact it had ended with the boy
actually punching Beast in the nose. At the memory Beast hid a smile, until he remembered how quick the boy's pulse raced as Beast held his wrist, how ragged his breaths were, and how something like the familiar scent of the hunt hung about him. These memories easily morphed into the memory of the previous night's dream, and he scowled. He fully intended to tell the boy about his recent decision, but instead he asked in a low rumble, "Do you still miss her?"

"Hmm?" Brendan looked up at Beast in query.

"Your mother."

"My mother?" Brendan took a long breath before best deciding how to answer. "I always miss her. There's not a second that goes by that I don't feel this little ache, here, behind my heart." He put a hand to his chest, rubbing the breastbone absently. "Most times I don't even remember it's there. But then I see or smell something that reminds me of her, and it throbs, like...like a cut on your fingertip."

Beast looked at Brendan, puzzled. "How can you live with such weakness?"

"What?" Brendan's eyebrows drew sharply together.

"No, don't...let me explain what I mean." Beast tried to sort his thoughts out, realizing that this might be a tender topic and trying not to hurt the boy. It wasn't something that came easily to him, this whole tact thing, but in the interests of friendship he felt he should give it a go. "Is it worth it to have loved so fiercely that you still feel the loss of it after so long?"

Brendan bit his lip, thinking about his mother, and thinking about Kieran. "That's the stupidest question I've ever heard." He looked at Beast challengingly. "Of course it's worth it. Every second."

Beast tried to explain his confusion and defuse the boy's anger. "I just don't understand. I certainly don't miss my parents. Of course, I don't think I'd ever spent more than ten minutes alone with either of them in my whole life. I was raised by nursemaids and tutors." Brendan slowly smiled at the Beast's rueful expression.

"The price of power, hmm?"

"Something like that." Beast turned towards Brendan with an unreadable look in his chatoyant eyes. Brendan took a deep breath and made a decision. Beast's question had sealed it for him; was the risk worth it?

His answer was a most emphatic yes.

Brendan scooted an inch closer to the Beast. "I've enjoyed our conversation, but I think I shall retire. Good night, Beast." Heart in his throat, Brendan leaned in to daringly give Beast a small peck on the lips, not sure if his actions would provoke a rage and frankly, not caring. Though fully intending to sneak a kiss for only the smallest of seconds, the very instant that their lips touched, Brendan's breath caught. It was exactly what he had been imagining doing for a long time, and he found it very difficult to stop. He pulled away and realized that the kiss had lasted several seconds longer than he had meant it to. He swallowed and looked up into the Beast's golden eyes, apprehensive of what he might see there. He observed Beast's brows raise in surprise, then draw together as he began to open his mouth to speak. Brendan thought desperately that he must shut him up, and quick, so he kissed him again, harder this time, putting his hand on Beast's face so he couldn't easily disentangle himself. Beast tried to pull back for a fraction of a second, then Brendan felt a small shrug pass over Beast's shoulders, and the other man began kissing back.

He kissed back. Brendan thought he might die from that one simple thought, that Beast was actually
and truly kissing him back. Just as he was about to take the kiss a little further, Beast pulled away abruptly. Quietly, and with no expression on his face, he said, "Good night," and swiftly left.

Stupefied and frozen, Brendan touched his lips, not believing that he had actually dared to do what he had just done. Then, he bit his lip and smiled, feeling that same heady joyfulness that had kept him awake all night.

He had kissed back.
In Which the Mirror Plays a Part

That night Brendan had very interesting dreams indeed, dreams that left him flushed and wanting when he woke. At home, in the safety of his private attic bedroom, he would have thought nothing of finding a little ease at his own convenience, but here at the castle, he could never be sure who was watching. Nothing to take the wind out of his sails, as it were, like the thought of an invisible voyeur.

With a sigh, Brendan rolled out of bed and performed his morning ablutions before dressing. He felt more nervous to go to breakfast than he had been the very first time, back when he still wasn't sure if the Beast would eat him or not. After the events of the previous night, Brendan could not know what to expect, and almost talked himself out of going to breakfast at all. He really hadn't planned on that kiss, amazing as it had been. Brendan had thought he'd go about wooing Beast slowly, building up a strong friendship that would lead, naturally, to something more. But that kiss had just happened. He hadn't been thinking; he'd been raw from Beast's probing questions and Beast just kept looking so kissable...

"I've already committed to seeing this through to whatever end. I will not prove myself a coward. It may have been unwise, but I will not regret what I have done."

An invisible servant brought him a comb. Brendan took it distractedly and vigorously brushed out his chestnut hair. He looked on the vanity for the hair ribbon he had placed there last night, but it was gone.

"Excuse me, but do you happen to know where I can find something to tie up my hair with?"

Brendan asked the unseen servant. A soft breeze brushed by him. All the drawers of the vanity were opened and a big show was made of wind ruffling through each one. After only a few seconds, the drawers shut themselves and the breeze brushed by Brendan's arm as if apologetically. Brendan's eyes narrowed in suspicion. There had been new hair ribbons supplied for him anytime he'd asked for them so far. What reason would the servants have in hiding a silly thing like a hair tie from him? He shrugged. No matter. He'd just have to wear his hair loose. He had far bigger concerns on his mind. Bigger and furrier.

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When he walked into the Dining Hall, it was with his head held high and shoulders squared. He would not have Beast thinking that he was ashamed of his actions; but when he arrived he was both relieved and disappointed that Beast's usual chair was empty. A quick glance around told him that Beast wasn't anywhere else in the room, or out on the balcony, either. Brendan walked over to the glass doors and looked out over the white-blanketed grounds. Numerous tiny bird tracks traced their journey on the wide balcony rail through the new layer of fresh snow.

The aroma of eggs and ham caught Brendan's attention. As he began to sit down, he noticed a small scrap of paper atop his plate. He picked it up and read the small, old-fashioned writing.

"It snowed but little last night, and the morning is clear and cold. Excellent hunting weather. Expect me back no later than noontide. Enjoy breakfast."

-B

Brendan was pleasantly surprised to see a bowl of blueberries beside his plate, as well as a small pitcher of cream. He set the note aside and did as he was told.
Afterwards, Brendan threw on his cloak and went to the stables. A servant provided him with a brown woolen scarf long enough to wrap around his throat three times. Sufficiently muffled, Brendan enjoyed the sound of the light, glittering snow crunching under his boots. He remembered that he and Beauty had called that kind of snow 'diamond snow' when it laid itself thick and sparkling on the balcony of the nursery, when they were very young and their father very wealthy. They had flung handfuls of it at each other before their governess had ushered them back inside, clucking about pneumonia. One winter Beauty was severely scolded when she had spread a small bucketful of snow in the twins' beds. Brendan smiled under his scarf when he remembered Catherine's shriek; it had echoed throughout the entire manor and even gotten Father out of his office, a nearly unheard-of occurrence.

The stable was warm and smelled reassuringly of fresh hay and horse. Brendan slid the door shut behind him and unwrapped a few loops of scarf from his face. He walked past the empty stalls to Jean-Luc's, who nickered excitedly as Brendan lifted the latch and let himself in. The big horse bumped his nose against Brendan's chest, and they both enjoyed a few minutes of companionable ear-scratching. Brendan was pleased to see that a blanket had been secured around Jean-Luc, and had been given a pail of still-steaming hot mash.

"Glad to see they're treating you well, old boy." He patted the broad neck as the animal went back to lipping up mash. Jean-Luc had been one of the best thing Brendan's father had bargained for, after losing the family fortune and moving to the country. Not very fast and not much to look at; but very dependable, never balking at any task the d'Aumale's had set before him, whether it be yoke, plow, or saddle.

Brendan tangled his fingers in the thick coarse mane and leaned his forehead against that sturdy neck, breathing in the familiar horsey smell. "I wonder if you miss them too, old boy. Never thought I would, that's for sure." He spied a jar on the tack shelf that had a few carrots in it and fed one to Jean-Luc. He decided against going out for a ride, leaving Jean-Luc to his cozy stall and warm blanket as he walked back to the castle, tucking his chin down into the scarf to escape the icy bite of the wind. It was maybe an hour before noon and he wanted to be sure to catch Beast when he came back. He headed back inside the castle and took a few halls and stairs to his room. Once changed out of winter clothes, Brendan tucked Beowulf under his arm and asked the hallway to take him to the main parlor, which it did with amazing alacrity. Still marveling over that particular miracle, he settled down in a chaise lounge that didn't look too torn up. The mutilated furniture and torn wall hangings stood in stark contrast to the refined white wood paneling and finely carved mantle that spoke of the parlor's better days.

He remembered the first time he had been in this room, when he was exhausted and dripping with freezing rain, still in shock over his first glimpse of the Beast. He placed his hand over five great tears on the armrest on the chaise, noting how his hand stretched to its limit didn't quite span every tear. After a few moment's contemplation, he laid back with his book and waited.

He was just to the part where Beowulf had been bitten by a dragon when he heard the Beast return. He sat up straight. The Beast stomped heavily into the room, clutching his left arm close to his body. With barely a glance at Brendan, he stalked over to the fireplace and threw himself into the armchair. Eyes wide, Brendan leaned forward for a better look and saw the coat of his jacket was torn away, exposing a wide gash on Beast's forearm. "Your arm!" he exclaimed, dropping the book to the chaise and standing up. "What happened?"
"Elk," Beast replied shortly. He hunched over his injured arm and started licking it.

Brendan clucked his tongue, an unconscious imitation of his old governess. "What are you doing? Stop that. It's going to get infected." He went over the the armchair, assessed the damage, and asked the servants to bring hot water, soap, a cloth, iodine, and bandages.

"I'm fine," grumbled the Beast, turning away. Brendan insinuated himself in front of Beast and took his arm, tearing off the tattered sleeve in an eye blink. Beast protested, "It is nothing!" as he snatched back his arm and wouldn't meet Brendan's eyes.

"Stop being so stubborn. You helped me when I got attacked by a rogue harpsichord. And also that whole nearly freezing to death thing. Let me help you. We're friends, aren't we?" Brendan smiled at Beast, trying to beam innocent intentions as he tucked his unbound hair behind his ears and out of the way. "Don't you trust me?"

Beast stared at Brendan for a few long moments. Then wordlessly he stuck out his arm.

Brendan smiled again and began cleaning the gash and bandaging it, touching only where necessary, barely refraining from running his fingers through the short silky fur on Beast's arm.

"There." Brendan sat back on his heels with a satisfied look. "Not too shabby a job, if I do say so myself." He stood up, brushed off his breeches, and returned to the chaise he had been sitting on to give Beast some space. Never smart to crowd a wounded animal, and Beast seemed precariously close to that line at present. Brendan glanced at the hand-shaped claw marks on the chaise and kept his tone light. "So was that a keepsake from the one that got away?" He noted with gladness that Beast's frozen expression thawed, and that his huge shoulders dropped as the tension went out of them. He was learning to read his host correctly, it seemed.

"It does happen occasionally," Beast murmured, running a talon over the neat white bandages. A servant brought its master a new coat, this one a fine brocaded blue with silver edging. He shrugged off the one-armed jacket and put on the new. "This buck was quite a giant. His rack of antlers nearly cleared the treetops." Beast looked over at Brendan with a glimmer of humor. Brendan grinned. He himself was never a hunter, but he recognized a good old hunting tall tale when he heard one. "I began to give chase, but this buck wouldn't move. He bellowed loud enough to shake a few stars from the sky and charged me. I dodged, but he was damned fast. Sliced me like a fine cheese with one of his fifty points."

"He didn't run?" Brendan leaned forward, rapt. "He came at you?"

Beast nodded, watching the fire. "The males can be very dangerous when they're in rut." Brendan looked away, red creeping up his cheeks. That sounds familiar. Dangerous, indeed. "I should have known better," Beast continued. "I was...perhaps a bit foolhardy to even consider him prey. I'm glad he'll be out there still, siring good strong fawns to make good sport in a year or two."

"Why were you in here, anyway? The parlor room lacks the amusements of the music room or the library."

Brendan cleared his throat and looked at his hands, clasped in his lap. "I was here waiting for you, actually."

Beast quirked a bushy eyebrow and seemed to tense up again. "Oh?"

"I wanted to ask you..." Brendan's courage quailed, and he changed his mind at the last moment. "...if you'd like to try riding Jean-Luc." It had truthfully been something he'd been considering, just
not what he'd originally wanted to say.

Beast couldn't have looked more shocked if Brendan had suggested that Beast grow a new tail. "What?"

"I know he's not as fine as the horses you're used to, but, you know, I thought, he's a good mount, and I thought you'd like to. Um, Ride. Again." Brendan tried out a smile. It felt false, so he let it drop. "It's fine if you don't want to, I just thought-"

"You thought I'd like to ride again." Beast spoke the words slowly, like he was tasting a fine wine and finding the vintage was good. Brendan waited. "Yes. I would." Beast met Brendan's eyes evenly, and an actual smile flashed over his leonine face so fast that Brendan thought he may have imagined it.

"Well, then," Brendan stood up and made a courtly bow, only a little teasing. "Shall we then, good sir?"

Beast rose from his chair, shaking his head. "You're mad, you know that?" He turned to leave, not bothering to check if Brendan was following, which of course, he was.

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When he had come into the parlor from his failed hunt and saw the boy sitting there, Beast had thought that perhaps his guest was going to mention what happened in the garden last night, and he was...not even remotely prepared to think about that. Or even acknowledge that anything extraordinary had happened, in fact. Instead his guest had bandaged the gash in his arm with brisk efficiency, then made a small jest which Beast recognized was designed to put him at his ease. He had been sure that Brendan was going to mention it later, but was instead shocked to hear the offer that came instead.

It had been a bit tricky at first, as Jean-Luc became nervous when the Beast approached the animal and cinched the saddle securely around the horse's girth after Brendan led him outside. The afternoon was a clear one, and there was plenty of light for a safe ride. Beast wore a thick winter cloak, though the cold did not bother him much anymore. He had held out a palmful of sugar cubes and spoke in a low voice while Brendan held the large head until the horse settled down and lipped up the sugar. The horse had visibly calmed, and did not protest as Beast mounted up, pawing the frozen ground a little in eagerness to be moving. Brendan had murmured praise to Jean-Luc, handed the reins up to Beast, and stepped away.

And now he was again in a saddle. It had been a long time.

Brendan looked up at him and put his head to the side. Beast couldn't quite decipher his expression. "You're smiling," the young man stated, with a small twist of his own lips. Beast sat up a little straighter in the saddle and tried to keep his manner imperious.

"Well, what of it?" Brendan just shook his head wordlessly and just watched from where he leaned up against the fence that lined the riding path. Mollified, Beast gathered up the reins and kicked his mount into a walk. It took him only seconds to remember the shifting motions his hips needed to make, how to move, how to react, how to feel what the horse was feeling.

Something must have shown on his face, because Brendan chuckled low in his throat, ridiculous scarf obscuring most of his chin. The chilly breeze tugged at his hair and it flew about him like an
auburn halo. Beast noticed that his eyes were the same color as the cloudless sky. "Oh, go ahead. Take him for a run," Brendan said as he smiled up at Beast and indicated the riding path ahead. Beast looked ahead with barely concealed excitement, then back at his friend.

"Are you sure?" He could feel muscles bunching under him, as eager to be moving as he was.

"Yes, I'm sure. Go, already! Jean-Luc looks like he's champing at that bit!" A wide grin flashed at him over the woolen scarf, and Beast found himself returning an answering smile without consciously deciding to do so.

"Yah!" Jean-Luc burst into a canter the second Beast's heels touched his flanks, and Jean-Luc's mane streamed back, Beast's cloak flying. The horse's hooves cut up large chunks of frozen turf and they raced down the wide path. Beast moved his mount into a steady gallop and was soon laughing aloud at the ecstasy of flight.

Brendan watched raptly, leaning forward with elbows on the fence rail, as his friend rode out onto the flat plain that ringed the hedge maze. Brendan could hear Beast's low, rumbling laugh carried to him on the winter wind, and smiled quietly under his scarf.

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Beast remembered the next few days as a series of moments.

The Library

The afternoon rays slanted golden across the library, dust motes dancing in the air. "Here, listen to this," Brendan read out an amusing passage of his book, a fictional account of a wandering Visigoth pilgrim. Beast found, somewhat to his surprise, that he enjoyed listening. Brendan's trained musician's voice made him a fine orator, and Beast set his own book down in his lap.

"Do go on." His guest flashed him a quiet smile, and continued to read. The next day, Beast found something of note that he read aloud to Brendan, who leaned his head back and closed his eyes as he listened. Very soon the hours became so full of things to do together that days that had once felt to Beast as if they lasted for an eternity no longer seemed long enough.

The Music Room

One day Beast found Brendan in the Music Room instructing servants to replace furniture. "What in God's name are you doing?" he asked, voice indicating that would have been just a shocked to find Jean-Luc doing the redecorating.

His guest was standing hips canted to one side, a finger against his pointed chin. He watched a floating silk divan get moved into place with an expression of concentration. "Oh, hello. I'm switching out the old, torn-up stuff in here for undamaged things. I think the servants have some storerooms full of fresh furniture, perhaps. A little to the left, I think," he added to the floating divan.

Beast puffed up in indignation, his tail lashing once. "Why?"
"I did mention that the furnishings were old and torn-up, didn't I?" He flashed a disarming smile at Beast. "I started asking them if they could repair the tapestries-"

Beast snorted. "They're servants, not wizards."

Brendan ignored the interruption. "-so then I asked if there were suitable replacements, and if they'd bring them here. Doesn't it look better in here?"

Beast looked around. It did look better. Brighter, shinier, less tattered. Funny how he never noticed how...claustrophobic the room had been. "I...suppose I have no objections."

"Good." Brendan grinned. "Because I've already done the parlor room in the east wing."

The Game Room

They were walking back from an midmorning ride, which had become the standard on clear days, to the dining room for their luncheon when Brendan noticed an open door along the hall where he had never noticed one before. "What is this?" he asked curiously.

"Oh, that's the Game Room," Beast answered vaguely.

"You never told me you had a Game Room!" exclaimed Brendan, who shoved lightly at Beast's shoulder in reproach. Beast stood stunned as the young man brushed past him to peek into the room. So casually he did that, Beast mused to himself, a hand unconsciously going to where Brendan had companionably pushed him, as if it wasn't extraordinary at all.

"Come on, let's play something," Brendan said. Beast could not think of a good reason why they shouldn't, so he and Brendan spent a pleasant afternoon playing Fox and Geese, which Beast won, but just barely. After that they agreed upon Nine Men's Morris, which Brendan won by a narrow margin. They had such a diverting time that they requested the servants to bring them a small simple meal that they ate while gaming. Beast was pleased to find that his guest was much better at games than his father had been. Though perhaps it would please him more if Brendan was just slightly less adept at them. Beast disliked losing.

Beast suggested their next game be Rithmomachia, a game he was certain he could win. He was unprepared for Brendan's look of incredulity. "Rithmomachia?!"

"Yes, haven't you heard of it?" This would surprise Beast greatly; in his day, Rithmomachia was required learning in all schools.

"Of course I've heard of it. My grandfather was very keen on it, I recall. But I've never played it; no one plays it anymore!"

"What? No one plays The Philosopher's Game? The finest exercise in mathematics and strategy? Widely regarded as the greatest game of all time?"

Brendan leaned forward, chin on hand, looking wryly amused. "I believed they stopped teaching it in schools after the invention of the zero, and fractions and integers and things of that ilk." Brendan smiled encouragingly. "They teach chess now, though."

Though discomfited, Beast set up the chess board; unbelievable that this poor substitute could have replaced the Philosopher's Game. Chess certainly couldn't allow one to find harmony within the Pythagorean theory, could it?
After half an hour it was clear, to Beast at least, that he was well on his way to losing this inferior game, and feeling old and out-of-touch, smacked the board off the table with a loud snarl.

Across from him, Brendan just folded his arms over his chest and quirked an eyebrow at him. That eyebrow spoke volumes, and Beast was surprised to feel ashamed. "I, uh." He thought quickly. "I saw a bug."

Brendan's mouth twitched. "You saw a bug," he said flatly. Beast sat looking stern with all the dignity he could muster, but saw that his guest was not fooled, and sighed. "You are a good player," he said ruefully, though the admission cost him. He could tell that Brendan was pleased and trying to hide how pleased he actually was.

"So are you," he bent and picked up the board, servants helpfully plucking up chess pieces and setting them back into place with small clicks, "When you take the time to think things through." He smiled at Beast to soften the sting. "You like to rush headlong into the thick of things, with no regards for strategy or subtlety."

"Yes, well. I wouldn't exactly count subtlety as one of my more evident traits."

Brendan laughed. "No, I suppose not." They laughed together for a moment. Brendan took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, looking stoic but resigned to his fate. "All right, teach me Rithmomachia." And Beast felt a warmth that he told himself was friendship.

Beast's Bedroom

His dreams were back to shadows and sounds, the familiar dreamscape of sensation with no true shape. He was torn between disappointment and relief as again came the hot, pulsing rush of the hunt, as familiar as the long years he had endured.

But then the nature of the dream shifted, almost imperceptibly at first, but them became quite clearly a different kind of hunt altogether. The scents were overpowering.

And human.

An ache blossomed with vivid flashes of color and barely-formed glimpses of something very like sweat-slicked skin. This was not the savage glimpse of dream violence that would only be soothed by a real hunt. It was a very different ache, indeed.

Though Beast could not see, not properly, anyway, the way he saw with his waking eyes, he could feel...he could feel-

And he'd thought the blueberry dream had been bad. Jerking awake, rending a wall covering from its banister with a shredding of seams, the Beast's breath cut a rasping, heavy swath through the silence of the night. The dark shimmered away as his invisibles, always ready to swarm to his bidding, gave their eternal master the room to himself.

All that was left of the dream was a familiar scent in the air, and the fact that he knew it to be only imagined shook him to his core.

The Parlor Room
Winter was now in full swing. When the snow grew thick and the wind too cold even for his thick pelt, Beast would listen to Brendan play in the evenings. Beast would watch his hands moving over the keys or strings, deft and graceful, creating music out of nothingness.

Beast looked down on his own hands. The dark claws could retract a little, not as much as a cat's, but were just as curved and sharp. He extended them to their utmost. He remembered how long it had taken him to relearn how to hold a wineglass, how to turn a page, even how to dress with those deadly claws. What were these hands good for? Certainly not for creating anything. They were good for rending and tearing. He watched Brendan with envy until it struck him that he'd never done anything useful with his hands, even before The Change. He'd never done anything useful, period. He'd go out hunting with hounds and hawks, never needing to draw a bow himself. He'd listen to minstrels play in this very music room, never bothering to pick up a lute himself. He'd read books when the weather was too bad to hunt game, and when absolutely unavoidable, he had ruled.

In fact, now that he thought about it, the only impact he had ever had was to temporarily lessen the amount of wildlife in his forests and to dog-ear pages.

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Late afternoon grew into evening; the slats of sunlight filtering through the library windows dimmed and then faded, but Brendan did not notice. Only when he perceived a flicker from the corner of his eye did he raise his head from *A History of Finnish Sagas and Norse Eddas* and notice that a servant had lit the oil lamps around the room, the one right next to Brendan's elbow on the side table throwing plenty of light onto the pages. The warm glow from the lamps made the library feel cozy and close, cavernous though it truly was.

He stared for a moment at the flickering flame that danced at the end of the wick. Beauty had wanted an oil lamp, he remembered of a sudden, and wondered what his sister was doing right now. Was she reading by the light of a cheap tallow candle? Did she look up and think of him, of her lost brother? Had she waited for a letter, for any kind of sign? It must be about...two months, Brendan realized with a start, since he had left in the night from his home. Did she think he must be dead, and feel guilty that he went in her place?

"I can't believe I hit her," he muttered to himself.

"Hmm? Hit who?" Beast raised his head from his book, perplexed. Brendan jumped a little; he had forgotten the other man was there, reading across from him. He flushed with embarrassment.

"Oh." As cautious as he had been to ever mention Beauty to Beast, he felt the need to talk about her, and after all, Beast was his friend, wasn't he? Who better to confide in? With some trepidation, he said, "Beauty. When she was going to sneak off. I...hit her."

Beast blinked. "You hit her?" he said with incredulity.

"Lightly! Very lightly. Just to...knock her out," he said miserably. "I feel awful about it, to be honest." He didn't look up as the silence stretched out between them, gnawing at his lower lip. He knew it; he'd ruined everything by mentioning her.

Beast heaved a sigh, closing his book. "You did it to protect her." His tone was unusually quiet, and as Brendan looked up, he couldn't read the expression in Beast's eyes. He gave Beast a small, rueful
"Thank you," he said quietly, eyes dropping.

"Would you-" Beast began, then stopped abruptly. Brendan raised his head and looked at the other man quizzically. "Never mind," Beast grumbled.

"No, would I what? Please continue."

Beast took a deep breath and spoke quickly, as if plunging into a cold lake to get the shock over with. "Would you like to see her on the magic mirror?" His face held almost no expression, but to Brendan, who had become accustomed to Beast's tiny little tells, saw that he was in fact hiding a great deal of nervousness.

He considered the question carefully. On the one hand, suppose seeing Beauty would rekindle Beast's old self and thereby put an end to Brendan's extended stay? What if Beast found her to be very beautiful indeed? On the other hand... "Yes, please. I would very much like to see her and be sure she's alright." Beast stood up and straightened the cuffs of his shirt. Lately Brendan had noticed, not without appreciation, that the Beast had left off wearing a jacket over his shirts unless he was venturing outdoors. He stood up also when Beast indicated he should.

"The mirror is being kept in one of the rooms of my suite. You can have a look, and retire with your mind at ease." Beast didn't exactly smile, but it was close enough to make Brendan's heart skip in his chest. "Follow me."

The walk was short, since the hallways changed to suit their master's fancy and neatly bypassed three flights of stairs to lead them to the great grey door. There were two grimacing gargoyles set on alcoves above the twin doors which were inscribed with sinuous dragons and other fantastic beasts. Great gashes were gouged here and there, marring the designs. Beast pushed open the doors and stood aside to let Brendan in, who followed with apprehensive steps. Beast cleared his throat, reaching a hand up to run through his long hair. "You can wait here in the foyer. I'll... go get the mirror." He turned to another door, then added as if in afterthought, "Make yourself comfortable."

When he had left, Brendan felt free to gawk. Beast's own suite!

The foyer was fairly large and opulently decorated, mostly in grays and silvers, though as torn and neglected as everything else in the castle. Candelabras as tall as Brendan stood beside the three doors leading out of the foyer and further into the suites. All three doors were closed. Brendan sank down into a sofa only to come quickly back up, coughing at the dust that arose with him.

As he patted the dust off his clothes the Beast stepped back out into the foyer. "Ah. Sorry about the dust. Here," He held the mirror out at arms length. Brendan took it, feeling the warmth of the enchanted thing creep up his wrist.

"I... thank you, Beast." Beast shrugged with an air of carelessness. Brendan looked at the item he held in his hand for a long moment, not knowing what to do.

"I can leave, if you'd prefer," murmured Beast with what Brendan thought to be unusual perspicacity.

"Oh, no, I just... how do I make it work? I just tell it what I want, and it does it?"

"Pretty much." Beast made an encouraging motion with his hand. "Go on, then. It won't bite you." Brendan smiled at him, then held the mirror up and watched his reflection as he spoke.
"I would like to see my sister, Beauty." He quickly amended his question. "D'Aumale. In Amiens. Um, please." He ignored Beast's amused snort. The handle grew a little warmer in his palm as his reflection swirled away into silvery blankness. He gasped, automatically flipping the mirror over to check for trickery. "Amazing. How does it work?"

"Magic," came the wry retort from behind Brendan's shoulder. Before he could remark further upon it, an image coalesced on the surface of the glass. It was Beauty, as clear as if he were there looking at her in person. He spent a few seconds in wonderment before really processing what he was seeing.

She looked well, writing some sort of correspondence on her small desk. She was dressed simply but in good, un-patched fabric, and he was pleased to see that a fine oil lamp lit her work. He supposed that the money their father had brought home from the Beast's castle was being put to practical use, if Beauty had anything to say about it.

He breathed a sigh of relief as she smiled at a letter and set about writing her response, quill scratching across the paper. "I can hear the quill! That's remarkable!" He could feel Beast's breath upset his hair as his host laughed softly.

"You see your sister looking quite well and you remark upon the capabilities of the mirror. One would think you would dissect it if you could." Brendan smiled. She really did look well; she was even smiling from time to time as she wrote. Who could she be writing to? A swain, perhaps?

The image faded away to silvery swirls. Brendan set the mirror down on the mantel. He turned to face Beast, aware that the other man had been watching over his shoulder. "So, you've seen her now." Beast stood very still and said nothing. Aha, as I thought. Brendan's mouth thinned. That is why he offered to let me use the mirror; he wanted to see her for himself. "Well, what do you think?"

His voice remained light, empty of the apprehension he was indeed feeling.

Beast did not meet Brendan's eyes for a long moment. When they did lock on, those honey-colored eyes made the breath catch in Brendan's throat. "She looks like you," Beast said simply.

Brendan honestly did not know what to say to that. He forced his eyes to drop, suddenly acutely aware of where they stood and how close they were. "Thank you," he said, "for letting me see her. It does set my mind somewhat at ease."

"Only somewhat?" asked Beast, a hint of teasing in his voice.

He looked back up into Beast's eyes and was lost.

Brendan surged up and kissed Beast with such strength that it surprised himself. He snaked his arms up around Beast's neck and clung there, knees suddenly shaking and his heart thundering in his throat. Under his lips, Beast's mouth was soft but unmoving. He pulled back, fearing he had made a dreadful mistake. This was a much more forceful approach than he had taken in the garden, kissing Beast lightly while the scent of jasmine drifted about them.

Beast first looked pole-axed, eyes wide with surprise. Then with an intensity he had never seen in him before, Beast cupped Brendan's head in both huge hands, pulled him back up and kissed Brendan fiercely. Brendan clenched his fingers in Beast's thick mane of hair and let his body lie fully against the other man's, his blood thrumming hot, and abandoned all rational thought.

One of Beast's hands dropped from his head to the small of his back, and Brendan moaned softly into their kiss. The sound seemed to jolt Beast, who pulled his head away, breath fast and heavy. "I-- " His voice was low and harsh, that one syllable flush with uncertainty.
"Shh," Brendan whispered, and advanced on Beast so quickly that the taller man retreated a step, backing into the door. While he had Beast effectively trapped he reclaimed the kiss, rejoicing as he felt the last bit of Beast's resistance crumble. He hadn't yet introduced the aspect of tongues into the kiss, and felt he should rectify that. Before he could, Beast distracted him by running the hand in his hair down over his shoulder. He let himself fall out of the kiss, eyes fluttering closed at the caress, and could scarcely believe this was real. His eyes snapped open and he met Beast's dazed stare, wet his lips, pressed his hips meaningfully against Beast's, and said something stupid. "Is this the door to the bedroom?"

It took him a second to realize that he had said or done something wrong, and by that time Beast had already disentangled himself from Brendan's embrace and his claws were making scrabbling sounds on the door as he felt for the handle. "Yes, and, well, it is quite late, and I....just good night!" The door slammed in Brendan's face. He blinked, paused, raised his hand as if to knock, paused again, and turned around.

"Merde," he muttered, feeling absolutely mortified. I am the biggest idiot on the planet. It was going so well! Why did I do that, why did I say that?!

The why was pretty self-evident, as Brendan adjusted his clothing. Not thinking with your brain, you fool. He took a deep, steadying breath and walked out of the suite. Well, he didn't walk out right way. First he waited a minute or two in the hopes that maybe Beast would change his mind. However, the door remained closed, and no sound at all permeated the heavy stillness in the foyer, so he bit his lip and left.

When he arrived back at his rooms, he stood with his back to the door and spoke to the empty room. "I am a complete idiot. Oh God. What. I just. I don't even. Ugh!" He flung himself onto the bed so hard the canopy shook. He groaned in frustration and despair as he tried to think about cold water, dead things, anything but those strong hands, the firm press of that body, those amazingly intense eyes...

Not. Helping.

After regaining a modicum of composure, Brendan rolled over and lay spreadeagled on the coverlet, not bothering to toe off his boots. "How am I supposed to have breakfast with him tomorrow?"

Hmm. Maybe he'll pretend nothing happened. Like after what happened in the garden. He brightened up a little at this, but then quickly felt a pang of regret. I don't want him to pretend nothing happened.

He considered talking with the omnipofish, but quickly decided that the only thing more embarrassing than what had happened was to be reduced to asking relationship advice from a fish.

Despite everything, Brendan felt a smile spreading across his face. "I can't believe I actually did that. I'm insane." Yet still, he knew enough to tell when a man wanted him, and Beast had definitely wanted. His smile grew until he had to bite his lip to contain it.
Sleep had been elusive. Brendan had only managed a few hours of it when dawn crept thief-like through the gaps of the bed-curtains. He lay among the twisted sheets, tired but wide awake, and watched dust motes dance in the morning sun until he finally gave up with a heavy sigh and arose.

Immediately, the servants set to work with a gusto. The air hummed with activity as the invisibles stripped sheets, plumped pillows, and filled a hot bath. This flurry of activity was unusual; on most days they worked quietly, even furtively. Sometimes it was difficult for Brendan to even notice them working, so softly did they move and so careful their movements. He noted their changed attitudes with somewhat distracted curiosity as he bathed and shaved. They seemed...agitated. Or excited. Something had them all atwitter, but Brendan was too busy with other things to try to suss out what it was. He slipped a collared jerkin over his shirt as he remembered the russet brown of Beast's eyes, and the warm steadiness of his hands. He still felt so foolish for his unthinking words last night, and wasn't sure how he could even look Beast in the eyes after that shameful display.

Once dressed, a pair of invisible hands seized his collar. Brendan jumped in surprise. He looked down and watched in amazement as the unseen hands turned down the askew collar and smoothed it out. The businesslike fingers felt familiar as they brushed by his throat with brisk efficiency; he thought that perhaps he had felt these hands before. Surely that hand couldn't belong to the same person who had once grabbed at him with such lost, desperate passion, or had awakened him in the night with suggestively roaming fingers? He blinked as they plucked a stray thread from his shoulder, then spun him about to face the door. "Um. Thank you?" he said, feeling thoroughly mother-henned. There was an encouraging pat on his shoulder.

He took a deep, steadying breath before opening the door and walking down to breakfast.

Even though his heart skipped a beat when he saw the Beast standing before the great fireplace, his walk remained level. He rested his hands on the back of his chair and addressed Beast's hulking shoulders.

"Good morning." He waited to see if the Beast would turn around or speak. He did not. *Ah, well, it's as I suspected. The Silent Treatment, followed by the Pretending It Never Happened.* He cleared his throat and spoke again, louder, allowing the Beast to pretend that he hadn't heard Brendan the first time. "Good morning, Beast."

His host's head turned just a fraction toward the sound of Brendan's voice, and Brendan could see the outline of Beast's face in the morning light. The troubled look he read there led him to approach the Beast and ever so daringly laid a hand on the Beast's arm. "Beast, are you alright?"

"Do not touch me," Beast spoke so softly that Brendan had to strain to hear it. He let his hand slide from the velvet-clad arm. "You are bewitched," Beast continued, in a tone that rung ever so faintly mournful.

"Bewitched?" After a second of blank surprise, Brendan began to laugh, the sound of it too loud in the echoing Hall. "What do you-"

"It is *she* I am meant for, not for you."

Brendan stared open-mouthed at Beast's profile, stung utterly, but perplexed by the hesitant gentleness of Beast's voice. It was unlike any sound he had ever heard coming from him before; near a whisper, as quiet as a hare in the snow.
Beast took in a long breath, large paws clenched at his sides. His leonine tail lashed once before stilling. "You asked once how I got this way. Long ago, I angered a sorceress. She said I was full of vanity and pride and that I was...ugly inside. She did this," Beast gestured at his body, still speaking so dispassionately, "she did this to teach me a lesson. She said I would remain a monster until I found love. And now, do you see?" Beast turned to look down at Brendan, for the first time emotion coloring his voice. "Do you see that now that I am so close, so close to that woman who may free me, the witch ensures that I will not break the spell by sending her brother instead! Your arrival was all her design; the roads that turned you back, the snow that kept you here, all her plot to keep me a prisoner."

Brendan stared at Beast, horrified. Beast's rust colored eyes bore into him as the larger man went on. "Last night..." here Beast faltered and looked away, turning back to the fire. "You are under a spell of her devising. You do not feel as you think you do."

At this, Brendan broke into a nervous grin. "Ah, here I think I may have something to tell you." He again put his hand on Beast's arm, pulling gently so as to make Beast face him. "There's something I want you to know, to tell you about my-"

"I do not need to hear it," Beast hissed, "I do not want to hear the lies she put into your head. It pains me enough as it is to..." Beast turned his head away.

"Look," Brendan said urgently, "If all this is true, then answer me this; if it's true, then why did you kiss back?" He ignored his unbound hair as it flew into his eyes. A silence stretched between them, Beast meeting Brendan's flashing eyes for long seconds before looking away again.

"For all these long years I have had only myself for company..." Beast's voice trailed off into silence, as if not convinced by his own words.

"Is that all? You were just lonely? Truly? Or do you feel as I do, that there is more between us?"

Brendan tried and failed to catch the Beast's eyes.

"You are speaking nonsense," Beast's deep voice was so low that he nearly whispered. "What more can there be between us but friendship?" Brendan didn't think he was imagining the faint wistfulness in Beast's voice.

Feeling that everything was slipping through his fingers, Brendan grabbed the Beast's clawed hand. He did not flinch to feel their sharpness. "Beast, you must listen. You are right. I am bewitched. But not as you think! I am instead bewitched by your kindness, your intelligence, your great passion. I am bewitched by your eyes and your voice and the strength and compassion in your heart, and in this hand." Brendan brought Beast's hand to his face and held it to his cheek. Not taking his eyes off Beast's face, Brendan carefully pressed a kiss to Beast's palm.

Beast breathed in sharply, remembering the small, trembling kiss the boy had pressed to his face after Beast had pulled him from the freezing water. He knew the boy had been delirious and unaware, for who in their right mind would want to kiss a creature such as himself? But here he was, fully awake, holding the Beast locked in his gaze while his lips grazed his palm. Where they touched Beast felt a shock akin to fire. He shut his eyes tightly, head reeling.

When he opened them again, Brendan's smile had a touch of triumph in it. "Would you still deny it? That there is nothing between us?"

Beast had trouble finding his voice. "Enchantment. Only that."
Brendan clasped Beast's hand in front of him, drawing courage from the fact that Beast had not yet pulled away. "I notice that you do not claim that you are bewitched, Beast. Only I."

Beast shook his head, curved horns catching the firelight. "She would be unable to. I have some small defenses of my own. My friend, she's made you believe in something that can never be possible."

Brendan's heart gave a great lurch and he licked his lips nervously. It was time to tell the Beast something he had never told to any one, save a single invisible servant. He could not continue believing that Brendan's affections were a lie; desire born of only of falsehood and sorcery. "Beast. You would not let me tell you something before. Please listen now. You must believe me." He swallowed heavily, looking down at the Beast's great paw held between his small hands before continuing.

"I've only ever been attracted to men. My whole life." He swallowed thickly. "In school there was...a young man...whom I cared for very much. We...were lovers for a time. " Here he had to break eye contact, overcome with old emotion. "And after him, there were...others, but that is not the point." He met Beast's eyes. "The point is that I am not bewitched, Beast. This is the way I am." He lifted his chin a fraction, though he felt his knees quake.

Beast's brows drew together in disbelief and confusion. "Lovers? How is that possible?"

Brendan's jaw dropped, flabbergasted. "What do you...have you really been that sheltered? As long as there have been people, there have been those who seek out the affections of their own gender. How could you never even have heard...I mean, you have all those Classical books! The histories of Alexander, the Grecian plays, the poems of Sappho...The Satyricon, for God's sake!"

"Surely that is all just satire." Some of the Beast's old growling rumble was beginning to creep back into his voice.

"Satire!" Brendan couldn't help but drop Beast's hand and nearly double over laughing.

"Well I certainly don't see how it could be possible!"

"I could show you," Brendan blurted fervently, then flushing deep crimson, not believing that he had dared to say that out loud.

Beast was rendered entirely speechless by this heartfelt outburst. Brendan recovered from his embarrassment enough to continue, and took a step closer to the Beast. "Beast, believe me when I tell you that what I feel for you is real, not some kind of witch's spell."

"And what do you feel for me?" The words were so quiet that Brendan could barely hear them.

The only answer Brendan could give was to stand up on his toes and kiss him.

After what felt like an age, Beast's arm slowly slid around Brendan's shoulder and Brendan felt a deep, visceral growl emanate from Beast's chest. Encouraged, Brendan let his lips part and swiped his tongue across Beast's lips. Beast gasped and Brendan ran his hand down the short, soft fur on Beast's face to soothe him.

"I've dreamed about this." Brendan whispered against Beast's mouth. His heart thundered so loud in his chest he was sure it could be heard outside the castle walls.

"You have?" Beast whispered back, drawing his head away to speak. His heavy brows were raised in surprise.
"Mm. Repeatedly." He guided Beast's lips back down to his own, unwilling to let them go unclaimed a second more. This time, Beast's lips parted a fraction, which was more than enough for Brendan to slip his tongue inside and deepen the kiss, head swimming.

As it turned out, the fangs didn't get in the way at all. That's one mystery solved, Brendan hazily thought. He felt heat rush through him as he pulled their bodies together. The important thing, he thought, was to keep Beast from thinking too much. When he thinks, he freezes up.

Beast groaned deep in his throat and his arm tightened around Brendan's shoulders and his talons buried themselves in Brendan's hair. "I've dreamed of it too," he breathed. His slow growl slipped all the way through Brendan's bones, warming him like a fine liquor. They kissed for an eternal moment longer, then Beast abruptly pulled away. "Wait. Sappho? Really?"

Brendan could not constrain the laughter that bubbled up.

At that moment, two fish, swimming silently in their garden pond, were having a laugh of their own.

Beast's question and Brendan's ensuing laughter hadn't dispelled the moment, so much as postponed it. They realized that neither of them had eaten yet, and so helped themselves to the breads and cheeses that had been laid out on the table some time ago, casting heavy looks at each other every now and again. Brendan sensed that Beast was like a skittish horse, close to spooking, and gave him some distance.

Beast was both intrigued and confused by the turn of events. He needed time to think, time to process... For the first time in his life, he had no idea what to expect and no idea what tomorrow might bring. He trusted that Brendan--and what an unfamiliar and wonderful emotion that was, trusting--would be able to enlighten him. It couldn't be like courting a woman...could it? Beast snorted at himself. As if that comparison makes any difference. It's been so long I've probably forgotten how to do even that. His companion passed him a torn crust of fresh bread, their fingers skidding over one another's, and he pushed his concerns to the back of his mind. It was enough to live in the present, and, for a moment, not to worry about tomorrow. Breakfast passed without further event and mild conversation, and the day eased into several.

The Library

Brendan was puzzling through a Roman text, drawing upon every bit of knowledge gained in his Latin lessons to do so, when he stumbled across a particular line in a poem. A very explicit line in a very detailed account of the history of Alexander the Great. One particular conquest of his; and not one involving a battlefield. This gave him an Idea.

"Beast? How good are you with Latin?"

"Good enough. Better at Greek," he answered, not looking up from his book.

"I've come across a paragraph in this that I can't quite parse. It's translated into Latin from Greek, so maybe you'll have better luck with it than I. Could you translate it for me?" At Beast's nod he passed the book over the small end table between them. Beast looked at the page Brendan had indicated. He watched Beast's eyes as they first skimmed, froze, and widened. He tried not to grin.
"Where did you find this book?" Beast asked slowly.

"Over there. Why? What's it say?" Eyes wide, the picture of innocence.

"If you climb back up there you'll find a Latin dictionary," Beast retorted tersely, and handed the book back. Temporarily thwarted, Brendan leaned back in his chair, sighed, and continued reading.

The Music Room

"There is no way this is happening."

"Just trust me, it'll work."

"I doubt that very much. It won't work. I'm not...shaped right."

"Oh, come on, your fingers are perfect for it!"

"This is not going to...how are they 'perfect for it'?"

"You'll see, you'll be brilliant. It's like you have picks on the end of them."

"Well, that's something no one has ever told me before."

"Can't imagine why not," Brendan smiled and stood behind the other man. "Here, hold it like this. On your lap." Beast shifted uncomfortably as the harp was placed in its proper position.

"Put this hand here," Brendan's hand slid down Beast's arm to place his fingers along the correct strings, lingering longer than was strictly necessary. "And this one here. There. Now you just stroke it gently." He leaned forward over Beast's shoulder, being sure to breathe his words directly into the long pointed ear. He was both amused and gratified to see the ear flick backwards in response, like an annoyed cat.

He felt the shoulders beneath his arms move, and Beast strummed once, very hard. There were several discordant snaps and twangs as every string broke.

In the silent moment that followed, the two stared in dumbfounded bemusement at the wreck of an instrument that now sat before them, broken strings waving haplessly.

"I'll go get new strings," Brendan sighed. "It will only take me a moment to restring it."

"I'll go get the iodine," Beast replied wryly, and stood and left before Brendan could retort.

The Game Room

The evening had passed without much event, and the pair had retired with some sweet, dark port and had been playing for hours. Beast had, after some cajoling, agreed to subject himself to another chess match. Soon enough his misgivings proved correct.

Beast's finger whipped across the board and pointed with incredulity at the two offending pieces.

"What is that? What is that you just did?"

"What? What did I do?"
"That...that...shenanigan with the king and the little piece that looks like a castle!"

"The rook?"

"Yes, the rook, I knew that! That move is clearly cheating! Neither of those pieces move in that fashion, nor may they do so at the same time!"

"It is too a legal move! I castled my king."

"Castled your king?' Now you're just making things up!" Beast crossed his arms over his broad chest in affronted dignity.

"I am not!" Brendan protested. "Just because you were not aware of the rule does not mean that it does not exist."

"That is utter nonsense!"

Brendan's eyes narrowed a tiny fraction. "I resent the implication that I am a cheater."

"If the shoe fits..."

Brendan abruptly stood. "It may take me days to find a chess rulebook in that enormous library of yours, but by God, I will do so!" As he began to stride across the game room, Beast stood and swiftly caught Brendan's arm as he passed. The young man stopped and turned to face Beast, a wary look in his eyes. "What?"

Beast paused for a long moment before speaking in a low tone. "I don't...rightly know. Just...stay."

Trepidation melting, Brendan smiled frankly then leaned up on his toes to kiss the Beast softly on the lips. Beast's already careful grip on Brendan's arm softened and he relaxed under the touch.

As Brendan drew away, he smiled slightly and said, "Do you concede the point?"

Beast's brow furrowed. "I would not go that far," he rumbled. Brendan lifted one conciliatory hand. "Let me rephrase my argument." He sifted his fingers through the Beast's mane and tugged his head down to kiss him properly.

Beast's Bedroom

Night approached and as the hallway lanterns lit themselves, Beast turned to his guest after a late dinner and bid him a good night. As he turned to walk to his rooms, he was aware of the soft echo to his footsteps; Brendan was following close behind, hands clasped behind his back as if going for an afternoon stroll.

Unsure of how to respond to such a thing, Beast remained silent throughout the trip.

When they arrived at Beast's bedroom door, Beast pivoted on his heel and drew himself up. Clearing his throat, he leaned in pointedly and said, "Good night."

Brendan mirrored his pose, leaning far forward into Beast's personal space. "It is lovely." His smile was the perfect mix of gentle and predatory. "I agree. It is a very good night."

Beast pulled his head back a fraction, uncertain of how to proceed. "Yes. So. I shall bid you a good..."
night, then. Since we've established it is, in fact, a good one." Brendan pressed his lips together and nodded slowly as he seemed to consider something of great import.

"Yes. This is the part where you invite me in," He spoke slowly, as if teaching grammar to a student. "To your room."

Beast swallowed. "Is that...is that proper?"

Brendan blinked. "We're two people sequestered away from the outside world in a magic castle together; how much of a concern is propriety, really? Who's to say what is proper for us, in our rather unique situation?"

"...I take your point." Beast gently cleared his throat again. "You are of course, more than welcome to join me in my drawing room."

Brendan smiled radiantly. "Thank you," and trotted through the door before Beast could hinder the proceedings with further courtliness.

After hesitating, collecting himself, and following Brendan inside, Beast found himself stopped at the threshold by the sight of his guest lounging with particular languor on a half-mauled settee in the corner. Beast couldn't help but find Brendan's expression to be unfairly expectant.

"Would you like any..." Brendan's eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch. "tea, or a nightcap?" The eyebrows drifted back to their usual level.

"No, thank you. I'm fine."

Beast smiled a polite fraction, nodded, and opened the door to the antechamber, through which could be seen the entrances to both the bath and the bedroom. He sidled through, noticing peripherally than Brendan's lounge turned into a lean as he craned his neck to follow the Beast's movements.

As Beast hovered nervously around his dresser, he wondered what forgotten human rituals to prepare for bedtime he could enact to make him seem more normal in Brendan's eyes. It had been a long time since he had made any sort of preparation for sleep other than to shrug out of his clothes, curl up on his bedcovers, and close his eyes. Brendan's voice rang out from the other room, breaking him from his reverie.

"Very nice rooms. And may I say that is a rather...impressive looking bed. Is that headboard made of oak?" There was a pause. "It's nice. Sturdy-looking."

Suddenly struck by how farcical his life had become, Beast huffed and turned about, placing his hands on either side of the doorway to the drawing room. "We seem to be laboring under the misapprehension that I have any idea what to do in this situation. Whatever...this rather unique situation may be. I have no frame of reference for this."

Brendan was struck by a fierce pang of affection at the lost look in Beast's eyes. After a moment's consideration, he nodded, stood, and said, "Then allow me to bid you good night, my most gracious host." With a small bow, a concession to the courtliness that Beast seemed to favor, Brendan took his leave.

Beast stared after him, flabbergasted, and as the door shut, he shouted, "That doesn't give me a frame of reference!"
The Parlor Room

"So what had you planned on doing with your education once it had finished?" Beast hesitantly and haltingly picked up Brendan's hand and held it in the air, unsure of what to do with it now that he had it.

The previous night, after Brendan had left for his bed, Beast had read up on all his Classical books, the ones he always thought were satire. New light was thrown upon the deeds on Alexander and Hephaestion, and even the Emperor Hadrian. He had read only ten pages into the Satyricon before carefully setting it aside as too ridiculous. And too filthy.

After hours of what could only be classified as studying, Beast felt just as much at a loss as he had before opening a single page.

Brendan shot him a quick smile, cheeks flushing very pinkly, and eased their hands down to rest comfortably entangled on the couch cushion between them. He slipped his fingers around Beast's as he answered, voice a touch breathless. "Well, I didn't have to do much, really. Our family was wealthy enough that I could take up Father's trade at any time I pleased. I was sent to University to teach me some culture, and to keep me out from underfoot till I came of age to inherit. I had thought," he ducked his head as if embarrassed at the confession, "to become a musician, but there's no money or future in that unless one can also compose, and I've never had the talent for it." He shrugged. "Once Father lost everything and we moved to the country, all our old plans fell apart. I figured I'd probably save up money from working as a clerk and buy the general store, perhaps. I don't know. I didn't think that far ahead."

Beast turned Brendan's hand over in his own giant paws, one talon carefully tracing the delicate lines that lay across the palm, and the small calluses that adorned the fingertips. "You would have been wasted on a profession as paltry and mundane as being a clerk." Brendan looked askance at the other man. "Is that so?"

"Quite. People destined to be clerks are dry, dull, unimaginative, and passionless."

The corner of Brendan's mouth turned up in a smile. "Then that would indicate that you find me to be the opposite of those things."

"I didn't say that." With a hint of a soft laugh, Beast leaned his head down and caught Brendan's lips in a slow kiss. Brendan gasped and Beast could feel his pulse quicken beneath his hand. Beast freed one hand to card through Brendan's chestnut curls. He could not quell the expectation that any second Brendan would take a good close look at his fearsome visage, change his mind, and run away. But instead, the look in those startlingly blue eyes as they looked up at him was very sure, and darkened with some heavy emotion he could not name. Brendan reached up to trace the curving outline of one of his horns with soft, questing fingertips. Beast jerked away.

"Beast," Brendan whispered against his lips, "it's alright. I won't touch them, if you wish."

"No, I...that's not..." A query bubbled up, Do they bother you so little? The words felt fragile on his tongue, and he swallowed them, unsaid. Instead he let his hand drop from the dark hair and kissed the face beneath him much harder than he had before. He had been taken by surprise in every kiss they had shared so far, and it pleased him to instigate one of his own as he leaned in to fully swipe his tongue over Brendan's. It took some thought to remember how to do this; how to breathe through a kiss, how not to bump noses, how the slick rasping slide of tongue made his own breath come
faster...His free hand fell into Brendan's lap. Brendan gasped into the kiss and pushed his hips up into the Beast's palm without conscious choice. Beast broke the kiss and quickly took his hand away, alarmed at Brendan's quick gasp, sure that he had hurt him.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, ashamed of his great unthinking strength and fumbling claws. It would take so little for them to draw blood. "I did not mean--"

"Don't be," replied Brendan in a husky tone that Beast hadn't heard before. It sounded very...interesting. It made Beast want to hear it again. "In fact I would not object if it happened again." Beast could see the pulse racing in that pale throat, and was amazed that he himself had been the cause. When the young man looked up at him, it was with a simple trusting openness, as if he would be amenable to anything Beast wanted. Anything at all.

Beast's heart skipped in his chest, though with nervousness, not passion. Having such utter trust aimed at him was completely outside his realm of experience. What should he do? Was there a correct course of action? He hadn't any time to think, anymore... Distance; that was the key. He leaned back, moving his hands away from Brendan, which was more difficult than he had anticipated, as warm and pliant as the other man was. It was like forcing himself to climb out of a toasty bed on a cold morning.

"What was his name?" he asked softly. "The...lover you had at school." The word 'lover' had been surprisingly hard to speak. It felt too personal, too intimate. Just saying it lent it weight, and truth.

Brendan blinked, eyes clearing a little. "Kieran." He noticed how Beast's brows came together in query, so he added, "He was Irish."

"Ah," Beast said softly, the pieces finally coming together. "The songs."

"Yes. He taught me most of them." Brendan looked away, eyes fixing on the fireplace.

"I see." Beast found himself unaccountably curious, but couldn't seem to form the right words to ask. Fortunately, Brendan seemed to know what he was thinking anyway.

"He moved away and got married." He shrugged expressively. "I was quite upset at the time."

Beast watched his face closely and felt his own heart catch a little. "And now?"

Brendan thought for a long moment, and then a slow, revelatory smile spread across his face. "I'm not anymore." He scooted closer to Beast and tilted his head back with the gleam of challenge in his blue eyes. Beast found he could not back down from it, so he moved forward and kissed him as the fire crackled in the hearth.

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Though winter's most severe weeks were past, on this particular night snow fell in large, fluffy clumps on the greenhouse ceiling, where they soon melted and ran down the glass in winding rivulets. Inside the greenhouse, the air was as warm and moist as summer, and the fragrance of growing things was a tangible pleasure. Beast had always enjoyed a slow walk through his garden, and found that his enjoyment was enhanced by the accompaniment of a friend. Even the stroll by the fishpond hadn't been unpleasant, though the two koi had been bickering with one another over the nature of the universe in a most irritating fashion. His companion had mentioned that he had dubbed
the pair 'omnipofish' in his head for some time, which Beast had found very amusing. Their conversation soon returned to literary avenues, as it often did.

"I still must disagree with you," said his friend, who walked beside him, taking two paces for every one of Beast's. "Why should it be 'a heap of lies', as you put it? I see no reason why Polo would lie about what he found."

"Money," answered the Beast with a short bark of laughter. "People want to hear what they think they already know; that foreigners are hedonistic cannibals, noble savages, and heathen bigamists. Who would want to read a book about how people from strange and foreign lands happen to be pretty much like everyone else? 'Witness the strange and savage inhabitants as they get up early for work! See the foreign devil have a light lunch!'"

"Well, I think his version was much more interesting."

"Which just proves my point." Beast flashed his rare smile at the other man, who laughed heartily. Beast noticed that he had a good laugh; it was deeper than his slightness might indicate, and held a mellow richness that Beast knew must come from years of vocal training.

Brendan hid a yawn behind his hand before speaking. "Well, this has been a very engaging evening. I thank you for your company, Beast." He set a hand on Beast's arm. The touch sent a frisson up his spine. Though they had shared little more than kisses and caresses, Beast discovered that his pulse began to race every time those slender fingers touched him. "I bid you a good night, Beast." The smile that was directed at him robbed him of his ability to think, and the other man had already turned to take his leave when Beast remembered the proper response.

"Yes. Good night, Brendan."

Brendan froze in his tracks. Beast watched in bewilderment as his guest slowly turned back to face him. His expression was completely indecipherable, and Beast blinked, wondering what had so struck him.

"What did you say?" The tremulous softness in Brendan's voice took Beast aback. Had Brendan misheard him and thought that Beast had leveled some insult at him?

"I...just said good night. What did you think I said?"

Brendan stepped forward with such boldness that the baffled Beast took a surprised step back.

"I thought I heard you say my name." The ardent heat behind those words astonished him. Beast was grateful that the other man couldn't see his face flush hotly under his fur. He had said it, hadn't he? He wasn't sure when exactly it had happened, but in his mind his guest had stopped being "the boy" and had become...something considerably more.

Before he could speak another word, Brendan had closed the distance between them and attacked Beast's mouth with the ferocity of a wild animal. Slim but strong fingers dug into his biceps as Brendan licked his way into Beast's mouth.

Though startled, Beast's body acted of its own accord and answered Brendan's advance with an aggressiveness of its own. He grabbed Brendan's waist and pulled him closer, till that slender body was pressed firmly against his own. The scent of the other man filled his nostrils; a mix of sandalwood soap and warm skin that left him delirious. He leaned into Brendan's neck, licking and nipping a trail of kisses up his throat and along his jaw, rapid pulse flickering under his lips. The feel of stubble dragging across his tongue intoxicated him in ways he never could have imagined; that
proof of maleness sharp under his tongue.

Another proof pressed into him as the man in his arms slid his hips against him. Brendan pulled himself up and took the tip of Beast's ear between his teeth, applying light pressure that sent sparks shooting behind Beast's eyes. He moaned low in his throat and twined his tail around Brendan's leg without realizing he was doing so. He moved his hands from Brendan's waist to the small of his back and pushed those hips into his own. The feeling of pressure on his hard member left him breathless; he couldn't even remember the last time he had experienced that particular feeling. Decades ago, certainly.

Brendan shuddered in his arms and growled huskily into Beast's ear. "Bench?"

"Bench," he answered quickly, voice ragged, and dragged his guest over to the nearby marble seat without putting an inch of air between their bodies. This feat accomplished, Beast sat down heavily and pulled Brendan on top of him. Brendan was quick to straddle Beast's thighs and resume the feverish kiss.

Abruptly, he pulled back. "What would you--I could..." Brendan ducked his head, biting his lip. He looked at Beast through his lashes, words coming uncertainly, but clearly eager to please. Beast swallowed, finding this hesitance unexpectedly becoming, even endearing. He brought his hands up over Brendan's shoulders, once again struck by how strange and marvelous it was to have another person touching him, actually here in his arms, after so many lifetimes of solitude.

Women he had been with, so long ago, had usually been professional courtesans or the occasional young widow, and as a result had always been forthright and outspoken about what specific acts they were willing to perform. Once, he had asked a courtesan if she could at least pretend that their congress wasn't such a businesslike affair. She complied, and it was awful. The fluttered eyelashes, the forced endearments. Beast hated the artifice of it, the falseness of feeling. He'd never asked for it again.

He had always felt that sex had been one of his onerous princely duties; settle land disputes, allocate treasury funds, bed a harlot. Oh, he had done it often enough --more often that he had settled land disputes, certainly-- for his passions had run high and the momentary release had been welcome. That was all it really had been; a temporary easement of tension, same as a hot soak after a long ride, or a massage after a tough boar hunt.

Never, in all his days, had he felt the heady rush of arousal so keenly as when this man smiled at him, or when a lock of that dark hair spilled over those blue eyes, or when the scent of that skin filled his breath. He felt it now, the need piercing through him like a knife, and the depth of his feeling frightened him as he had never been before.

So he closed off the vulnerable heart of his emotions and struggled to regain some control. He knew if he let Brendan touch him with those long, skilled hands that he could play Beast as easily as he did a harp. Beast determined that this time, at least, he would be the one leading the charge.

Well, into the fray, he thought, and plunged his tongue into Brendan's mouth. He slid his hands over Brendan's back, then further down to cup his buttocks, so firm and round that he groaned aloud into their kiss. The sound made Brendan shiver and press up against him. Again Beast felt the firm swell of the other man's hardness, which made part of him --the vulnerable part that he had closed off-- thrill and panic simultaneously. The part of him that needed control recognized a chance to take it, and remembering what had occurred in the parlor room two days previous, brought his hand around and ground the heel of it against Brendan's erection.

Brendan made a strangled sound in his throat, hips snapping forward as his head fell back, hair flying
wildly into his eyes.

Despite his intentions, despite every effort to lock away his vulnerabilities and to take control, Beast lost everything in that moment. He wanted only to see that expression again, to feel that body shudder in his arms again, to hear his whispered name from those lips again. He watched Brendan come apart in his arms and felt every preconception he had shatter.

Brendan trembled, his breaths slowly evening out. His arms, still draped around Beast's broad shoulders, were supple and relaxed.

"I...don't think that's ever happened when I've had my clothes on," Brendan said with a shaky laugh. A crease appeared between his eyebrows, and embarrassment crept over his face. "Um. I don't want you to think that I'm normally that...uh...fast."

Beast silenced him by leaning forward and kissing him. "Hush." Brendan blinked, as if he had never expected to hear that word from Beast's lips. "I don't. It's been a long time, yes?"

Brendan blushed. "Yeeess...but it's been even longer for you, no?" These last low words were uttered very close to Beast's ear, so close that his breath tickled the fine hairs there, and he shivered.

"It...it has," Beast breathed. He used a gentle hand on Brendan's neck and another kiss to guide the other man off his hips and onto the bench next to him.

Brendan looked confused. "Don't you want me to..."

"I think," Beast said as he gracefully rose to his feet and straightened his cuffs, "that we should do this properly next time."

"Properly?"

"Yes. In a bed, perhaps? I understand that is the usual thing." Beast's lips curved in amusement. "It is late, and you are understandably tired." He enjoyed seeing the flush creep across Brendan's face like a sunset. "I propose this: you retire for the night, as will I, and tomorrow after we break our fast we shall adjourn to my chambers to...continue tonight's conversation. Is this agreeable to you?" Beast asked, brows raised in innocent inquiry.

Brendan's mouth opened and closed several times before he could find his words. It gratified Beast immensely that he had finally managed to catch the young man off-guard. "It...it is most agreeable. If you're sure..."

"I am," Beast answered quickly.

Brendan's teeth caught his lower lip to contain a joyful smile. "Then I will see you at breakfast tomorrow, Beast." He inclined his head at his host, to which Beast dropped into a courtly, formal bow.

"And I shall bid you a bonne nuit, cher monsieur Brendan." At that moment, the wide, shining smile he received seemed to make every year of his imprisonment worth it.
The first thing Beast did upon waking was to order the servants to thoroughly clean his rooms.

Actually, the first thing he did upon opening his eyes was have a thorough, if not wholly unexpected, panic attack. He had managed to fall asleep quite peacefully the night before, a remarkable feat considering what had transpired the previous evening; the things he had committed to with his own voice, the things he had done with his own hands. He sat up, claws tensed in the sheets, remembering it all in a rush of tangled senses, the absolute certainty he had felt last night while looking into Brendan’s eyes dissolving in the confused jumble of what should be.

Ever since Beast had unwillingly acquired his bright, infuriating, intoxicating guest, nothing had turned out the way it should have. He felt as if everything that had occurred in the past weeks had happened to someone else, and he was just watching as the story unfurled before him like a strange and familiar play. Realizing this made him feel instantly better. Whatever had happened and whatever was going to happen, it was okay because it was happening to someone else, not to him. He wasn’t responsible for any of this. His breathing slowly evened out. Then he set the servants to work.

He had them dust and polish furniture, beat out the rugs, replace anything that was torn or tattered, and make up the bed with clean sheets without thinking too carefully about why he was doing it, for if he stopped to think, he might collapse in a boneless heap of cowardice upon the scrubbed floor.

So instead he performed his morning ablutions, dressed, and made his way down to breakfast.

Beast had intended to be early for breakfast, but Brendan had arrived even earlier and was seated at his usual place, glass of juice idly in hand. When Beast strode in, Brendan’s face was turned toward the window, apparently watching birds flit about the sill. When he heard the click of Beast’s steps his head snapped around and he gave Beast a wide smile. “Good morning,” Brendan said with warmth. He had left his hair down today, Beast noted.

“So I’m just going to come right out and ask this.” Brendan’s hands were flat on the table, but he met Beast’s eyes easily with a resolute set to his chin. “...Alright.”

“Are you pretending that nothing happened last night?” Beast set down his fork with exaggerated
calmness, faintly proud of himself for the steadiness of his hand.

“No. I am not.”

All of Brendan’s breath left him in a rush. “Oh, good.” He beamed at Beast, that careless smile that always scattered all of his carefully composed thoughts. “Then I would like to thank you.”

“Thank me?” he asked, mystified.

“For a nice evening. Um, a spectacular one, actually.” He cocked his head to the side, taking in Beast’s blank confusion. “It’s customary.”

“Ah.” Beast took a long drink of whatever-was-in-the-glass to give himself some time. “Is it also customary to reply that I enjoyed myself immensely, and look forward to similar actions in the future?” Even across the long table, Beast could see those clear eyes darken with what had to be arousal.

Brendan spoke in a carefully controlled voice, but even so, Beast’s keen ears picked up the tremors in the vowels. “In that case, what do you say we forget about the rest of the food and go up to your rooms?”

What the hell, Beast thought. This wasn’t really happening to him anyway, so he may as well enjoy the show. He set his napkin on the table and stood up.

“Follow me.”

The feeling of swimming through unreality was starting to ebb by the time they reached the bedroom door.

He closed the door behind them, and Beast was suddenly seized by an intense feeling of inevitability; any moment Brendan would change his mind, would turn to leave, and Beast worked to gather his courage to reach out to him, to pull him into his arms and somehow convince him not to go.

They stood silent for a few seconds of eternity, and then it was Brendan who finally closed the distance, sliding his hands over Beast’s shoulders. Beast was struck by the bravery of this small action, this little gesture, one he had found himself unable to do. But now it was done, the connection made, and reality snapped into focus.

He brought his face close to Brendan’s neck and his hands moved to embrace the other man as if by their own volition. This is really me, Beast realized, breathing in Brendan’s sandalwood scent, this is happening, and I want it to.

Their lips met easily, like it was a well practiced dance, and Beast stroked a hand through Brendan’s dark hair as they kissed for a long moment.

Abruptly, Brendan pulled away. “Beast.” He shifted about uneasily. “I have a question. And, um. It’s...kind of a big one.”

Beast leaned forward, skating a hand over Brendan’s shoulder, feeling the warm firmness of his skin through the thin shirt he wore. He could hardly believe that Brendan was here, in front of him, not running away from him; in fact, moving closer. “Hmm?”

Brendan swallowed. Beast noticed that his cheeks were blazing red. “Right. So. This question. That
“Just ask it, Brendan,” Beast murmured with fond exasperation, wrapping a strand of that bewitching hair around his claws. Brendan’s eyes fluttered closed at the sound of his name on Beast’s lips.

When his eyes opened, he took a deep breath and spoke firmly. “Is everything human down there?”

“...What?” Beast’s hand froze in their explorations.

“Okay, look. I have to know beforehand. Exactly how much did the transformation change you? I mean, you have all your...” Brendan motioned a hand in the direction of Beast’s pants.

“Yes! I have all my...” Beast waved his hands emphatically. “What kind of question is that?!”

“Um. An obvious one? Look, Beast,” Brendan laid his hands on Beast’s shoulders, “No matter what, I’m not going to run away. I just need some advance warning here. I think that’s a reasonable request.”

There was a prolonged silence. Beast felt very hot under his fur. “Everything is...normal.” He heard Brendan let out a minute breath.

“Well, that’s....something of a relief.” He smiled up brilliantly and pulled Beast’s head down for another kiss.

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The kiss quickly grew heated, and Brendan surged into it with a soft, eager sound he was a little surprised to hear come from his own throat. He pushed gently on Beast’s shoulders, leading him step-by-step closer to the bed until they were right next to it. Beast’s arms wrapped around him and before Brendan could gather his wits he was being pressed back into the soft mattress, Beast’s breath hot at his throat. Brendan arched up with a surprised gasp into the welcome weight of the man atop him, head swimming.

Beast pulled back and fixed him in place with an intense hunter’s glare. “You’re sure? You’re not...going to change your mind?” He knew how much those words must have cost Beast, and did not let his gaze falter.

“I’m here, Beast. I’m not going anywhere.” He brought his head up to further express his sentiment with the language of lips, sliding his tongue slowly over Beast’s lower lip before taking it between his teeth. Beast groaned and pulled Brendan closer.

Beast leaned into the kiss and tangled his fingers in Brendan’s hair. He broke away and lightly bit the skin above his shirt collar, where neck met shoulder. Brendan shuddered, eyes sliding shut as Beast’s tongue traveled the dip of his collarbone and up his throat. The press of sharp teeth turned his knees to water. His voice shook.

“If...if this has all been an elaborate scheme to devour me, now would be a good time to spring the trap.” He felt Beast’s low rumbling laugh against his skin as he dragged his lips up from Brendan’s jaw to his ear, again biting lightly.

“That would be one convoluted trap. Would have been a lot easier to eat you on that night you
wouldn’t leave. Could have saved myself a lot of headaches.” Brendan managed a breathy laugh.

He resumed kissing him with considerable ardor, and Brendan was lost for long moments, drifting with delight. Several minutes later, Brendan surfaced from his pleasant haze to realize that Beast wasn’t just prolonging the kiss; he was stalling.

“Something wrong?” he whispered against Beast’s lips. He nipped at them lightly while waiting for an answer. Beast sighed heavily and pushed up on his elbows.

“I...I don’t...” His brows furrowed in frustration, as if he were unable to force his thoughts to form into words. Brendan reached up a hand to smooth his hand over those heavy brows, over the tendrils of russet hair spilling across the forehead, and slid his hand up over one curved horn. It felt like warm, ridged ivory. He noted with satisfaction that Beast did not flinch or pull away.

“It’s okay. Talk to me.”

Beast huffed, looking away. “I know how to do this part. I just...have no frame of reference for...for the rest.”

Brendan’s lips curled into a smile. “Ah, that old frame of reference problem.” He leaned up to draw his tongue along the curve of Beast’s jaw. The short soft fur felt...interesting against his tongue. He hadn’t expected it to be so surprisingly silky, not too dissimilar from skin. He felt Beast draw in a quick breath at the touch. “There’s no need to rush, you know. We can just do this, this kissing stuff. There’ll be time later for...the rest.” He let his head fall back to the pillow to watch Beast’s face. Beast’s tongue flicked out to lick his own lips, and Brendan felt a flaming tongue of lust curl in his belly.

“No,” Beast breathed, “I want...the rest.”

Relieved, Brendan wrapped his arms around Beast’s neck and pulled him down for another kiss. “The rest, it is then.” He rolled and pushed the other man on his back and straddled him, eyes warm and mischievous.

“First thing,” he said, “is to remove some of these clothes.” Without waiting for a response he pulled off his loose shirt and flung it away carelessly. He licked his lips, suddenly nervous as he felt Beast’s eyes on his skin. “And now yours.” He moved his fingers to the hem of Beast’s shirt, whose hands reflexively clamped down over Brendan’s.

“I don’t...” Beast’s throat moved as he swallowed thickly. “I think that should stay on.” Brendan’s eyebrows shot up.

“Do you?” He tilted his head to the side and spoke frankly. “Beast, I am here. I am not running away. Let me see you.” Beast did not move, face tight. “Please,” Brendan asked gently, meeting Beast’s eyes. Eventually he nodded once, then loosened his grip on Brendan’s hands. Brendan returned his attention to the shirt, and it was not long till Beast’s chest lay bare.

He had not intended to stare. That was definitely the one thing he had planned on avoiding. It would not do to make Beast unnecessarily self-conscious. He simply couldn’t help it.

Beast looked even broader and larger without the vestments of civilization, muscles well-defined even under the golden fur, which was as short and smooth as it was on his face and arms, excepting the very middle of his chest where it grew long and curled. Brendan wanted to sink his fingers into that tuft of chest fur, and was about to, when he noticed Beast’s nipples, dark pink and completely bare of any hair, and instead wanted to do something about them.
Apparently he had stared in admiration too long, for Beast suddenly sat up and made as if to move. “I understand,” he growled, expression shuttered. “We’ll forget this ever-”

“No!” Brendan lunged forward and pushed Beast back down, as surprised as Beast was that he had managed to do so. “I’m looking at you because I like the way you look, Beast.” He ran his hands down over those shoulders, feeling the muscles tense underneath them. He stroked gently, over shoulders and chest, skating over the firm abdomen, and back up again to repeat the process. Beast relaxed minutely with every path his hands traced.

Brendan was going crazy just keeping to those gentle, relaxing strokes, but he restrained himself. Now that he was here, finally in bed with Beast as he had longed to be for weeks, it was so difficult not to skip the foreplay, as pleasant as it was, and get right down to the delicious main event. He had never been very good at prolonging the moment and was always impatient in bed, but this was important. Perhaps if fortune granted him another opportunity, he could have that sort of rough, needy passion he craved, but its place wasn’t here, not this time. He had to be careful, and deliberate, and watchful. If Beast started to have second thoughts and Brendan did not notice it, he knew there would be no way to fix it, the same way that a shattered wineglass could never be properly put back together again no matter how much glue you used.

After the sixth pass his hands made over the lightly furred torso, Beast made a deep, eager sound in his throat, reached up and delved his tongue deeply into Brendan’s mouth. Fingers closed in Brendan’s hair and his hips rocked up, once, and at the firm pressure of it Brendan thought he might pass out from sheer, delirious bliss.

“More,” Beast spoke, his voice husky with heat.

“Yes,” agreed Brendan. He ran his hand down to Beast’s breeches and let his fingers dip underneath the hem. Beast arched into the touch and gasped wordlessly, breath quick and shallow. When he recovered, he met Brendan’s eyes, licking his lips absently. A new light came into his dark eyes, so focused and determined that it made the breath catch in Brendan’s throat.

Beast firmly pushed Brendan back up, hooked a nail under the ties of his breeches and deftly unfastened them. He did not take his eyes off of Brendan’s, who gasped as Beast’s hand reached in and took hold of him.

“Ah!” Brendan shuddered, as equally aroused by the unexpected certainty of Beast’s actions as he was by the firm touch itself. It was...unexpectedly expert. “Mon Dieu,” he choked out as those fingers flexed, watching a predatory smile spread across Beast’s face.

Before he knew it, he was on his back with Beast on hands and knees over him. Beast was momentarily sidetracked by Brendan’s breeches, which seemed reluctant to come off. “Take these off?” Beast asked breathlessly, hands tugging at them.

“God, yes.” With Beast’s help he managed to kick them off, shucking his smallclothes while he was at it. And suddenly, he was naked in front of Beast. For the second time, he thought, remembered his near drowning with some embarrassment. Hopefully Beast found this time a bit more impressive than the first. Or at least agreeable enough to continue doing that amazing thing he had been doing with his hand.

Beast ran a hand over the side of Brendan’s thigh and settled on the curve of his hip. His eyes were shadowed, betraying no trace of feeling. “You look...” Beast exhaled and his eyes were suddenly flooded with a myriad of emotions that disappeared too quickly to read. He squeezed them shut for a full second, then took Brendan’s face between his hands and kissed him firmly. He drew away and spoke with a barely discernible quaver. “You look...very good.” Brendan felt the compliment as a
rushing warmth all the way to his toes. He was about to speak when the feel of light hair tickling his skin distracted him. Beast’s tongue drew a moist line down the middle of his uncovered chest, and his wits were instantly scattered by agile hands and insistent lips.

“Beast,” he whispered noiselessly. His fingers scrabbled at Beast’s waist, fumbling in his eagerness before managing to unfasten the buttons of Beast’s pants. Beast stilled, and Brendan quickly looked up at his face to gauge his response before concentrating his attention much lower.

He pressed one hand alongside Beast’s hardness, feeling the heat of it all the way through the thick fabric. Looking up at Beast, he moved his hand over the bulge of it and pressed. Beast bit his lip, hard, as if to contain a fountain of words, and Brendan watched in fascination as Beast’s piercing gaze lost focus, and his breath stuttered past his lips.

“Yes?” he asked softly, running the palm of his hand slowly up. One last chance for Beast to change his mind.

“Yes,” The word dragged harsh and thick out of Beast’s throat. Brendan tried to bite down a grin as he peeled the top of the pants down over Beast’s hips and took the matter well in hand. The gasp Beast made nearly broke him. Brendan sucked in a breath and bit his lip, nearly losing all control as he stroked slowly down. Eagerly, he tried to yank down the breeches with his free hand.

Beast stilled his hand and moved away to roll on his back. Brendan took the opportunity to rake his fingernails down Beast’s sides. Beast arched into the touch with a guttural sound.

“That’s,” He swallowed thickly, panting a little. “That’s very distracting.”

Brendan smiled wickedly. “Is it? So sorry,” he chuckled disingenuously. He swirled his fingers teasingly in the thick trail of hair leading down Beast’s stomach. “What am I distracting you from, dear Beast?”

Beast indicated his last remaining garment with some mild aggravation. “From getting these off.”

Brendan removed his hand and sat back quickly. “Ah, my apologies. An important task, one that I support fully. Please carry on.” He settled back on his haunches to watch.

Beast squirmed easily out of his breeches until the knees; it seemed he had some minor difficulties in maneuvering the bunched cloth over his backward-bending long ankle, and the large, taloned foot. Brendan observed with interest as the tendons flexed and the cat-like toes stretched. He wanted to spend time exploring them, running his hands over those strange planes and angles, but decided that he had used up all his allowed gawking time looking at Beast’s chest.

In but a moment, Beast had thrown the discarded pants off the side of the bed. When he leaned back, Brendan let his hand go back to what it was doing, causing Beast’s eyes to roll back in a very interesting way. Beast was a little larger than normal, as he had expected—not to say that he had made a habit of spending perhaps hours speculating over the lurid details of Beast’s body, no, certainly not—but not alarmingly so. He was, however, as hard as a bar of iron underneath that silky skin. He licked his lips and stroked once very firmly while watching Beast’s suddenly very open and expressive face. He was enthralled by the clear play of emotions on those normally taciturn features, and moved his hand down to cup the heavy sac in his palm. He bit his lip to contain a moan; it had been a long time since he’d touched another man this intimately, and his hands itched to touch more. Beast went very still, breath coming short and fast to his lips. Brendan reached back up and wiped his thumb up and over the crown, wiping away a bead of moisture.

Beast shivered, sat up, and growled.
The sound reverberated all the way into Brendan’s bones as Beast surged up and bore him down to the mattress, pulse spiking at the thrill of feeling Beast’s powerful body covering his own. When those hips settled over his, he cantled them up to thrust against Beast.

It felt as though lightning shot through his limbs, and he cried out brokenly. Beast buried his face in Brendan’s neck, breathing in his scent while pulling Brendan’s hips up again, a shuddering gasp ghosting against Brendan’s neck as they pushed against one another.

He had other, more intricate plans for this encounter, but waiting any longer was quickly becoming impossible. He fiercely kissed the other man and bucked his body against him, thrusting hips and tongues straining for ascendance. Beast moaned deeply into his mouth, and any resolve to go slowly crumbled. He gave in to the fire that burned with want and need, a hot flood of energy smoldering beneath his skin as he drove tighter and harder against that burning eager body. One of his hands dipped down between them, unable to completely close his fingers around them both, but it was enough to bring them together with a delicious friction that set sparks off behind his eyes.

He squirmed in Beast’s grasp as they panted and rocked together, bodies finding a hard, driving rhythm. They strove together with clutching fingers and twined legs, bruising teeth and apologetic lips as they ground and twisted as one entity. Brendan felt them both throbbing in his grasp, and his head fell back, hardly aware of the pleading, animal sounds he was making. He strove with a raw, aching need as he tumbled toward that welcoming, shuddering break, that tumultuous crashing wave that tightened his overwhelmed skin and burst upon him, rushing and roaring in his ears and after so many months of wanting this dear god everything was perfect and he tripped and tumbled over that edge, coming hard with a glad shout.

As he felt Beast tense above him he gasped, “yes, yes,” unable to express in sensible words his desire to see Beast fall apart, and Beast pulsed hot over his hand, turbulent swells of climax shuddering though his encircling limbs. Beast rode it out with his face buried in the crook of Brendan’s neck, breathing short gasping moans that just might have been his name.

They collapsed to the sheets with a shuddering exhalation. Slowly they stopped trembling, and Brendan reluctantly drew his cramped hand away. Beast bit him tenderly on the neck before rolling off onto his side, one arm still across Brendan’s middle. Brendan ran his fingers over the fur, slick with sweat like a horse after a long ride.

When he thought he could stand up without too much wobbling, he gingerly moved Beast’s arm and went to the water basin along the far wall. He dipped a cloth in the lukewarm water and returned to the bed with it. He climbed up beside Beast, whose eyes slitted open to watch him wipe their mingled seed from his skin. When that was done, he pressed a kiss to Beast’s lips and offered him the cloth. Beast looked embarrassed as he cleaned himself up, but Brendan wasn’t having any of that, so he kissed him again until he felt an answering smile against his lips.

Suddenly overcome with the depth of his feeling, he took in a deep rattling breath, and pushed his face against Beast’s chest, arms twining about his body.

“Alright?” Beast asked with concern.

Brendan hid his beaming smile against Beast’s chest, certain that if he looked up, his love would radiate out and Beast would see it and and he would know and it would ruin everything and Brendan’s whole world would shatter apart around him. “Very,” he said. At the back of his mind had crept the fear that once the moment was over, Beast would snap to his senses and become his old, hermetic self. But here he was--staying put and not pushing Brendan away, in fact winding his arms around Brendan’s shoulders. He wished fiercely that this moment could be preserved, a jewel of memory frozen in amber, unchanging forever.
A finger caressed the side of his face, and he looked up into Beast’s eyes, noticing how very close they were in color to warm, dark amber. He leaned happily into Beast’s palm as it touched his cheek like a pleased cat.

“Do you want me to go?” he asked softly, then cursed himself. What was it about this man that made him always say the wrong thing?

Beast’s fingers slowed their exploratory crawl. “No,” he said. “Do you want to?” His fingers flexed minutely against Brendan’s cheek.

“No,” he answered.

A long pause. “Good.” Slowly Beast twined a curl of Brendan’s hair around his finger and pulled him in to plant a slow, lingering kiss on his lips. “We can have lunch here, if you like. Are you hungry?” Brendan realized that he was, enormously so, and said as much. “Then I will send for provisions straight away. Are you,” he seemed to fumble here, as if he was unsure of the proper pleasantries, “are you content to remain here while I bathe?” As he spoke he levered himself up to his feet.

Brendan felt his eyebrows rise and tried to keep his voice light and teasing. “Oh. Feeling a trifle unclean?”

“What? No!” Beast protested, looking baffled. “It’s just...sweat makes me all...spiky.” He looked like he might be blushing under his fur, and Brendan felt the knot of worry in his belly ease. He chuckled warmly.

“Well, we can’t have that, can we?” He lay back, hands crossed behind his head. Beast lingered, his eyes trailing over Brendan’s nude body, and it was his turn to blush. He could almost feel the tangible weight of those amber eyes on his skin. “I could join you, if you like,” he offered a touch breathlessly.

Beast hesitated. “I think...not this time.” He gave Brendan a small, quiet smile before moving through the curved, arched door of the bathroom.

Brendan looked up at the silk-tasseled canopy above him, stretched all the way to his toes with a lazy smile, and waited.

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Beast twisted the brass knobs of the bath and let the basin fill. This was one of the times he was glad he had invested in the installation of running water, a luxury that had only been available for the wealthiest, and even then it had been cost prohibitive to outfit more than one or two rooms. It would have been decidedly awkward to have the invisibles fill a bath while he had a naked man in his bed. Mon Dieu. A naked man in his bed. He rested his hands on the rim of the sink and looked at the space on the wall where a gilt-framed mirror had once hung. He wondered if he looked any different; he certainly felt different. It wasn’t just the usual lassitude that came after sex. It was perhaps something in Brendan’s eyes when he looked at him; the warm, open, acceptance. Yes. That might be it.

He considered the open curiosity and admiring fascination evident in those blue eyes as he lay bare;
not once did he flinch, not once did his eyes dart away or his hands hesitate.

He had to clench his fingers into the basin of the sink at the thought of those hands to keep from melting to the floor. Steam rose and curled around him.

When the bath was ready he scrubbed quickly, dried himself with a thick towel, and threw on his dressing gown. He went through the second set of doors and made his way through his suite, noticing with surprise how lived-in it looked with new candles lit in the candelabras and fresh silk upholstering the divans. He stepped outside his rooms and stood in front of the griffon-carved doors. He spoke aloud to the air.

“Two lunches to be served up here. Nothing too fancy. Leave it on the sideboard of the foyer, not the bedroom itself. And something to drink.” He opened to door to slip back inside when he pictured Brendan’s disapproving face. He paused. “Thank you,” he added, unable to keep it totally sarcasm-free, but it would have to do. Beast rolled his eyes at himself and moved back through the door.

He stopped at the entrance to the bedroom, arrested by the sight of the young man stretching his arms over his head. Brendan smiled languidly at him as he shut the bedroom doors behind him and moved next to the bed.

“I don’t know why you bothered with the bath,” Brendan said, a foxy slyness in his voice. “You’re just going to have to take another one later.” He moved to the edge of the bed where Beast stood, rose up to his knees and draped his arms over Beast’s broad shoulders. “I can cope with a little spikiness.”

Beast’s knees threatened to wobble. He slid his arms around Brendan’s back, marveling at the feel of hairless skin underneath his palms.

“This was a good idea,” Brendan continued, letting his fingers tangle idly in Beast’s hair, “coming up here right after breakfast. That way we can spend the whole day in bed, if we like.”

Beast’s felt his adam’s apple slide up and bob down again as he struggled to keep his composure. “It was a good idea, wasn’t it?” Brendan arched himself up to Beast’s ear, body stretching into a long, sinuous line.

“I have a few good ideas of my own, you know.” His low murmur was heavy with promise, and Beast felt a need that had been slaked begin to surface again.

“Really,” he breathed, aware of how his voice shook minutely. “All of your ideas thus far have been quite exceptional.” He felt the edge of a slick tongue tracing the outer shell of his ear, and drew in a sharp breath. “Would you care to elucidate these ideas? I can assure you I am agog.” A light laugh vibrated the sensitive fur of his ear, sending a shiver down his spine.

“I would,” Brendan abruptly pulled back, sinking back down onto the mattress. “After lunch.” He smiled cheekily.

And so they talked idly of unimportant things, laying together on the rumpled bedcovers, until Beast heard the slight click of a closing door, and went to retrieve their lunch trays from the foyer. They ate stretched out on the bed, indulgently heedless to crumbs or spills, and Beast felt more alive and awake than he could ever remember feeling.
In Which Magic is Unpredictable

Chapter Twenty; In Which Magic is Unpredictable

It was a readily agreed upon fact that magic was unpredictable. Even the most ancient of her sisters, those who could pull magic from the aether in gauzy strips to be woven into rain, fire, wind, love or death, knew that no matter one’s precision, if the magic developed enough will of its own, there wasn’t really anything for it.

It meant one had to be careful. One had to treat magic as a living thing. A spell had to be fed, nurtured, coaxed, and only when control was absolute, commanded. She had done all this and more for centuries, bestowed gifts upon those who deserved them and punishments upon the wicked. Over the centuries she had aided in the rise and fall of paupers and kings alike. She had woven her magic into the forests and hills of her chosen land and, though the spells wore away and faded, she could see their remnants glitter like a watermark on every sprig of grass when the sun rose and set each day.

One particular swath of woods, dark and remote, winked balefully up at her with a sharpness she found she did not entirely like. She had worked a spell on a castle there, she knew, though she had worked many spells on many castles. Its lord had been beautiful and vain, and his insides has been rotted with anger and coldness, composed of disdain for human life and an arrogance she had found she could not abide. So she had changed him, and she had left him.

The years had grown long, much like the brambles that climbed the castle's walls and the thick scratching limbs of the trees that barred the castle's roads, and the shadows the magic cast had grown longer. It wasn't that she had forgotten, precisely, but the living spell had kept itself. It had kept its castle's secrets. These could not be rushed, and the time had not yet come.

Now, though. Now the time was come, and the spell had turned awry.

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Brendan’s first good idea, after the empty luncheon plates were set away on the nightstand, was to thoroughly catalog and document Beast’s physical peculiarities--purely in the interests of scientific inquiry, of course. He started with one of Beast’s large hands, grazing the knuckles with his tongue. Beast drew in a sharp breath as Brendan began, then quickly relaxed with a sound much like a purr.

The things I do for science, Brendan thought with a secret smile as he pushed up Beast’s sleeve and with his tongue drew a broad stripe along the thinly furred skin of the wrist. He noted the muffled sound Beast made and thought to himself, Ah, he likes that, check.

When he glanced up, he saw Beast’s eyes slightly narrowed. He froze immediately, wary that he had somehow misstepped. “What is it?” he asked.

“You have the strangest expression on your face.”

Brendan felt his cheeks grow hot and swallowed his initial affronted response. “Oh?” he said mildly. The corner of Beast’s lips quirked upwards. “It’s the same look you get when you’re translating Latin.”
His eyebrows shot up. “You watch me when I’m reading Latin?”

“Well, when you try to read Latin,” Beast teased, easily moving Brendan onto his back and settling atop him.

“Oh ho, how the gentleman doth jest,” Brendan huffed with mock indignation. It was hard to pretend offense when Beast was cleaving to him like a second skin and nuzzling his nose in Brendan’s hair, but he was making a valiant effort nonetheless.

“So to what do I owe the look of such intense concentration? Are you running equations in your head? Remembering the names for all the tendons in my hand, perhaps?”

“Maybe I’m trying to learn you.” The words came out breathier than he had intended them to.

Beast propped his weight on his elbows and looked down at the other man. “You’re doing fine so far,” he said quietly, then brushed his lips against Brendan’s temple. “Better than you are at Latin, anyway.”

Brendan laughed. He had a witty retort on the tip of his tongue, he really did, but completely forgot what it was as Beast slid down and kissed him. Brendan hummed appreciatively, running his hands over the watered silk of Beast’s robe. All this talk of books and reading when there were so much better things to do...

All this talk of books...A slow, skulking thought had been creeping in the shadows of Brendan’s mind for some time, and it just now finally sidled into the light.

Like a Beast he shall remain, forever, frozen in time as his heart was frozen in bitterness, until the day comes when he learns to love, and is loved in return, in spite of what he has become. That was what he had read in that strange and beautiful book so many long weeks ago, hidden in that dusty broken-mirrored room. Like a Beast he shall remain, until he learns to love and is loved in return. It was written, and it was true in a way that Brendan couldn’t express; as if the words had been penned with a firm certainty that mortal hands could not possess.

The words had stuck in his brain like a pebble picked up in a horse’s hoof; deceptive in its size, but digging in a little deeper with every step.

So here was the crux of it then-- Brendan had Beast in his arms, and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was in love with him. He hadn’t even felt this way with Kieran, this utter unquestioning certainty that what he felt was real--that it wasn’t mere infatuation or some permutation of lust--but love. He loved. He knew it down to his marrow.

And Beast remained as he was.

Beast did not love him.

Logic had never been one of his favorite classes at the University, but he had been quite good at it nonetheless. He knew full well that the only way the curse would be broken was if they loved one another, and it wasn’t broken, ergo Beast did not or could not love him. There was no other conclusion to draw.

It wasn’t an issue of something as trivial as shape; Brendan had fallen for Beast as he was, in spite of what he had become (how could the book have gotten even that so right?) and he did not wish for Beast to look any different than he currently was. The issue was instead that for all Brendan’s bravado, all his forthright words and his unhesitant actions, he harbored a deep-rooted fear that twined around his gut like a thorny bramble. After Kieran had left him, he had barely been able to
pull himself back together, and what he felt for Beast was...was a great deal *more*.

He had known at the start that Beast would most likely reject him-- or perhaps worse, *laugh* at him-- but he had accepted the risk and gone ahead anyway. He had not been rejected; but neither were his feelings returned.

Beast did not love him. Accepted him, yes, desired him, perhaps. No matter what had just occurred between them (delicious as it was), the proof was here in front of him, looking down at him below a golden-furred brow.

“Now what’s that look for?” asked Beast. His mouth was curved into a crooked smile.

*That’s for knowing you’re going to break my heart, and knowing that I’m going to keep giving it to you anyway.* Brendan managed to return the smile, pushing his troubling thoughts back down into their shadowy refuge. “Just thinking.”

Beast propped his head up on one hand and adopted a serious mien. “Good, you should definitely get some practice in.” Brendan laughed and shoved the other man off of him.

“*Bâtarde béat!*” he muttered with a smile as he sat up.

“Such scandalous language. And the basest of lies. My parents were married,” Beast drawled, causing Brendan to break into chuckles again. He couldn’t ever remember seeing Beast in such good cheer, and a warm glow suffused his chest thinking that perhaps he was the cause.

“So what were they like?” He settled down opposite Beast, lifting himself up on one elbow. “You parents. I mean, you’ve met my father, unlucky you. You know what he’s like.”

Beast managed a sort of awkward half-shrug from his supine position. “They were...I don’t know. The King and Queen. Distant, maybe?” His gaze suddenly sharpened. “Your father...does he know?” Brendan blinked, uncomprehending. “About...you know.” Beast waved a vague hand in a motion that seemed to indicate Brendan, himself, and the bed they lay on all in one swoop. “About you?”

“Oh! No! No. Definitely not. He’d disown me in a heartbeat.” He hadn’t intended for his voice to sound so bitter, so he cleared his throat to mask it, fingers idly tracing the ornate pattern of the duvet. “Distant, hmm? I suppose I can understand that. I remember you once saying you were raised by nursemaids and tutors.”

Beast watched Brendan’s fingers as they moved. “I suppose I was.” They both fell silent for a few moments. “Do you want to see them?” Beast suddenly asked, pushing himself off the bed.

“What?”

Beast smirked, extending a large hand to pull Brendan to his feet. “Just get dressed and follow me.”

***

It wasn’t until Beast was standing in front of the doors, Brendan’s soft footfalls close behind him, that he considered that this may not have been a good idea.

He himself hadn’t been in this wing of the castle in *years*, and while there was no telling what sort of state it was in, that was not what gave him pause.
This room was full of his secrets.

Brendan stepped lightly to his side, and the shoulder brushing against him sent a little frisson of electricity up his arm. He wasn’t certain he’d ever get used to that, the sensation of touch, so strange and foreign and addictive. “Are we here?” Brendan asked, “not that I have any idea where here is.”

Beast looked archly at the other man. “This,” he said with the lofty air of a proclamation, “is the Portrait Gallery.” He swung the doors open before them.

Chandeliers flared to life, chasing shadows into their cobwebby corners. There were no windows, and the network of halls were clearly old and unused, once-fine carpet now greying and curled. The air had a stale quality, though that was quickly fading as the light grew brighter. Frames adorned the walls in vast multitudes.

Brendan made a soft exhalation of surprise, then looked up at Beast with unguarded delight. Beast gestured his hand before him grandly, clearly inviting his guest to explore at his leisure. He felt a quaver of nervousness and hid it behind a wry smile.

Brendan gave the long hall a measuring look. Beast stood to the side, unconsciously sticking close to the shadows. He carefully watched Brendan walk up to the first portrait.

“Who’s this?” Brendan indicated before him; the painting was not in good shape, the frame marred with rot and the canvas murky with age, but the image was still discernible as a pretty young woman with long dark hair and serious eyes, a delicate hand set atop the head of her sleek ashen hound.

Beast shrugged. “It was customary for royals to send portraits of their marriageable daughters to any eligible princes.”

Brendan’s head snapped back to Beast, eyes wide. “You were supposed to marry this woman?!”

He barked out a laugh. “Hardly. I’m not even sure who she is. We must have received dozens of portraits like this from all over. It was considered crass to not hang up every damned picture you were given. Can’t just throw them out, after all. Nobles are like packrats that way. That’s why this gallery is so ridiculously large. Anyway, it was sent to my elder brother, not to me.”

“Oh.” Brendan stepped back. “Is this the elder brother who traveled with the Norsemen? The one who brought you the book?”

“...am surprised you remember that.” Beast aimed a small smile at Brendan. “Yes, that is he. Barnabie.” The name, said aloud, sparked a small and unexpected flare of panic. He had brought Brendan here, after all, on the whim of a passing fancy, thinking he would enjoy seeing something new of the castle. But now that he was here Beast felt strangely exposed, more naked than he had felt a half an hour ago when he actually was naked. He was suddenly seized by the desire to run. He quickly mastered it, admonishing himself. Do you not trust him? Has he not already learned so much of you and not yet turned away? What does it matter if he knows of your family, too? His mouth tasted bitter. All that is here are the faces of dead people. There is no harm.

His legs still quavered with the impulse to run, so instead he stepped forward, skipping past several faded portraits of strange princesses as he walked. Brendan kept pace and asked in his strident tenor, “Is there a portrait of him?” Beast’s eyes focused sharply on him as he drew to an abrupt halt. Several second passed in silence, Brendan merely raising an eyebrow questioningly.

“I believe so.” Beast rumbled softly, “it is this way,” and he led Brendan to a large, gilt-framed painting near the end of the hall. This was obviously the main area of the gallery; iron-wrought
sconces had been carefully placed to give each painting emphasis and luminance. He felt the slight breeze of the invisible servants as they lit more candles around him. Beast moved up to stand beside the painting and looked up at the man depicted there. “This is he. Eldest brother Barnabie.”

Brendan was silent for a moment as took it in. Beast ignored the painting and watched the other man instead, already knowing what he would see; a tall, stern looking man with a beard as elaborate as his finery, a falcon perched on his forearm. The man’s eyes, though slightly too small to be thought handsome, had the same steely intensity of the raptor’s.

Brendan tilted his head. “He certainly looks like the type who could hold his own among the Norseman.”

Beast snorted. “He certainly was.” He remembered suddenly the stubborn jut of his brother’s jaw when he had an idea he just wouldn’t let go of. He tore himself out of the memory quickly, for it brought on the desire to flee again. To distract himself he stepped in front of another painting. “This is Cousin Celene, a comtesse, died a year after this was painted. Wasting sickness, I think.” Slowly he led the other man down the hall, naming people of interest as they went. “Marquise Dulci, second wife of my uncle Guillaume. Lady Isolde, actually a family friend, not a relation. Uncle Hubert…” Occasionally Brendan would stop and inspect a painting more closely, which made Beast fight back the urge to fidget.

“These two?” Brendan inquired. The painting in question was in the Gothic style, and had two young men seated in front of a grand fireplace. Beast could see why it had caught Brendan’s interest; both men held musical instruments.

“Oh. That gangly one on the left is my other brother, Emile. The other is one of our cousins, what was his name…ah, yes. Cyril. A minor baronet, I think.” He smiled crookedly at Brendan and leaned forward, as if imparting an important secret. “Emile didn’t actually play, just so you know—he just thought it would make him look more rakish to be holding a lute in his portrait.”

Clear blue eyes twinkled up at him. “Really? A fraud, was he?”

“Oh, yes. Unfailingly so. And an absolute scoundrel with the ladies.” As Beast had intended this made Brendan laugh heartily. He had a good laugh. Musical, almost. Beast found himself saying absurd things just to hear it more often.

He finally brought them up to an absolutely enormous painting that nearly spanned the entire wall. The golden frame was easily a foot thick, plentifully carved with rosettes and flourishes. An art-loving spider had made its home in the upper corner; an invisible gently brushed it away. “King Julien and Queen Marjolaine.” It was odd that looking at the faces of his parents, saying their names, stirred no trace of feeling; but then, they had been strangers to him. Actually, come to think of it, every painting in this wing was of a complete stranger. The thought struck him like a sudden slap. This gallery, Beast realized, was a display of how alone he had always been, how isolated and friendless his life was. He had been surrounded by throngs of people and yet close to no one.

And for the first time in his life, he considered that maybe that was his own fault.

While Beast puzzled through this revelation, Brendan seemed to think that some words were required of him. “They look very elegant.” Then the young man turned his head towards Beast and said softly, “You have his eyes, you know.”

He shrugged one shoulder, affecting carelessness. A change of subject seemed in order. “Well, there you are, then. The Portrait Gallery. It must be nearing dinnertime, I should think.” Just as he started to turn to lead them out, away from these strange, empty faces, Beast reached out and took

He...felt like an imbecile. He really should have expected this, shouldn’t he? Of course Brendan would want to see him as he had once been--the handsome prince. This had been a terrible idea. But it was too late to take all this back, to just stay in bed and to never set foot in this dark, spidery hall ever again.

So Beast snorted. “Turn around.” Brendan did so, and found himself facing a long row of shredded wreckage. Canvases drooped utterly destroyed and rotting from their broken frames. Beast gestured to them with dark humor. “All of these along this wall are of me.”

It was a good thing, really, that there were none left. If Brendan could see Beast-as-he-should-be, and then looked back at the Beast-as-he-was-now, the inevitable look of disappointment of his face would be...it would be...well, it would be a look that Beast did not wish to see.

Brendan’s current expression was one of surprise. Beast watched him out of the corner of his eyes. “Oh,” he said. He took in the view of ruined paintings for a second, then turned back to Beast looking more amused than anything else. “I like how you just left the frames there.”

It was not what Beast had expected him to say, and it startled a laugh out of him. “Well, you know me. I like my decorations as shabby as possible.” Brendan smiled, then paused as if a thought had just struck him.

He looked back and forth between the shredded portraits and the ones of Beast’s family, brow furrowed. “Beast? You have told me all their names.”

Beast blinked. “Yes?”

“Guillaume and Emile and Lady this and Uncle that and so on...”

“...Yes?” Beast was puzzled, not seeing where this was going.

Brendan turned round to fully face him, head tilted. “What is yours?”

_Run run run run._

He checked himself, and stilled.

_I..._

_It’s..._

He dug down into his memories and came up with nothing. He drew his great brows together, and answered in a low rasp. “I--I do not remember.”

He stood there in silence, mind twisted in a tangle of disbelief, embarrassment, and most surprisingly of all, grief. He thought he had mourned for his lost self many years ago, but to discover that he did not even recall his own name? Now there was no one left who remembered him, no one who would speak his name in memorial--not even himself. He stood there as if at the precipice of some great yawning gulf, only the sounds of his own heartbeat in his ears, until Brendan stepped forward, took Beast’s hand in his own, and pulled him back from that edge. He wore a quiet smile and his hands were warm. “No matter. I know everything I need to know about you already.”
Utterly baffled, Beast blinked. “Don’t you care?” he asked incredulously, his own throat feeling like a shredded canvas.

Brendan shrugged as he spoke, nodding towards the row of mangled portraits. “Not really. Whoever I would have seen in those pictures wouldn’t really be you.”

Beast’s eyes dropped down to his bootless feet, to those hated claws, unable to give a name to the feeling behind his heavily thudding heart. I...I don’t even have the words...

Beast’s eyes dragged slowly up to Brendan’s, and with a heady growl, pushed the smaller man up against the wall and kissed him. Brendan gasped under his lips with surprise, but readily relaxed into Beast’s firm grip and kissed him back, under the watchful gaze of a dozen half-remembered cousins.

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Kissing Beast was like experiencing a force of nature. It was as if he was trying to make up for two hundred years of solitude by pouring himself into Brendan’s mouth; come to think of it, he probably was.

Whatever the reason, Brendan melted under the onslaught, body responding quickly despite the gallery’s faint odor of dust and mildew. When Beast pulled away to start nipping and sucking at his neck, Brendan groaned, hands scrabbling for purchase at Beast’s shirt. He slid his hands up past the hem to glide across the muscles of Beast’s back, feeling their powerful stretch beneath his fingertips. Beast bit hard against his collarbone, and Brendan hissed at the pleasure, head thumping back against the wall. Beast’s voice was hot and gravelly in his ear. “Do you think I could convince you to move this somewhere a bit more comfortable?”

Brendan replied shakily. “Beast, at this point I think you could convince me that the sky was orange.” Beast’s low laugh had a trace of growl underlying it, and sharp nails raked through Brendan’s hair. “Ah! With stripes, even.”

Beast kissed him deeply enough to steal the breath from his lungs, then peeled himself away from Brendan and placed his hands against the wall on either side of Brendan’s face, his eyes dark as woodsmoke. “Your room is closer than mine.”

“Does that matter? I thought the hallways went wherever you wanted them to.”

Beast looked chagrined. “Doing that requires some...concentration. And I am in no fit state to concentrate on anything besides you at the moment.”

Suddenly Brendan forgot how to breathe. He swallowed thickly. Beast took his hand and the next thing worth remembering was shoving the scarlet bed-curtains out of the way and being pressed back into the mattress of the four-poster, both their clothes already littering the hardwood floor of his room.

Brendan swept his tongue into Beast’s mouth, then sucked in his lower lip to worry it gently in his teeth. Beast groaned and roughly bucked his hips against him. Brendan pressed up, rolling Beast over and straddling him. “Let me try something,” he breathed into Beast’s pointed ear, taking the strangled gasp for a yes. He began kissing his way down Beast’s body, hands taking frequent
detours along the way to tangle in that long tuft of chest hair, to gently pinch those nipples into stiffening peaks. He took the time to learn the shape and texture of his lover’s leonine body, mentally cataloguing what things made his breath catch and his muscles twitch.

He wriggled lower, and bit at the sharp jut of Beast’s hip.

“What are you—”

And then in one easy movement took as much of Beast as he could into his mouth.

In the periphery of his vision he saw Beast’s head rock back, whole body arching up to meet him. The man was utterly silent, that kind of silence that only comes when the body has absolutely no intention of wasting time on foolish things like breathing.

It was good. This felt...so amazingly right.

After some time he disengaged briefly, voice colored with amusement. “Breathe, Beast.” Beast shakily sucked in a lungful of air, fingers clenched tight in the sheets. Brendan lowered his head, breathing warmly against wet skin before using the slide of his lips and tongue to completely unravel the man beneath him.

The sound of his murmured name was like a benediction, and he too fell apart.

After, he rested his head on that broad chest, closed his eyes and forgot his own body, lost in that aching ocean of a heartbeat. Beast slowly regained his faculties, bringing his hands down to card through the chestnut curls that fanned across his chest. “No one has done that for me in a very long time. Time immemorial, in fact.”

“Mmm,” answered Brendan, enjoying the husky rumble of Beast’s voice reverberating against him. His own heartbeat began to even out, and it seemed like an enormous task to move, even if just to reach for the duvet and pull it up around them. Instead he stayed where he was and tucked his cold feet underneath Beast’s warm calves.

“Are you alright?”

“Mmm,” he affirmed.

“I mean, are you...alright? That is to say, are you, ah, content?” Somehow he made that last word sound almost sensuous. Brendan craned his neck back without lifting his head to look at Beast, and smiled languorously.

“Mmhmm.”

Beast’s brow furrowed skeptically. “Are you sure?” Brendan briefly thought about couching his terms, verbally dancing around indelicacies, but they had progressed way beyond that point, as far as he was concerned, and spoke plainly.

“I came, no worries. I’m not surprised you didn’t notice. You were...otherwise engaged. Though thank you for checking; that’s very sweet.” He hid his yawn against Beast’s thick fur.

“Oh.” He felt the body beneath him fidget slightly. “From that? I didn’t even touch...really?” Brendan chuckled warmly.

“Yes, from that. Being on that side can have its own rewards, you know.” Beast was silent for a moment, claws gently tracing lines across Brendan’s shoulders and raising goosebumps in their
“I see,” Beast said, and he moved to dislodge the man atop him. Brendan made a displeased noise in his throat as Beast maneuvered him back into the pillows and pulled the covers over him. “Here, you’re freezing.” He smoothed the duvet with a thoughtful look on his face as Brendan watched him lazily, belatedly noticing that Beast wasn’t under the covers with him. Beast leaned over him, brought his face close to Brendan’s, and said softly, “Well then I might have to try it sometime.”

Once, when Brendan was a lad of thirteen, he had been invited to a friend’s country estate for part of the summer. He and his friend had been on a long ride through the outlying fields, where the ripe summer wheat met up with the edges of the forest. They heard a high, piercing screech, brought their horses to a halt, and watched an enormous eagle swoop down to land on a fallen branch along the trail, not ten feet away. Without even glancing at one another both boys knew not to move even a little, and they sat silently watching the eagle for what may have been minutes or hours, barely even blinking lest it frighten the majestic creature away.

Brendan felt exactly that way now. Finally he brought up his hand, tangled it in the thick mane of Beast’s hair and pulled him down to kiss him, not trusting his voice in the slightest.

When Beast pulled away, running his tongue absently over his lips, he cleared his throat and said, “We haven’t eaten anything. Are you hungry?”

Brendan stretched. He was, but at the moment he was definitely more interested in sleep than he was in dinner. “No, I’m fine. You go ahead, though.”

Beast gave him a lopsided smirk. “How have you managed for the past months to conceal the fact that you are so exceedingly slothful?”

“You’re supposed to be lazy after sex,” Brendan protested. “You’re the one who has to get up and fuss about with baths and dinners. It’s unnatural.” Beast snorted in amusement. He stood and cast about for his clothing, dressing hastily. Brendan watched in appreciation, then suddenly snickered as a thought struck him.

Beast looked back at him, perplexed. “What?”

“I just realized. If the servants didn’t know before, they sure as hell do now.” He grinned puckishly as Beast stared at him, and very possibly, under his fur, blushed.
In Which Words Go Unsaid

My heartfelt thanks to the excellent betas Renchan and Saltwater.

Chapter Twenty-One; In Which Words Go Unsaid

Cloaked she went down the long roads, twisting through woods until greening fields prevailed, and to every pair of human eyes, she was different; sometimes hunched and grey, sometimes lithe and tall, sometimes no bigger than a child. Animals followed her from a wary, yearning distance, keeping apace but never passing before her; and in this manner she walked into a village bursting all over with the spring. It bustled with simple common-folk activity, and smelled of fresh green earth, livestock and the still-distant warmth of summer. She spoke to no one, sought no direction or help, but came by her own means upon a cottage tucked between thick trunked oaks and beeches where they began to crop up in the fallow fields, right before they crowded in to become the dark forest that bordered the town.

It was a cozy scene. The roof was well thatched, the last vestiges of snow melting off it in rivulets, and slips of grey smoke curled out of the dark stone chimney. A crème-colored mare shared a patch of sweet new grass with a black goat, and a low rock wall surrounded a garden of fragrant kitchen herbs. Under the windows grew a thick tangle of rosebush, blooming early with deep red buds. It was a well kept cottage, made lovely by people who had once known the elegance that came with wealth and sought to reproduce it with the simple means at their disposal. It was a prosperous home.

Looking at it rankled, deeply. Where she stood in the shadows, frowning imperiously at the scene, frost crept outward from her and spread over the bark and soil, blades of new grass withering as it touched them.

There had been, somehow, an exchange. The right people were not in their proper places. The sorceress had long admired the wondrous ability of nature to surprise, but humanity was always fairly predictable. Not this time. Something may have gone...not entirely according to her plan, but the remedy was simple enough. She pulled her hood up and slipped away to blend into the blue-green shade of the trees and wait for nightfall.

***

When morning came, slanting brightly across tangled sheets, Brendan awoke alone. He stumbled out of bed, yawning so widely he felt his face would split. He made his way to the washbasin and scrubbed at his face until he felt more awake. His stomach grumbled loudly as if scolding Brendan for skipping dinner the night before, so he bathed and dressed quickly, barely bothering to run a comb through his hair before tying it up out of the way. Funny how there seemed to be plenty of hair ribbons on the dresser today, he noticed, when there had been such a dearth of them two days ago. Had it only been two days? How long had it been since he and Beast had their pivotal talk in the garden, and kissed under the fragrant jasmine? Time behaved so strangely in this castle, and he resolved to sit down later and figure it out.
Hunger wasn’t the only reason for his haste. A happy, fluttering eagerness sparked in his belly as he made his way down the stairs, and grew as he neared the Dining Room.

Beast sat in his usual chair, and at the sight of him everything clicked into place.

Brendan smiled as he took his seat. “Good morning,” he said, momentarily distracted by the entrancing aroma wafting in from the kitchen; some kind of chicken, perhaps?

“Good morning to you, too. Did you sleep well?” Beast leaned forward, chin in hand. He wasn’t exactly smiling, but the slight curve to his lips let Brendan know that he was close to it.

“Very. And yourself?”

“Quite well.”

A pause. “That smells rather good, doesn’t it?”

“Ah. Indeed it does. I expect it’ll be ready presently.”

“That’s...that’s good.” All safe, benign avenues of conversation exhausted, Brendan ran out of things to say. The silence, though still companionable, had an awkward, uncertain tenor to it. He picked up a grapefruit spoon and toyed with its sharp edge. The fire crackled loudly in the hearth.

The kitchen door swung open, and two unseens carted out silver covered platters and set them before the pair. After the covers were whisked away, Brendan immediately began to dig in. There was fruit and waffles and...ah yes, cold chicken. Delicious.

“So, what shall we do today?” Beast asked after a good portion of breakfast had been devoured. “Bit cold for a ride. Library? Or I could beat you at Rithmomachia again.” He smirked.

Brendan swallowed a bite of chicken and groaned theatrically. “You keep bringing that up. Must I relive my ignominious defeat? Will it haunt me ceaselessly to the very grave?!” He raised his fist and shook it melodramatically, the effect slightly marred by having a fork in it. Beast raised an eyebrow. Brendan lowered his fist and cleared his throat, feeling silly until he noticed Beast trying to hide a laugh.

“Alright, alright, no Rithmomachia. Perhaps a music recital?”

“It has been a while since I’ve gotten in some practice,” Brendan conceded. “Although,” he let his voice drop a register, “yesterday we spent practically the whole day abed. Perhaps we might do something a little more...vigorous?”

Beast’s heated eyes met his own. “I know just the thing.”

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Brendan leaned back, panting heavily. He shook his damp hair out of his eyes as a droplet of sweat rolled down the middle of his back. Beast was hardly sweating at all, which Brendan found to be utterly unfair.

“You’re terrible at this,” Beast laughed. “Didn’t they teach fencing at that fancy school of yours?”
“Hey! It’s not my fault. After the introductory classes I always elected to take tennis instead.” He caught his breath, squared up and went en garde. He waited for Beast’s lunge, and when it came he barely sprang out of the way in time, the fleuret swinging close by his hip with an alarming swish.

“Have you read Flos Duellatorum?” Beast asked airily, twisting his wrist in an elegant flourish.

“Can’t say as I have.” He barely sidestepped another well-placed swipe. He quickly returned one of his own, which Beast easily batted aside with a practiced twist.

“It’s a treatise by Fiore dei Liberi on fighting techniques. Very informative. You might find it illuminating.”

“Now you’re just trying to distract me.” Brendan flashed a grin at Beast over a clumsy parry.

“Am not. You should read it, it’s quite good.” Another thrust that came much too close for Brendan’s comfort.

“Ah, I’m not sure how relevant fencing is to my everyday life.” The flashing épée looked eerily natural in Beast’s great claws, and when he wasn’t ducking wildly out of its range, Brendan admired his easy steps, the cool confidence in his every motion. It was...actually rather appealing. “It’s not often I’m challenged to a duel.” He darted in on the offensive, advanced, and when Beast parried he followed through with a fine riposte.

“Nice one,” Beast murmured, falling into a defensive stance. Their blades met, ringing out in the salle. Brendan beamed, ridiculously pleased at the praise, and this distraction proved his downfall.

“Ah-ha!” Beast’s arm shot forward cobra-quick, the tip of the fleuret landing squarely over Brendan’s heart. The impact shoved Brendan back a step.

“Okay, okay! Touché, you win!” Brendan backed off, dropping his sword to the ground. Beast drew himself up and saluted, looking a little too smug. Brendan saluted back, because those were the rules, and muttered, “You just better hope you never go up against me in a tennis match. I came in third at a tournament.”

“Alas,” Beast said, hand going to his heart mockingly, “these grounds have no tennis court. These tales of your athletic prowess must remain sadly unconfirmed.” Brendan rubbed at his breastbone, where the prod of the épée had struck hard, even through the padded jerkin. “Are you hurt?” Beast asked, concern softening the caustic edges of his voice.

“No,” Brendan scoffed. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

He rolled his eyes. “It might bruise, but I am not some delicate flower.” Beast watched him silently as he unbuckled the leather pads, hands jerking impatiently at this unfamiliar task.

“Have I offended you in some way?”

Brendan sighed and turned back to Beast, running his fingers through his damp hair before tying it back up. “No, no, you didn’t. It’s me, I’m sorry.” Beast stepped closer and said nothing. Brendan chewed his lip for a moment before continuing. “It’s just...sometimes I feel like you don’t take me seriously.” He was entirely unprepared for Beast’s gloved hands to come up and cup his face between them. He went still, heart stuck somewhere in his throat.

“Is this serious enough?” Beast covered his mouth with his own and drew him close for a deep,
After a long second of eternity he pulled away, and Brendan released a shaky laugh. “Fairly serious, I’d say.” They looked into each other’s eyes for a lingering moment.

Beast tore his gaze away, stepping back. Brendan thought he might have seen a troubled look flash across Beast’s face, but said nothing and continued taking off his armor.

When their equipment hung on their appropriate pegs, and swords mounted back up on their racks, Beast suggested they take lunch in the solarium. Brendan liked the solarium, a bright, open room with high ceilings and ivy-covered windows, no doubt green and beautiful in summer. Snow had piled in the corners of each glass pane, limiting their view of the gardens and making the solarium feel more private, almost cozy. Unlike most other rooms in the castle Brendan was familiar with, very little was torn or in some other way ruined; most likely because every surface of the solarium was either glass or dark wood paneling, and it would be quite a task to shred up a hardwood floor, even for the Beast.

“You know,” Brendan later mentioned, mopping up leftover sauce with a crust of fresh bread, “this castle is just enormous.”

Beast looked amused. “Castles generally are,” he chuckled, swirling a glass of deep red wine before taking a drink. He lounged on his settee with his particular brand of casual grace that Brendan had always admired.

“Yes, but even for a castle it’s...I mean, how many people could you fit in here?”

Beast’s smirk disappeared, brows drawing low over his eyes. “I don’t know.”

“My university was able to house maybe a thousand students at a time. You could easily double that here. Easily. Maybe triple.” His gaze turned upwards as he considered, doing a few quick calculations in his head.

“Well.” Beast cleared his throat, each word coming clipped and quiet. “Perhaps I should consider opening a school here then.”

Brendan knew that tone—that quiet, choleric tone that always, always preceded some violent outburst. He licked his lips in an unconscious, atavistic response. “Beast, I...”

“No no, I like this idea. Maybe I could teach lessons in how not to run a kingdom. Or classes on scaring people out of their wits? I know, Advanced Theories on tearing a deer’s throat out with my bare hands.” Beast sat up very straight, his eyes sharp as flint, and set his glass down on the table with a loud clink. “It is idiocy. ‘How many people could I fit in here?’ Is this a question?”

Brendan turned his head away. “I was just...” He cupped his elbows in his hands, trying to quell the sick little feeling that twisted in his stomach.

Beast exhaled loudly, shoulders dropping, and buried his face in his hands. “I know,” he said after a tense minute, words muffled. He sat back up and met Brendan’s eyes levelly. “I didn’t mean it.”

Brendan inclined his head a fraction, eyes narrowed in silent challenge. Their gazes did not falter for a long moment. The air between them changed, and the little hairs on Brendan’s arm all stood up as if he were in an electrical storm.

“Come here,” Beast rumbled in a soft, silky voice.

Brendan ignored the way his heart skipped against his ribs, lifted his chin and said, “No.”
Beast growled low in his chest, then subsided. Brendan waited. “Please,” Beast finally asked, still lacing the word with a light dose of sarcasm.

Close enough. Brendan rose and walked around the low glass table. He came to a halt just in front of Beast, their knees barely touching. Beast reached up, took his hand. His taloned thumb slowly drew a circle around the point of Brendan’s wrist, and he let himself be pulled gently down.

Brendan settled in Beast’s lap, curling his hands over those broad, velvet-clad shoulders. “You don’t scare me out of my wits, you know. And the deer you brought in that night for dinner was delicious.” A low laugh ghosted against his cheek. He fastened his mouth over Beast’s, whose lips tasted of wine. The tart smokiness of the flavor suited him.

“You’re different,” Beast breathed into his ear, broad hands coming to rest at the small of his back. Brendan found he had nothing to say to that, so instead answered with a kiss, exploring slowly with his tongue when those wine-flavored lips parted enough to let him. He ran his fingers over the smooth ridges of Beast’s horns just because he could, then laced them through the thick golden hair that hung loosely at the base of the neck.

Beast broke away to mumble against his throat, “Sorry. About before.” Brendan smiled since he knew Beast wouldn’t see it, answering mildly.

“Forgiven. Why, you didn’t even break anything this time. I’d say that’s progress.” The sound Beast made wasn’t exactly an angry one, but it wasn’t an entirely amused one either. Beast roughly yanked Brendan’s head down to kiss him, his heat pressing up against him, and time just sort of...dissolved for a while.

It was only when he felt Beast’s furred hands encircling his wrists did he realize that his own hands had been drifting steadily southwards, even going so far as to untuck Beast’s linen shirt from his trousers. He didn’t remember doing this, but he wasn’t displeased with the discovery. However, Beast’s grip effectively curtailed any further investigations. He tilted his head questioningly.

“Not...here,” Beast murmured haltingly.

Brendan felt his forehead crinkle in confusion. “Why not?”

Beast’s eyes darted about warily, like he was on the lookout for enemy spies. “The servants. They might be watching.”

Okay, that’s creepy. “Can’t you ask them to, well, go away?”

Beast sighed in annoyance. “I could, yes, but there’s no guarantee that...well, they’ve been rather fractious of late.”

“Fractious?” Brendan smiled broadly. “Well, we can’t have that. Fractiousness leads to far worse things. First contrariness, then recalcitrance, then onto downright insubordination.”

“It’s your influence, you know,” Beast shot back with a frown. “They see you disobey me and they think they can do the same.”

Brendan sat back, immediately adopting the quietly furious expression that never failed to convince his sisters he was murderously angry at them; he’d won a lot of arguments with that look, until Beauty learned the power of the hurt sniffle. Her hurt sniffle trumped his angry eyes every time. “Oh, I’m supposed to obey you now?”

“No,” Beast answered quickly, “that’s not--it isn’t--” Beast’s verbal stumbling was adorable, and
Brendan’s mock-sternness melted into a roguish grin.

Beast rolled his eyes, and in one swift, smooth motion threw Brendan back against the pillowed arm of the settee. “You are infuriatingly vexing. Do you realize that?” He loomed predatorily over Brendan, enveloping him in the scent of warmth and velvet and musk.

“Well as long as I’m not fractious,” he quipped back. Beast buried his face against the other man’s shoulder and laughed silently, his amusement quaking pleasantly through Brendan’s body. When he finished, he stood up, eyes bright. He pulled Brendan to his feet, then twined the other man’s arm companionably through his own.

“Would you mind terribly if I escort you?”

“Depends on where we’re going,” Brendan answered easily, as if it didn’t cause his breath to catch every time Beast went out of his way to touch him, as if those overlarge hands didn’t send both his mind and his pulse racing every time they were on him.

“You did say it had been too long since you’ve had some practice.” He started leading them out of the solarium, and Brendan had little choice but to keep up, taking two steps for every one of Beast’s.

“And it has been too long since I’ve heard you play. I had my heart set on a proper recital.”

Brendan smiled modestly. “Well, if my gracious host desires a recital, then a recital he shall receive.”

So that night he played, and with every word he sang he tried to say what he couldn’t speak, as if the dulcet notes themselves could carry thoughts through the air.

***

Marking the passage of days did not come easily to Beast. He’d long since been living season-to-season, rather than day-by-day, and it had taken some practice to get back into the habit of thinking in yesterdays and tomorrows.

It was the day after their fencing match, actually just starting in to the evening now, and Beast rapped on Brendan’s bedroom door with the intention of suggesting a nighttime ride; the day had been quite mild, and the horse would be restless. The door slid open at his knock, revealing his guest curled up in front of the fire, nose in a book. He glanced up briefly before fixing his eyes back on the book.

“Please come in, Beast. I’m almost finished.”

Beast shook his head fondly, stepping inside. There wasn’t a second chair so he sat down on the bed, sprawling his awkwardly-shaped legs out in front of him. Brendan was indeed on the last few pages, eyes avidly darting back and forth. Must be good, Beast thought with amusement. He leaned back on his hands, content to watch the other man read, the firelight flickering redly in his hair. His attention was momentarily diverted as his gaze was caught by the vase on Brendan’s nightstand, and what was unmistakably one of his roses in it. In fact, judging by its dark hue and nuance of shape, it must have been the very same one the merchant stole from him, the very one that Beast had sent the enchantment through to punish the merchant for breaking his promise. How odd that it had been brought back without his knowledge, but after a moment’s consideration, he found that he didn’t mind. It looked good by Brendan’s bedside, it looked...right.

After several minutes, Brendan shut the book with a satisfied sigh. He turned to Beast with an apologetic smile. “Sorry, I was miles away, there.”
Beast held up a hand to forestall any further apologies. “No need to explain. I quite understand.”

The fire was dying down a little. Brendan stood up, stretched, then went around the room lighting oil lamps and candles. “Anything in particular you came to see me for?” The flirtatious look he darted Beast’s way caught him unawares. It took him a second to remember why he was in fact there.

“Ah. Yes. I had thought an evening ride would be pleasant.”

“Oh.” Brendan looked out the window, where the sunset still lingered among clouds the color of autumn leaves. “He’ll be anxious for some exercise, I think.”

“I thought the same, myself.”

Brendan said nothing for a long moment, gaze still fixed on the distant vista below. “Did you know that it’s nearly March?”

Beast fell silent for several heartbeats. When he did speak it was like his voice was coming from a long way away, like it was someone else’s. “No, I didn’t know that.” He continued, after a beat, just to fill the silence. “Winters can be long, here.”

Brendan’s head dropped, dark hair snaking from his shoulders to shield his face. When he turned back around, Beast was taken aback to see that his hands trembled, ever so slightly, probably imperceptible to anyone without his keen animal senses. “Beast,” he said, eyes averted. “Do you...I need to...Is this...” Beast just wordlessly watched him stutter, utterly mystified.

Brendan let out a thick sound of frustration. “Never mind.” Then he flung himself at Beast, whose arms instinctively came up to catch him, and before Beast could gather his wits he had a squirming lapful of Brendan and was being kissed enthusiastically.

Want tightened inside him, no less potent for its suddenness. He fell back against the bed, hands eagerly twisting at Brendan’s shirt, hearing seams rip as he tore it off over his head. He sank his claws into that tousled chestnut hair and pulled Brendan down, nipping teasingly at his lips before claiming them in a searing kiss.

He was, somewhere in his brain, surprised at how much more easily this was coming to him. It was a little easier every time, easier to give a little more of himself, easier to take. Brendan’s clever hands slipped under his shirt, unfastening buttons as they passed. It wasn’t long till they were both unclothed, and the other man pressed against him with a sharp cry.

Beast flipped them over in one smooth movement, licking at the hollow of Brendan’s throat, feeling drunk on the taste of salt-sweet skin. He rasped his tongue along the sharp edge of Brendan’s jaw, enjoying the contrast of textures between smooth throat and rough stubble. Brendan hummed with pleasure, then opened his eyes. “Sorry, I’m probably all...” he chuckled low in his throat, cheeks flushing. “It just occurred to me that I haven’t shaved for a while. Sorry.”

Beast took a long moment to translate his thoughts into words. It was true that the sensation was unlike anything he’d ever felt during any previous romantic encounters; it was utterly unique to Brendan. It was also true that he got more pleasure out of the feel of this man’s nascent beard than he’d ever had with any part of a woman. “I...kind of like it.” His voice sounded small and weak to his own ears, and a reflexive rush of shame followed his admission.

“Do you?” Brendan whispered, delight evident in his blue eyes, the candlelight reflecting in them like opals. Beast’s only answer was to kiss him, so deeply that when they broke apart he gasped for air.
They finally found a rhythm, hips aligned and bucking hard.

Brendan writhed against him, fingers digging into his biceps hard enough to bruise. And the *sounds* he was making...

From the very beginning of their acquaintance, Beast had noticed Brendan’s pleasant voice and enjoyed the rich, silvery tones while he sang, and even noted how interestingly husky he sounded in the mornings. But like this, raw with need and breathless, his voice sounded like bitter chocolate and it was more than Beast could take.

“God, your *voice*,” escaped him, and he buried his face in the crook of Brendan’s shoulder, eyes squeezed tight. “Say something, anything...”

“My voice?” Brendan sounded surprised, taken aback, even.

“Yes,” Beast said forcefully, and they fell into an intense, grasping kiss.

Brendan eventually pulled back, a wicked light coming into his eyes. “I’m learning all *sorts* of things about you today,” and the throaty burr in his words was unmistakably intentional. Beast groaned, far closer to coming than he wanted to be so soon. “What would you like me to say? How good this feels? How much I--want you?” There was a break, quickly covered, in those words. Beast shut his eyes tight, determinedly not thinking about it, what it might mean, whether it was true, and slid down the bed, marking Brendan with his teeth as he went. He hesitated as he got lower, the decision he made not one full second ago now wavering, realizing he had no idea what he was doing and suddenly very cognizant of his sharp claws and pointed fangs. He moved back up as if this had been his intention to begin with, and indeed the other man seemed none the wiser, not at all disappointed as they both ended up on their sides facing each other.

The height difference meant that Beast had to crane his neck down to latch his lips to Brendan’s, but he didn’t mind. He slid his arm around Brendan’s lower back, the muscles at the spine so tense with need, and pulled him firmly against his own body. This would have been enough for him, but then Brendan reached for his hand, twined them together, and guided them both down between their rocking hips.

“Brendan,” he gasped at the touch, moving his hand as guided, like he was being shown the moves to a dance or a duel. The young man keened lightly in his throat, and came, shuddering, over their joined hands. Beast followed a spare second later, for one slim moment every trace of *yesterdays* and *tomorrows* whiting out and leaving only *right now*.

When the world came back to him, he found the sheets had been drawn up over him, and he felt the body beside him stretch languorously, the movement just barely brushing his fur. He slowly caught his breath staring up at the tasseled canopy, all those *tomorrows* creeping back.

He sat up. A muffled sound of protest issued from the figure beside him. “Moving around again *already*?” He felt the other man wriggle deeper under the linen sheets. “We can take the horse out tomorrow. Relax, lay back for a bit.”

Beast said nothing.

“Unless you want to go again, of course. I am definitely in favor of that.”

“The curse is not just going to go away.”

Beside him, Brendan went so still that he must be holding his breath. Slowly he sat up too, playful tone gone. “I hadn’t--”
“This thing,” Beast interrupted, “this thing, that we’re doing? It’s not...she wanted to punish me. The sorceress. And. Everything.” Not at his most articulate. He took deep breaths to steady himself.

Brendan cautiously slid a hand over his own. He spoke with the same careful hesitance. “Is it...is this something you want to be doing?”

A bitter laugh escaped his throat before he could think to stop it. “It doesn’t matter what I want.”

They were both silent for a long time. Eventually Brendan shifted closer and said, “So then, how do we break it?” Beast moved his hand away.

“We can’t,” he said firmly.

“We could try to find her, or someone who knows how to undo it--”

“Do you think I haven’t tried?” Beast got up and walked naked over to the window. He looked down at the garden, his precious roses stark black against the snow. “Even if there was a way. I...I don’t know who that person is anymore. I don’t know how to be him again. I am just...Beast.” It was a dark moon, and by the dim light of the oil lamp across the room he watched the other man in the window’s reflection. Brendan’s fingers were twisting the white sheets that pooled around his waist in the stretch of taut silence. His words still hung in the air like candle smoke after the snuff. Beast caught his own reflection in the dark window, and looked away.

Slender arms slid around his waist. Brendan pressed against his back and embraced him tightly. “That’s enough for me.”

Beast closed his eyes at that beautiful lie. He let his hands rest on Brendan’s forearms, as if with this gesture he could keep him there, wrapped around him forever.

It’s enough. He twisted around in Brendan’s arms and pushed him back to the bed, fierce with passion, and for just a little while let himself believe it.

***

Brendan tumbled back onto the sheets, dragging Beast with him. A few seconds of desperate kissing and he was hard again, gasping dizzily into Beast’s ear. He felt triumphant, even exultant; he had finally managed to convince Beast of his feelings. What else could it mean, they way he had tumbled him back into bed, the way he was kissing him now as if his life depended on it? He ran his hands over every part of him he could reach, trying to make them convey the fullness of his desire and acceptance for this man. His lover guided him back, head sinking into the pillows, and soon Brendan curved up into the slick glide of Beast’s tongue as it dragged slowly down the middle of his chest. His heart jumped as Beast kept going, his tongue a heated caress along the dip of his abdomen. He held his breath, silently willing it lower when he felt Beast laugh softly against the skin of his thigh.

“Breathe, Brendan,” he rasped, and Brendan recognized that he was being imitated, and smiled.

And now finally, Brendan felt that mouth encase him, searing and wonderful. He was deaf to his own moans as he nearly tore the sheets in his clenched fists. Beast was doing things that Brendan didn’t realize he knew existed.

“Oh God. Beast, that’s...ah!” Beast hummed, pressing firmly with his tongue and Brendan saw stars.
He let out a shaky moan and tried desperately to keep his hips still. “That’s incredibly good,” he
managed to say, because apparently Beast liked the sound of him speaking, a revelation that he
would have never expected in a million years. It was obvious to him that it was Beast who had the
exceptional voice, not him.

Also, exceptional instincts, or maybe he had just been paying very good attention to what Brendan
had done to him earlier. Either way, he already had Brendan right at the edge, even so soon after last
time.

“Wait, wait.” He tugged gently on Beast’s hair. “It’s too much, I can’t...” He tried to steady his
breathing, and when Beast crawled back up he pulled him forward so their foreheads touched.
Brendan swallowed hard. “What do you want, Beast?”

“I want everything.”
Brendan shivered, managing a weak laugh.

“You don’t know what everything is, Beast.”

Beast seemed to think this over for a moment. “No, but I still want it.”

“Oh god,” Brendan whimpered, just barely aloud, against his lover’s lips. Moving now with a firm
certainty he pushed Beast over on his back and sat astride him, bending down to kiss him frantically
while muttering, “Yes, yes, I want that too.”

He gathered his wits just enough to glance at Beast’s hands, noting those cat-like claws that even
when retracted where still sharp and dangerous, and with a mournful sigh he mentally omitted them
from the equation.

“Don’t move,” he ordered, sliding off the bed and crossing the room to open a dresser drawer,
rummaging around before grabbing a fancy glass vial. When he came back and regained his perch,
Beast’s head was canted curiously.

“What’s that?”

Brendan spoke in an offhand, nonchalant sort of way. “Bath oil. I kept it from the last time the
servants drew me a bath. For no reason.”

Beast looked slightly baffled. “Why did you-”

“For absolutely no reason whatsoever,” he stressed, blushing fiercely. “I mean, I wasn’t...planning
anything.”

Beast sighed dramatically. “Do you always have to be so cryptic?”

“Oh, I’m cryptic,” Brendan groused, leaning forward to pepper Beast’s face with kisses. “Hello,
kettle. You’re black.” He loved the sensation of Beast laughing under his lips. Their teasing kiss
quickly became more heated, and soon they were both gasping for air, pressing their bodies so
closely together it was like even their skin was keeping them too far apart.

Brendan wrenched himself back up with considerable effort, and his voice sounded unsteady. “I’m
going to do something. Tell me to stop if...if you need to.” He wasn’t sure how Beast would take
this, if he’d even be interested or if he would like it but...

“I trust you,” Beast said simply, hands running up and down Brendan’s arms as if to steady him.
Brendan had to drop his head and let his bangs hide his face. *Dieu,* how he loved this man.

When he regained some semblance of composure, he poured out a palmful of oil, sat back on Beast’s thighs and took his hard member between his slick hands. Beast bucked up, wildly, into Brendan’s clenched fist, nearly throwing the other man off his legs. “Easy,” Brendan soothed, pushing Beast firmly down with one hand while completely coating him with the other.

He moved back up, over the hips, and Beast’s eyes went wide with realization. “Can...can we do that?” he asked hoarsely. Brendan’s only answer was a swift, wolf-like smile.

He reached back, took hold of Beast’s oiled length and moved him into position. He was ready, so very ready.

He eased down, relishing the slow stretch, the slight near-pain burn, until he could not sink down any further.

Beast’s eyes had rolled all the way back in his head, his hands gripping so tightly at Brendan’s hips that he felt the sharp little pinpricks of his claws. “Okay?” Brendan asked, breathless.

Beast made a sound that was close to *guh.* He had to visibly gather himself to answer. “Just...don’t move for a second.” Brendan trembled with the effort of keeping still, until he had to bite down on his lip hard to keep himself from shifting, twitching, *anything* to get more of that delicious feeling. At Beast’s shaky nod he snapped forward with relief and they both cried out in unison.

They moved blindly, not quite in sync yet, and at one angle Brendan groaned as pleasure flared sharp and hot inside him.

Beast whispered in a voice like wet silk. “Are you alright?”

“Oh, yes,” Brendan croaked. “It’s...it’s good.” That was a woeful understatement, but Brendan couldn’t wrangle any better words together. “This is...I can’t explain.” He shifted rhythmically for several moments, ignoring the way his thighs were already burning with the exertion. It’d been a long time since he’d done this.

“No one told me that...*that* felt like anything special.” Beast spoke haltingly, like he too was having trouble forming a coherent sentence.

Brendan laughed low and sultry, leaning forward. “It’s a *secret,*” he whispered in Beast’s ear. “Otherwise everyone’d be doing it.” Beast’s arms came up around him, one hand curling tight in his hair as they moved together. Brendan gasped against Beast’s shoulder, the full length of Beast’s burning body under him, the controlled power behind every thrust of his loins, and utterly lost himself in the moment.

He was dimly aware of sinking his teeth into the ropy muscle of Beast’s neck, of grabbing handfuls of his mane and pulling hard, of harsh desperate sounds tripping from his own tongue, and mostly of that steady throb of pleasure pounding into him over and over until eventually it eclipsed everything else and he couldn’t even remember how to make his lips form the words *I love you, I love you.* He came loudly, grinding and spilling against Beast’s stomach.

He was only faintly conscious of being rolled over, feet locking together around Beast’s waist on instinct alone. Each thrust that Beast drove into him ignited violent aftershocks that quickly left him broken and begging.

With one last snap of his hips, Beast shuddered, gasping a guttural cry, falling forward onto his elbows. When he finally opened his eyes they were mere inches away. Beast rested his forehead on
Brendan’s as he slowly, shakily caught his breath.

Brendan tilted his head up to kiss Beast, slow and sweet as raw honey. Afterwards they stayed like that for a long moment, just existing.

But eventually they had to move, and once he regained his coordination Brendan reached for the washbasin beside the bed and wrung out a wet cloth. After using it on them both he slid under the sheets with a satisfied sigh. Beast opened one eye to watch him, smiling in that subtle way he had. Brendan steeled his nerves and asked, “So, off to fetch a snack, or take a bath or something?” He trailed his fingers through the fur of Beast’s stomach where it was still slightly sticky.

Beast turned his head to face him, tendrils of his hair tumbling into his honey-brown eyes. “No. I’m not going anywhere.” Joy swelled through Brendan like a sun-warm ocean wave. He smiled so widely his cheeks hurt, then lifted up the covers until Beast joined him and curled up close around him.

***

He watched the young man asleep beside him, those chestnut curls falling across his closed eyes. Gently, so as not to wake him, Beast smoothed them back.

So young, he thought, and so...

Innocent was what he thought at first, before realizing that the word was wholly incorrect. What then was the word that eluded him? He watched Brendan’s shoulder blades lift and fall like wings. Dear, he realized, so dear to me and so very young.

There was a certainty now that he hadn’t felt before, a crystal truth that rang through him like a tuning fork, sharp and clear. All of his decisions had been the wrong ones. Everything he had ever done in his long, long life had been a mistake, so it shouldn’t surprise him that this was too. All his choices were the wrong ones, and most especially the choices that led to Brendan being in his bed.

What lay ahead for this kind, intelligent man who had become so important to him? Loneliness, solitude? The affection they now shared growing stagnant after a lifetime of long, empty days? A cage might be attractive if it was gilded prettily enough, but no amount of fine trappings could erase the fact that it was still a cage. Brendan had wandered into Beast’s cage, his home for centuries, heedless of the consequences; but there was still time before it slammed shut on him.

I thought I’d changed, but I haven’t. I am as selfish as I ever was. Beast pushed a lock of hair back from Brendan’s brow. Selfish and weak. The thought of losing him freezes my heart in my chest, even though the alternative would kill him. Not all at once, no, but slowly, over time. Slowly all light and color would leach out of the world, as it did for me. He brought it back to me, he thought as he ran his hand over Brendan’s shoulder lightly, so as not to wake him. He brought it back to me, for a time. This place would be his prison as well as mine and the years will grow heavy on him until their weight is too much to bear, and he’ll grow old and unfulfilled, bitter and hating me more every day.

If I was any sort of man, I would send him away right now. But he didn’t; he sank down into the covers, head on Brendan’s shoulder, all the while hating himself for a coward.
In Which Things Shatter

If one knew the secret, it was quite simple to affect change in the world. Admittedly, things such as rituals and circles and sigils made the task all the simpler, but in essence all one needed to do was to reach out, take hold, and will reality into being.

Of her kind, she was among the oldest and strongest. Not for her the fate of her lesser sisters; to be fed to the fires of this New World to placate its fear of the Old Ways. Unscathed, she had endured the long march of time, and witnessed sights no other eyes had seen, touched worlds no other hands ever had.

Magic had its own will, as any living and growing thing did, and the practitioners of its art had to be very good indeed to bend that great indomitable will to their own.

She watched the little family in their little cottage, hours passing like eyeblinks, and waited.

When she saw her chance, she reached out, grabbed hold, and took it.

As the rising sun crested the tall castle walls and poured golden though the leaded glass windows, Brendan awoke to an unfamiliar sound; soft, slow breaths, just barely loud enough to classify as snores. He blinked sleep from his eyes, feeling a pleasant ache all through his limbs. Beast was still there in his bed, sound asleep. All the little careworn lines around his eyes were smoothed out in slumber, his brow unfurrowed. Brendan’s lips curved into a soft smile. He reached out and drew his finger, featherlight, down the bridge of that curved nose where the fine bristles of fur met in a messy whorl. Beast shifted away with a shallow grunt, burrowing deeper into the pillows, and Brendan grinned as he did it again a little more firmly.

This time Beast woke, eyelids fluttering heavily against the sunlight spilling in through the curtains. Brendan let his hand glide down Beast’s face, memorizing by touch the arch of his cheekbones and the swell of his jaw. The whole world was only this moment; a perfect, placid pool of soft sheets and slow heartbeats.

Beast hummed -- or, rather more accurately, purred -- into Brendan’s touch.

“Hey,” Brendan said softly.

Beast’s lips stretched in a slow and sleepy smile. “Hello.” He yawned hugely, pink tongue curling catlike. When he was finished he asked in a raspy morning voice, “I didn’t thrash about or steal the covers, did I?”

Brendan chuckled softly. “Not so I noticed.”

“That’s good,” he said, turning over on his side to face Brendan, who looked especially vibrant in the mornings, Beast noticed, which hardly seemed fair. He always woke up cranky and mused, hair sticking up every which way--and when your whole body was covered in fur, it really showed.

“You kept the rose.” Beast nodded, indicating the slim little vase on the far nightstand. “It is the same one, isn’t it?”

Brendan chuckled softly. “Not so I noticed.”

“Nonplussed by the sudden change of conversation, Brendan lolled his head to look at the object in question. In its small pool of sunlight it glowed lambently like a ruby statue. “Oh. Yes. I did. And yes, again, it’s the same one.”
Beast looked at him curiously. “How come?”

Brendan shrugged. “I thought you might demand proof, when I arrived, that I was truly who I said I was.”

A low chuckle escaped Beast’s throat, musing that sometimes, Brendan thought things through to the point of overthinking them.

Brendan smiled back. “You didn’t, but how was I to know? So I just kept it here.” He stretched his arms over his head, relishing the little twinges and pangs that inevitably followed a night of such exuberance, and was unprepared for the other man’s question.

“Why did you come here?”

Brendan opened his mouth, then closed it, swallowing a glib answer before actually giving the question some thought. “I’m...not entirely sure. To keep Beauty out of harm’s way, certainly. To prove...something to my father, perhaps.” He tangled his fingers with Beast’s, so warm and strong against his own. “But mostly, I think, to meet the man who valued his roses more highly than he did his wealth.” In the clear light he could see all the gold flecks brought out in the depths of Beast’s eyes, and they caught at him like a dozen tiny snares.

The following kiss stretched languorously until it led to other things, and the dawn slipped past without the two of them noticing.

***

They were walking together when Brendan saw a crocus.

It peeked out from the wet snow that lined the cobbled path to the stables, its yellow head nodding gently at the end of its slender stem. Brendan pointed it out with a smile.

Spring had finally crept its way into the castle grounds, surreptitious as a sneak thief. So, Beast thought, that one syllable encompassing a throng of crowded emotions, chiefly among them a resigned acceptance. This had been inevitable.

Brendan knelt down to look more closely at the flower, fragile with newness, and thoughts he hadn’t considered for weeks burst fresh like soap bubbles at the forefront of his mind. “I wonder how they’re all getting on, back home?” He muttered as he straightened, frowning faintly.

After a moment Beast nudged him gently. “You alright?”

“Yes. I’m just thinking...Pretty soon the little garden will need plowing. I just wonder how they’re doing without their great big workhorse.” He smiled crookedly, trying and failing to not seem worried.

“Maybe they bought a new one,” Beast reassured him, “I did send quite a lot of money in your father’s saddlebags.”

Brendan scoffed. “That’s assuming my imprudent father hasn’t squandered every penny.”

All Beast said was hmm.

Brendan looked up at him. That hmm had definitely sounded meaningful. “What?”
“You remember when you looked in the magic mirror? I thought it seemed that your sister, at least, lives in some measure of comfort.”

Brendan brightened. “That’s true.” He took Beast’s hand. “I’m probably just worrying unduly,” he explained, dismissing a little tremor of nervousness. He didn’t want to give the impression that he was planning on leaving. In fact, he was starting to plan how to best tell Beast that he was going to stay with him forever.

“If it is truly bothering you, why don’t you take another look in the mirror? Perhaps after dinner, so you can sleep with a clear conscience.” The words barely off his lips, Beast stood as still as a startled rabbit as Brendan stretched up and kissed him upon the cheek.

“Thank you, Beast. That’s a sweet offer. After dinner.”

Beast blinked, smiled and squeezed the small hand in his own.

It didn’t take more than a few minutes for them to reach the stables. Brendan had just unlatched the door when Beast stopped him.

“You go ahead. I have some things to attend to.”

“You...do?” Brendan quirked an eyebrow at him in askance. “What things?”

Beast took a deep breath. He had gotten better at controlling his temper; but he was a creature of old, old habits, and they died hard. He quashed the snarly instinct that wanted to insist the boy mind his own business, and that nasty little part of him went off to sulk in a corner. “For the most part, the castle takes care of itself. There are, however, a myriad of small matters that require direct attention. Every few months I must ensure that all the spells on the castle are intact, and doing as they ought. Lately I have been neglecting my duties as the castle’s caretaker, and I dislike postponing it any longer.”

Brendan blinked, surprised at the candid explanation. “Oh. Well. Okay, then.” Beast smirked, then leaned down to capture him in a long kiss. When they finally surfaced for air, Brendan felt a little dazed. “So. Um. See you later, then?”

“Most assuredly,” Beast murmured, his voice a tangible caress.

Brendan took Jean-Luc out for a ride, the horse’s breath forming great white puffs in the cold air, and during the whole ride thought of Beast. The horse could have fallen out from under him, and he still would have floated along, unconcerned, on a pink haze of happiness.

Afterwards he brought the gelding in and started to remove his tack, shooing the invisible hands of servants away when they attempted to do the tasks for him. He liked the simple job of oiling the bridle, and enjoyed the pleased snuffles Jean-Luc made when he sponged down the sweat-damp hide; it was good clean work, and it helped a horse’s mood, being looked after and cared for.

Brendan smiled to himself. That same principle worked with other beasts, too.

He walked into the castle through the side door, kicking clinging snow off his boots, and followed the lit hallways to the western parlor.
Beast was already there, leaned back on a chaise with his wolfish feet kicked up on a low table. Brendan just caught sight of the title of the book he had been reading—*Myths and Fables of Grecian History*—before Beast sat up at the sight of him and set it aside. At Beast’s welcoming smile, he lowered himself to the chaise next to the other man. “Perimeter secure?” he joked, leaning easily against Beast’s warm bulk.

“It’s very important, walking the grounds and freshening up enchantments.” Beast looked at him with mock-severity. “If the magic on the kitchen pantry expired, we’d be foraging for roots and grubs.”

“Perish the thought.”

“I’ve been putting it off for weeks. Everything is settled now. How was your ride?”

“Good,” he answered, beginning the laborious process of uncoiling the long scarf from around his throat. “Jean-Luc was momentarily startled by a falling branch, but disaster was averted and all is well.” When he finally was clear of the scarf, a servant plucked it out of his hands and it disappeared. Brendan thanked the servant, sighed, and leaned further into Beast, whose arm came up to wind around his shoulders, warming him.

They sat together in a soft, comfortable silence. Beast motioned for Brendan to give him his hands, and when he did he began chafing Brendan’s cold fingers between his palms, sharing his heat. He took Brendan’s hand in his own, and being mindful of his claws, he stroked the pads of his fingers over the palm. Brendan swallowed a little gasp as a frisson ran up his arm. He shut his eyes in enjoyment, opening them when those fingertips went still.

Strangely, Beast was frowning, staring at Brendan’s hand like it held the secrets to the universe cradled in its grasp. Brendan just watched curiously for a moment, before gently asking, “Did my hand do something to offend you?”

Beast looked up, confused. “What? No?”

“Well, then why are you glaring at it so?” He kept his tone light and teasing, wrapping the hand in question around Beast’s furred fingers and squeezing tightly. “Is something the matter?”

Beast abruptly stood, pulling the other man with him. He stepped back and flashed Brendan a crooked, self-deprecating smile. “Only that I have gotten very adept at deceiving myself. Pay me no mind. Come with me, I have something for you.”

***

In the cozy warmth of the kitchen, the glad, joyful sound of laughter rang out. “Blueberries! I’m surprised you remembered.” Brendan fixed a wide smile on Beast. “Thank you.”

Beast ducked his head in pleased embarrassment, thinking it was unlikely that he would ever forget the request for blueberries or especially the dream that preceded it. “Ah. Yes. You are, of course, quite welcome.” Brendan plucked the bowl off the cupboard shelf from a great array of various fruits in bowls, breads in baskets, and a rainbow of grains and legumes in glass canisters. Beast fondly recognized the gleam of curiosity in Brendan’s eye, and explained. “This is only the dry goods cupboard. There’s a cold one over there, for meat. And a separate one for cheese and butter and things.” He waved vaguely in that direction.
“Fascinating,” Brendan murmured, speaking more to himself than to his host as he took a quick peek in the dairy pantry, shelves stacked with dozens of red-waxed cheese wheels. “The fish told me about this. You can ask for anything?”

“Well, within reason. It’s best to keep stock of raw ingredients and let the servants put it all together. I asked for a ridiculously complex cake one time, and the results were...messy.”

Laughing again, Brendan settled into a tall stool at the kitchen counter. Beast leaned across from him and plucked a single berry from the bowl, relishing its summery taste. Brendan made a sound of enjoyment as he ate a whole handful, somewhat less seductively than his dream-version had, Beast noted with a flicker of disappointment.

“This is dangerous,” the young man suddenly announced.

Beast glanced around, seeing only an innocent bowl of swiftly dwindling blueberries. “It is?”

“Definitely. I could eat this entire bowl by myself. In an indecently short amount of time.”

Beast smirked. “Have I discovered your secret weakness, then?” A fall of brunet hair escaped its ponytail and curled over Brendan’s ear. There was a wicked cast to his eyes, the expression painting them nearly as dark a blue as the berries themselves. “I think you’ve already found all my weaknesses, mon ami.”

Beast smiled lopsidedly. “Let’s see. Books, music, gardens...” he ticked off each point on his fingers, “frozen ponds, harpsichord strings, fencing...”

Brendan leaned up in a quick, smooth movement, stretching his slender body over the counter until he was so close that Beast could feel his eyelashes disturbing the air with every blink. “Those weren’t the weaknesses I was referring to.”

Beast swallowed thickly. This was reminding him too much of his own weakness, his own cowardice, and he dropped his eyes to the bowl between them, smile faltering. Sensing his uneasiness, Brendan slid back into his chair with a slightly smug expression that very clearly said: we’ll save this for later. That look sent sparks shooting through him, and Beast ate some berries to cover the flush he could feel flitting like fire under his fur.

“So,” Brendan continued as if nothing had happened, “how is it exactly you brush up these enchantments? How does one go about ensuring spells are intact?”

Beast shrugged one shoulder. “It’s not easy to explain. I just do it.” It was much the same with his ability to control the servants. He made sure that his wishes were clear, and ensured afterwards that orders were carried out. He couldn’t explain how he did this, even if Brendan ever asked; it was something innate, something otherworldly that didn’t translate into words. Beast wouldn’t have understood it himself, two hundred years ago. Suffice to say, he made orders to the servants, and they obeyed them. Whether this was done by magical or mundane means was inconsequential.

“Did you have this...” the young man gesticulated wordlessly, searching for the right phrase, wary of speaking of Beast’s transformation without causing a quarrel. “Did you have this ability, before you...well, just before?”

Beast shook his head. “No, not at all. I never even believed in magic until that sorceress came knocking at my door. I slowly learned a trick or two, over the years.”

Brendan said musingly, “Before I came here, I didn’t think there was anything that reason could not explain, but after everything I’ve seen, I may have changed my opinion. The world holds far more
wonders than I’d ever thought possible.”

Beast gave him a pleased, measuring look. “I have come to that conclusion as well. There were always stories around these parts, local legends and old wive’s tales. Wizards and unicorns and all that folkloric rubbish. I never paid it any credence. Now...well, let’s say I’m willing to keep an open mind.” He smiled too widely, so he felt the tips of his fangs protruding, and quickly scaled the smile down to a smirk.

Brendan perked up in his seat. “You’ve haven’t seen a unicorn, have you?”

Beast barked out a laugh. “No!”

The young man sighed and reached for another berry. “Shame.”

“Even if I had,” Beast continued sardonically, “I lacked the proper qualifications to tame one.” Brendan spluttered, choking on a blueberry as he tried to swallow and laugh at the same time. He was still occasionally surprised by what a sharp sense of humor Beast could have.

Beast glanced down at the last blueberry in the palm of his hand, dark against his golden pelt, and was struck by a sudden impulse. He thrust his hand flat out in front of him and concentrated.

Brendan gasped. There was now a strawberry where the blueberry had been, perfect in every respects. “How did you do that?” he asked, delighted.

“Just an illusion.” Beast flashed him his quicksilver smile; there for a split second and then gone. “Go ahead, pick it up.” When Brendan did, his fingers seemed to go right through the skin of the strawberry until they touched the real berry within. He held it up with wonder. If not for the eerie sight of his fingertips disappearing beneath the surface, he would have been completely taken in by the trick. It was a perfect facsimile, shiny red flesh complete with a scattering of tiny seeds.

“That’s amazing,” he breathed, looking up at Beast in open admiration.

Beast shrugged modestly. “It’s just a modification of the spell used to shield the castle from unwelcome eyes, replicated in miniature. The applications are limited and not terribly useful.”

“I think it is incredible.”

“Well,” Beast demurred, “I thought it might amuse you. It still tastes like a blueberry, you know. You can eat it quite safely.”

Brendan popped the counterfeit strawberry into his mouth with a grin. “So you’re a wizard.”

Beast scoffed. “Hardly. Not really, no.” Brendan was grinning a touch too teasingly, and Beast could not resist teasing back a little. “No more than you are.”

“Me?” Brendan blinked. “How am I a wizard?”

“I do believe you have demonstrated a few tricks of your own. Last night, for example.” Beast’s eyes darkened, voice rumbling down a few octaves, making Brendan’s pulse thud hotly in his temples.

He blushed. “Um.” This was the first mention made all day to their...acrobatics the previous night. It was strange how Beast could be so shy one moment and then so bold the next; as mercurial as ever. Brendan looked down at his hands, tracing nonsense patterns on the counter. “I do hope that my...tricks were well received.”
Suddenly Beast’s voice was at his ear. “Positively enchanting,” he whispered, causing the young man to shiver, his restless hands going still. Beast moved a lock of stray hair out of the way and pressed a kiss to the curve of Brendan’s ear.

Brendan twisted up and locked Beast in a fervent, breathless embrace. Beast’s lips were soft and pliant underneath his own, and he nipped at them, none too gently. He was rewarded with a surprised gasp, followed by a deep guttural growl as Beast’s wandering hands grasped him by the hips and pulled him from the stool. Brendan went languid, relishing the strength with which Beast lifted him up on the wooden counter. He pulled his lover between his thighs and sank his fingers into the ivory lace at Beast’s throat, searching for buttons.

Beast bit back a hungry moan as he pressed close, roughly grabbing a handful of hair and pulling Brendan’s head back to lay claim to that pale, smooth throat. Something moved in the periphery of his vision; he looked up in time to see the empty bowl on the table, not a handspan away from where he was rutting up against Brendan, being carried off by invisible fingers and float off to the washbasin.

“Ah,” Beast sighed, regretfully releasing his handful of Brendan’s hair and forcing himself to step back. “Damn.” The feel of the slight rasp of stubble against his lips lingered even as he tried to compose himself.

Brendan looked up at him, ponytail askew and pupils blown wide. “Wha-? What’s wrong?”

Beast just nodded toward the sink, where the bowl was being rinsed and dried with a swift, sure efficiency. Cupboards rattled noisily as other servants began stacking up plates from lunch in their rightful places.

“Oh. That’s...unfortunate.” Brendan reluctantly slid off the counter and straightened his clothes. “The afternoon was going in a very agreeable direction, there.”

All day Beast had felt uncommonly impulsive, and when another sudden desire cropped up, he didn’t question it. He stepped forward, encircled Brendan in his arms and kissed him on the forehead. When he drew back, Brendan had a foolish smile spread across his face. “What was that for?” he asked, a touch dreamily.

“No reason in particular.” Beast lied as he put some space between them, leaning back casually against a cupboard. He knew why. He hadn’t expected to become so fixated on this boy, he certainly hadn’t planned for it, but he could not deny that everything was different now. He was different.

He knew something else, something that had become painfully clear to him as soon as he saw that cheery, yellow crocus nodding at him that morning; their time together had an expiration date. And Beast wanted as much as he could get in the limited time he was allowed. Which was, he knew, very foolish. It would only make things harder when the inevitable happened, when he was once again alone, pacing back and forth like a trapped animal in the same dark rooms for untold centuries to come.

_Selfish thoughts_, he told himself with derision. _I’m not so different now, after all._

“Well, if we’re not going to put on a show for the servants, then do you fancy a walk through the Greenhouse?”

Beast shook himself out of his dour contemplations. “That sounds very agreeable. If you’ve had your fill of blueberries, of course. I can always summon up another bowl.”
Brendan gasped in mock-horror. “The temptation! Let us leave, quickly, before my willpower dissolves.” Masking a snicker with a roll of his eyes, Beast turned on his heel and left the kitchen. Smiling, Brendan followed.

***

“Don’t you get bored, just swimming about all the time?”

“I dunno, don’t you get bored walkin’ on those leg things all the time?”

“Hm, the fish has a good point,” Beast said over the top of his book from the bench across the pond.

“Hush, you.” Brendan ignored Beast pointedly, returning to his conversation with the lazily circling koi. “So what do you do all day?”

“Well, the swimmin’ does keep us pretty busy,” the white fish interjected from under the rushes.

“Very true,” nodded the black.

Brendan rolled his eyes. “Is that all? You two must do other stuff. Like, I don’t know, discuss literature or something?”

“Ha! Yeah, we debate Chaucer ‘ere in our little fish pond.”

Beast spoke up. “I used to let them in the library, but the books kept getting returned all soggy.” Bubbles of piscine laughter broke the silvery calm of the water.

Brendan stood up, brushing petals from his trousers. “Alright, I give up,” he laughed, making his way from the bank over to the bench. “I was just curious.”

“I’ve met cats less curious than you,” Beast said as he set his book aside.

Brendan sat next to him, letting his hand rest atop Beast’s. “It’s a character flaw, I know.” His thumb made slow strokes on the back of Beast’s knuckles.

“There are worse ones,” Beast said distractedly, holding his hand very still. “Avarice, idiocy, recklessness...”

Brendan sighed heavily. “That reminds me. I’d better check on my family, in case Father has managed to bankrupt us yet again.”

Beast flashed him his quicksilver smile. “If anyone can squander that much money, it’s your father.”

“Yes, he might have invested it all in ocean-front property in Paris.”

Beast quirked an eyebrow in amusement. “Unless geography has radically changed in the last two centuries, that would be very stupid.”

“You never know,” Brendan joked, as Beast sensed the presence of an invisible at his elbow and held out his hand. As soon as it was in his grasp, he extended the mirror to his guest with an exaggerated flourish.
“One magic mirror, as requested,” he said. Brendan took it, immediately suffused with the pleasant feel of it, not quite as strong as the first time he had held it, but still a tangible weight of comfort and warmth in his hands.

“Thank you.” He looked at his reflection and was surprised by what he saw. He looked...different. Older, maybe?

No matter. He cleared his throat, glancing at Beast, who just arched his eyebrows expectantly at him. “I’d like to see my family, please.” He smiled a little as the mirror swirled blank. “Let’s hope they’re not in a gutter, begging for alms.”

Beast gave a low laugh. “You worry overmuch.”

He smirked. “I don’t think that--”

A strange voice emitted from the mirror in his hands, and Brendan looked down with surprise. “...don’t want to worry the others, but I truly see little hope,” the strange man whispered.

Brendan frowned as the image cleared. He recognized the man speaking; it was the local doctor, the very same physician that had come to treat his father after he had fallen ill from the Beast’s rose. The man was bent close with one of the twins, Catherine, in the corner of a room.

Catherine’s hand flew up and covered her mouth. Her eyes were very red. “Isn’t there something you can do? You’re a doctor, for God’s sake!”

The doctor sounded weary as he put his hand on Catherine’s shoulder in a very familiar fashion. “A doctor, my dear, not a miracle-worker. I can’t heal him if I don’t even know what’s wrong.”

Brendan snapped his gaze to Beast, who was watching over his shoulder with avid interest, heavy brow furrowed in alarm. He turned back to the mirror and asked, “What’s going on?” The picture moved, as if the viewer was passing down the hall, and slipped through a half-open door into his father’s bedroom.

There sitting around the bed were his other sisters, their eyes just as red-rimmed as Catherine’s had been. Beauty was wringing a wet cloth out into a bowl, and Marguerite reached out and took her father’s grey hand in her own.

Brendan gasped. His father looked half dead; the only sign of life was the slow, unsteady rise and fall of his chest under the thick blankets.

Beauty shot Marguerite a worried look, and in that look Brendan read volumes of sleepless nights and concern. “Father,” Marguerite called softly. “Father, you must eat. There’s some tea...”

The picture in the mirror moved again, this time hovering directly over the bed. The mirror was still warm, clutched in his cold, unresponsive fingers. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

His father blinked blearily, a shrunken thing. “Where’s Brendan?” came thin and reedy from his father’s cracked lips. Brendan froze and heard an odd drumming, before realizing it was his own heartbeat.

“He’s...away, Father,” Beauty said gently, laying the cloth across her father’s forehead. “Remember?”

“Mother Mary, he won’t stop asking,” muttered Marguerite in an aside.
Beauty sighed wearily, a strange, lost sound that Brendan had never heard from his sister before. “I know.” She tenderly mopped the sweat from her father’s forehead, then continued in a low voice. “I’m going to try again tomorrow.”

“What?” Marguerite hissed. “Beauty, no. How many fruitless trips into the forest will it take for you to accept that he’s gone? We need you here. Father won’t listen to anyone else.”

Beauty slumped in her chair, her expression defeated. “He can’t just be gone, Marguerite.”

Marguerite’s hard look softened. “I know, and I’m sorry. But think, Beauty. Father is at death’s door. We’ve lost our mother, our brother, and now you want to go alone to whatever doom he disappeared to? It’s madness! We can’t lose you too!”

A tear rolled down Beauty’s cheek. “I’ve...I’ve had dreams.” She twisted her hands in her lap. “It’s like...a voice, telling me that if I had gone instead, like I was supposed to, that none of this would have happened...”

“Well, excuse me if I don’t put much stock in dreams, sister.” Marguerite stood to rearrange the pile of pillows underneath her father’s head. “Who’s to say what’s supposed to be, anyway? None of us can see the future.”

“Where is...my boy...” Both women looked down as their father muttered, his eyes wide but unseeing.

Beast abruptly stood up and crossed the path to stand in front of the pond, hands held tightly behind his back. So soon, he thought, grieving. He hadn’t expected it to come so soon...

As the image in the mirror began to fade Brendan slowly unfroze, uncurling his hands from their vice-like grip around the frame. “I...this...this is terrible,” he said hoarsely.

“It isn’t your fault.”

“But...if what it shows is true...”

“Of course it’s true,” Beast rumbled, voice rolling over the room like a quiet thunder, bereft of any real force. “Did I not say that it would show you what you asked?” He stood sharply outlined by starlight streaming in through the glass. He himself very still, one hand clamped viselike over his wrist. His grip broke with his resolve, and he pulled Brendan towards him, who went willingly into his arms.

He engulfed the smaller man’s frame in his arms and held him close, breathing in his scent and committing it to memory, pairing it with the images of memories he saw behind his eyelids. Brendan’s easy smile, the blue of his eyes alight during an impassioned discussion, his strong clever fingers coaxing music from ivory keys; his head thrown back in ecstasy, the flush of his skin, the soft fall of his hair.

He knew what had to be done. What he did not know was if he would be strong enough for it.

“Pack his things,” he said aloud softly, sensing the flurry of movement as the servants hastened to do his bidding.

Brendan pulled his face from where it had been buried in the fur of his mane. “If I hadn’t seen...if I hadn’t known...” He shook his head. “I don’t know which would be worse.”
Beast gently disentangled from their embrace. “It would be worse,” he said carefully, “not to know.” He looked down at Brendan, and all the young man could see were his bright brown eyes burning at him from the shadows of the Beast’s backlighted form. “If you leave now, you can be there by first light.”

Brendan’s mouth dropped open. “If I... I can’t just leave.”

“Sure you can. Your horse will be ready for you.” Beast turned from him, hands again clasped tight behind his back. He made as if to walk along the cobbled path until Brendan lunged forward and grabbed his wrist, mirror clumsily clutched between them. Beast spun back around, face shuttered. “Don’t,” he warned.

Brendan’s eyes narrowed, equal parts bewildered and suspicious. “What is this, Beast? What are you doing?”

“I’m not doing anything,” Beast hissed, pulling his hand from the other man’s grasp. “The longer you delay, the worse your father gets.”

Brendan’s gaze dropped guiltily. True as Beast’s claim may be, he couldn’t just leave things between them like this. Only that very morning he had wanted to tell Beast that he was never leaving him, and now...this. “I’ll come back,” he vowed.

“You shouldn’t,” Beast grated. Brendan’s breath caught—he had to fix this. He stepped forward, grasping at Beast’s hands.

Beast pushed Brendan away from him, making the young man stagger backward. “What is it you want from me?” Beast asked harshly.

Ever tenacious, Brendan quickly closed the distance between them and grabbed his broad shoulders. “I want you to choose me!”

Brendan met his lover’s eyes and spoke fiercely, voicing thoughts that have been haunting him for weeks. “Can’t we forget about breaking this spell and just be together? I want you the way you are. Haven’t I proven that? Isn’t that enough?”

Beast brushed off his hands as if they were a child’s. “And what then? What then, Brendan? We’ve given in to our baser urges. Where are we to go from there? At best, you will grow bored with the novelty of bedding a freak and leave, and at worst, you stay here out of guilt and pity, making yourself a prisoner with me! Am I supposed to then watch you squander your life away, to grow old and die while I remain unchanged forever?” Beast’s voice was almost indecipherably raw, but his eyes were hard and unflinching.

Brendan was, for once, shocked into silence.

More softly, Beast said, “Brendan. You’re smart and capable and young. I’m just a leftover relic, a ghost from another time. You can go and do whatever you want.”

Brendan shook his head and took Beast’s face between his hands, his words betraying a tremor of desperation. “I only. Want. You.”

Again Beast shoved him away, this time more roughly. “Then you are a fool.” Silence descended to fill the distance between the two, nothing but the sound of breath until the slippery whisk of fur against velvet as Beast shifted.

He stepped forward to take the mirror, wrapping his hands around Brendan’s. “You must go to
them,” he said quietly, but with a firm resoluteness. “They need you.”

Brendan looked down at the blank mirror, the images still vivid in his mind. He needed to return home, this was undeniable; yet he was scared to leave, scared to take his horse down the path, turn about, and find nothing but brambles and wilds where the castle had once stood. He shuddered at the thought, but it clung. He caught his lower lip between his teeth before meeting those flinty eyes and promising, “I will come back.”

Beast shook his head emphatically. “Don’t. Go home, Brendan. Help your family. Live your life. Find someone else, someone better.” His fingers flexed, very slightly, against the backs of Brendan’s hands. “Forget me.”

Brendan managed a wry smile. “Have you forgotten how stubborn I can be? I’m not giving up on you, Beast. I...” So many times before he had tried to say those three words -- small words, really, but so very heavy that he could not force them off his tongue.

He had come too far to back down now.

When his voice finally came, Brendan did not recognize it. It sounded strange and far-away, like a phantom or a memory. “I...love you, Beast. I love you.” Beast’s eyes locked on his, and Brendan could read in them not one flicker of emotion.

The Beast pulled the mirror out of Brendan’s hands, his movements slow and deliberate. His shoulders seemed to lift forever with the great inward breath he took. When he spoke the words were cold and flat as ice. “I do not love you.”

Brendan recoiled at the dispassionate emptiness in Beast’s eyes, the world shattering into pieces smaller than the petals of roses around him.

“Leave me.” Beast hissed, stalking forward, his great bulk suddenly menacing. “You are no longer welcome in my home.”

Brendan took a faltering step back, and swallowed against the burning in his throat and eyes. “Beast, please--”

“What did you think?” Beast said suddenly, wildly. “That you were anything other than a diversion, something to while away the long winter days?”

Brendan ceased to be, hands falling numb and useless to his sides.

“What did you think?” Beast continued scornfully. “What did you think this was? A fairytale, some foolish story where princes fall in love with paupers, that I would change everything for the likes of you?”

Love. Beast’s words twisted in Brendan’s stomach, butterflies with razor tipped wings.

“A few tumbles and you think you have some claim on me! Did you believe I’d settle for this?” The words gathered speed like tumbling stones. “It was only a matter of time before I tired of you. Did you think this could continue forever? Were you truly that naive?”

Finally, one word scratched its way from Brendan’s throat. “No,” he rasped, and it wasn’t clear if it was a denial or an answer.

“You love me,” the Beast sneered mockingly, brows arrogantly arched. “Did you think that you were the first?”
Those butterflies lurched once in Brendan’s gut, then died.

“Go,” Beast snarled.

Brendan stood frozen.

“GO!” The roar reverberated around the greenhouse, jasmine flowers quivering on their branches. Beast flung the mirror down at Brendan’s feet where it splintered with a loud tinkling crash.

Everything shattered.

Brendan ran.

The Beast stood alone, swaying almost imperceptibly.

Starlight filtered down through the glass ceiling and shone up from the broken fragments of mirror scattered on the cobbled path. The fish wisely stayed at the bottom of their pond and said nothing.

The silence stretched, and after some time Beast left the garden.
In Which There is a Homecoming

Chapter Twenty-Three; In Which There is a Homecoming

The bellies of clouds were pink with dawn, and here and there the sky-clad trees wore clusters of new buds.

Plodding steadily along, the horse followed the path itself more than any guidance from its rider, who slumped in the saddle as if his spine were broken.

After... -- he shied away from naming what had happened the way someone who’d been bitten flinched from dogs -- after last night, he had run to his room and found all his things neatly packed for him already, a fine woolen cloak laid out on the bed as if waiting. He donned it hastily, slinging his pack over his shoulder, rushed downstairs and threw open the main doors. Outside Jean-Luc was saddled and waiting, hooves scraping fitfully against the cobbles.

He pulled himself into the saddle and kicked his heels, hard enough that the big horse squealed with surprise and broke into a gallop, down the dark and forbidding rows of rosebushes. The great iron gates flew open as he approached, and the wind howled at him as he left the castle behind. He didn’t turn around, not once.

Eventually it occurred to him that Jean-Luc couldn’t gallop the entire way, and with a twinge of apology slowed down to an even, loping trot.

A blanket of numbness had fallen over him then, as he rode through the night. The cold had been cruel, clutching at his clothes and hair with skeleton fingers, wind-riven branches heavy with the last icicles of winter.

It was a relief not to think; the numbness was as welcome as ice on a wound.

As he got further from the castle, the frost seemed to fall away and grass grew green among the roadside.

The dawn chorus was in full swing, and the birds fluttered from tree to tree as they sang love songs to one another.

It was a beautiful morning.

And Brendan was nearly home.

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Brendan looked at the cottage as it appeared through the opening forest, throat tight with nerves. He was surprised by what he saw; it looked considerably richer and greener than when he had left. The horse caught the scent of home and whinnied softly, prancing with excitement. Brendan gathered all the little scattered pieces of himself, drawing up tall in the saddle. He could only pray that he wasn’t too late.

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Beauty looked up from the goat pen, a bucket of scraps clutched in her hands.

There was a light morning mist clinging to the edge of the trees, and a large figure melted out of it
like a ghost. She set the bucket down, pushing stubborn goats out of the way, and walked around to the front of the cottage, peering through the mist.

She knew that horse.

“Oh, thank you, Mother Mary,” she whispered, then hiked up her skirts and ran.

“Brendan!” she cried out as she dashed toward the rider. “Marguerite! Catherine! Brendan is home!” Behind her the house stirred, sleepy voices rising.

With some difficulty Brendan slipped on a smile. He slid off Jean-Luc’s back, legs shaky and sore from the long ride. Before he had even fully turned around his arms were full of sister, who squeezed him so tight he could barely breathe. He smiled, a real one this time, and wrapped Beauty in his embrace, breathing in the familiar scent of the herbal wash she used in her hair. It was offset slightly by the smell of goats. “Hello, sister.”

She pulled back and punched him on the arm, to his surprise and discomfort. “Is that all you have to say?! You disappear for months and all you say is hello?! Oh, Bren!” She flung herself back into another hug, sobbing, and he patted her shoulder, feeling slightly at a loss.

There was an outcry from the door, and the twins spilled out onto the walkway, bathrobes hastily thrown on and their hair pinned up messily. As soon as they clapped eyes on Brendan their jaws dropped, and they too began running forward to hang all over him. In seconds Brendan was caught in a very localized hurricane of womanly affection and tears.

“You’re back! You’re really back!”

“Are you hurt, Bren?”

“We thought you were dead!”

“I just can’t believe it! When I heard you shout, I thought you’d gone mad, Beauty!”

“Where have you been? We thought Father’s dreadful Beast had killed you!” That name struck him like a kick in the chest, and it took every ounce of willpower not to flinch.

“I never did,” Beauty swore, “I knew you were alive! But oh! Father! Brendan, Father is—”

Brendan extricated himself from his sisters’ grasp with some difficulty, his face going serious. “I know. He’s ill.”

All three looked at him askance. “You knew?”

“How?”

Brendan hesitated. “It’s...complicated. I can explain everything later. Is Father still in his room? I must...” he trailed off, for there in the open doorway, leaning heavily against the frame for support, stood his father.

“I thought I heard...Beauty say...you were home.” Etienne’s halting voice was a faint wisp of what it had once been, and he looked pinched and pale.

“Father! You shouldn’t be up,” scolded Catherine, though she wrung her hands with worry. Etienne stumbled a little, and Brendan darted forward to take his elbow. He swallowed hard and looked up at the blank face of his only parent.
“Hello, Father.” Etienne looked at him with such intensity it was as if he was staring into the great empty abyss of Brendan’s broken soul. Brendan prepared himself for anything, for the anger, the disappointment, even for wrathful fists to fall upon him, and was completely unprepared when the only thing that fell upon him was his father’s encircling arms.

“My son...” he sobbed as he pulled Brendan close. “Thank heaven you’re unharmed.” Brendan, frozen with shock, slowly brought up his hands and clapped his father carefully on the back. “Are you alright, my boy?”

The last time his father had actually *hugged* him was when he had scraped his knees at the age of five.

This was...beyond his realm of experience.

“I...” his voice broke, so he cleared his throat and tried again. “I’m alright, Father.” Etienne held him out at arms length, giving him a thorough once-over.

“Look at those fine clothes! You look like a lord.” He beamed at Brendan. “It’s good to have you home, Brendan.”

“Oh,” Beauty sniffled, dashing away happy tears.

“Father,” Marguerite said gently. “You should lie down. You are very ill.”

Etienne smiled at her wanly. “I feel better already.”

***

Once inside, Etienne was overcome with weakness and had to be led to bed. Beauty made him comfortable while Catherine unsaddled the horse, and Marguerite disappeared into the kitchen to put on the kettle.

Brendan looked around as he hung up his cloak and set his pack down by the door. The house looked much less bare than it had before; there were some modest paintings, new warm rugs, and a few extra chairs in front of the fireplace. With a basket of knitting beside the chairs and last night’s embers still glowing in the hearth, the cottage looked very homely and inviting. As he built up the fire, he couldn’t help but think that as pleasant as it was, the room seemed so very small.

Beauty came in, and for just a minute watched her brother with a smile on her face before speaking. “Father’s settled in,” she said. “The doctor ought to be in to check on him this evening. He should sleep through the rest of the morning, I think.” She motioned for him to sit. When he lowered himself to the chair, the whole night’s worth of exhaustion swept over him. Beauty sat in the chair closest to him and took his hand. He shot her a tired smile.

Catherine walked in, and for the first time Brendan noticed the swell of her belly. “Good lord,” he cried, standing up. “Are you pregnant?!”

She blushed. “Sit down, silly. Yes, Gustav and I are expecting.”

“Who is -- wait, the doctor?!”

“Yes,” she said in exasperation. “We were married shortly after Christmas. I was going to wait until we’d heard some word from you, I swear we were going to, but...well.” She laid her hand over her stomach with a small smile. “It wouldn’t have been proper not to.”
Brendan gaped. “I’m... going to be an uncle?” He turned the idea over in his mind and found it to be very agreeable, indeed. Catherine grinned. When they had been rich and lived in the city, Catherine had always been rail-thin, and, it must be said, a bit ferrety about the face, but now she had a pleasant plumpness to her and a rosy glow to her cheeks. Motherhood suited her.

He still couldn’t resist teasing her, just a wee bit. “So it wasn’t a white wedding, then?” He had to duck as she lobbed a ball of yarn at his head.

“He still couldn’t resist teasing her, just a wee bit. “So it wasn’t a white wedding, then?” He had to duck as she lobbed a ball of yarn at his head.

“Tea’s on,” Marguerite called as she brought out a tray with cups and toast. Brendan suddenly realized he was ravenous, and smothered a piece of toast with butter and jam before wolfing it down.

His sisters all watched him intently, and the toast seemed to stick in his throat.

“Um. Well.” He tried on a polite smile. “I see you bought some goats?”

“Brendan!” hissed Marguerite. “To hell with the goats! Where have you been?” Three pairs of eyes fixed on him expectantly.

Brendan scratched at his chin to buy himself time, carefully lining his words up like soldiers. “Well. I’ve been at a castle.” He had to pause for all the twittering as each of them tried to ask questions at once.

“I knew it,” insisted Beauty, tossing her golden curls. “You went to see that Beast Father spoke of. The moment you took that blasted rose out of the house, Father got better, you know.”

Brendan took a shaky breath and forcibly willed himself to continue. “Yes, I went to see the Beast.”

“Oh, how awful. Has he held you captive this entire time?” Marguerite covered her mouth with distress.

Catherine gasped. “No! How ever did you escape? Was it very terrible? Did he keep you locked in a dungeon?”

“Locked him in a dungeon and gave him such nice clothes?” asked Beauty, her expression keen.

“Was he truly a Beast, as Father said? Did he have claws and fangs and everything?”

Brendan’s knuckles went white on the arms of his chair. “I cannot speak of it.” His voice was steel and ice. His sisters all fell silent.

Beauty cleared her throat and poured herself a cup of tea. “Of course, brother. Don’t trouble yourself. I can’t even imagine what you’ve been through.” Catherine opened her mouth, and Beauty gave her a hard look until she shut it again, pouting. “You rest and relax, and you can tell us all about your adventures whenever you feel ready.” She gave him a kind smile, and he felt an answering one reach his lips.

“Thank you,” he said in a hushed tone. They sipped tea and chewed toast in silence. When Catherine started to stand up, she had some difficulty, so Brendan leapt to his feet to help her. An uncle, he thought, completely overwhelmed by the idea.

“Goodness gracious!” exclaimed Catherine, grasping her brother’s face between her hands. “You look like a highwayman.”

Marguerite tilted her head to one side. “He certainly does. He looks a complete ruffian. Don’t you think, Beauty?”
“Well, I don’t know if I’d go that far,” the youngest sibling said diplomatically. “But he’s certainly a little...scruffy.”

Brendan pulled back out of his sister’s reach and touched his bristly chin. “Do you really think so?”

Marguerite tugged at a hank of his hair. “Certainly so. Your hair is nearly past your shoulders! And it looks like you’re trying to grow a hedgehog on your face.”

“Oh thanks very much, Marguerite.” Brendan muttered. “I didn’t realize it’d gotten so bad. I’ll shave tomorrow, alright?”

Catherine snorted. “You didn’t realize? Didn’t you look in a mirror in that castle?”

Brendan’s jaw twitched. “There were no mirrors, no.” His tone forbade comment. The sisters again fell silent.

“Why don’t you go take a nap, brother?” Marguerite took his arm and pushed him gently in the direction of the attic stairs. “You look awful. Don’t worry about Father, we’ll take care of him. You can see him when you’ve had some rest.”

Brendan’s shoulders slumped wearily. “That sounds perfect. Thanks, Mar.” He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, then made his way up the stairs, ignoring the concerned murmurs he could hear starting up behind him.

He looked over his attic room, the piles of secondhand books and the violin case lovingly set in the corner. It was if he had never left. He fell to the narrow bed gratefully, burying his face into the pillow. At least someone had though to change his sheets once in a while. They smelled clean, though without the faint hint of lavender he had become accustomed to.

Every time his thoughts started to waver, to wander, he had to wrench them back.

If I don’t think about it, he told himself firmly, then it won’t hurt.

He kept his mind blank by listening to birdsong until weariness overtook him.

***

He slept dreamlessly for a handful of hours. Wakefulness brought a moment of confusion -- Where were the bedposts with their deep red curtains? Where was the faint crackle of fire in the grate? Then reality came rushing back, and he was in his chilly attic bedroom, the fine clothes he had slept in grimy with road dust.

He shucked them off and shoved them down into the bottom of a drawer, where he wouldn’t have to look at them. He dressed in his own plain, simple clothes and tied his hair back in an efficient tail. A quick glance out the little window informed him that it was late afternoon.

When he made his way downstairs he found Marguerite and Catherine folding laundry. They both smiled up at him.

“Did you sleep well? You look much better,” Marguerite declared.

“I just set some lunch aside for you and Father,” said Catherine. “You can take it in with you, as I’ll expect you want to spend some time with him.”

“Thank you, sister, I do. How is he?”
“His color looks better.” She smoothed the wrinkles out of a chemise and set it on her pile. “The
doctor will be by soon to check on him.”

Beauty entered with a small bucket of goats milk. “Oh, Brendan, you’re up! Can you take Father his
medicine, please?” She fished one-handedly in her apron pocket for a small bottle and set it on the
waiting lunch tray.

“Of course.” He gathered up the heavy tray with care and carried it into his Father’s bedroom.

His color did look better, Brendan noted with relief, setting the tray on the nightstand. “Father?” he
asked, tentatively. Slowly, Etienne stirred. His eyes opened blearily.

“You’re here.”

Brendan pulled a chair closer to the bed and took a seat. “I’m here.”

Etienne tried to sit up, and Brendan helped prop him up on the many pillows. “I thought perhaps I
had dreamed it. I have had very strange dreams.” His voice was hoarse, and very feeble.

“Shh. Are you hungry?” He lifted the bowl of soup and offered it to his father. “Beauty says you are
to take your medicine.” Etienne made a face, but took the bowl and began eating. Brendan pretended
not to see the way the spoon trembled in his hand. Instead he measured out a dose of poppy syrup
and stirred it into his father’s tea.

Etienne grunted in thanks, handing back the half-empty bowl and sipped at the tea. Brendan sat in
silence, merely watching and lending his presence.

His father sighed heavily when his tea was gone. “Brendan. You are alright? Unharmed?”

Brendan smiled reassuringly. “Yes, Father, I’m fine.” Etienne blinked unevenly as the poppy syrup
took effect.

“I had thought...”

“Hush, Father. Get some rest. We can talk later.” He patted his father’s hand, a little uncertainly.
Etienne made a little sound of agreement, sinking down into the comfort of the pillows, eyes sliding
shut.

*He made my father sick once...*The ugly thought crept in and hunched in the corner of his mind, a
hideous little gargoyle of a suspicion. *What better way to be rid of me than to do it again?*

Brendan watched for a minute as his father’s breath steadied and his face went slack. Then he ate his
lunch, being mindful of crumbs. He didn’t think he could bear the wrath of three sisters if he got
mutton sandwich on his father’s sickbed.

As he finished the last bite, there was a light knock at the bedroom door. Not waiting for an answer,
the door swung open and in walked the doctor -- or rather, his new brother-in-law, he supposed.

“Ah, young Monsieur d’Aumale! The prodigal son, I understand.” The doctor extended his hand,
and Brendan shook it heartily. “I am most glad to see you are well. None of the girls would tell me
where you had disappeared to. I had assumed, I fear, that it was in relation to some gambling debt, or
some equally unsavory endeavor.”

Brendan let loose a bark of startled laughter. “I do not take after my father in that arena, Doctor
Thibault.”
The doctor was several years his senior, but not so much older than Catherine. He had fair hair, going a bit thin at the top, and intelligent eyes. He wasn’t particularly handsome, but he did possess a pleasant smile that seemed designed to put folks at their ease. “I know not what manner of man your Father was before you moved here to our little township, but I must say he has acquitted himself well. He recently became the sole owner of the grocery in town, did you know? And doing quite a brisk business, I hear.” He took a few instruments from his bag and bent over the bed, taking esoteric measurements with an expression of deep concentration. Brendan watched with interest.

The doctor straightened, eyebrows raised with slight astonishment. “I am pleased to say that his conditions are improving. His arrhythmia has evened out and it sounds as if the pulmonary edema has drained.”

Brendan did not know much about medicine, but he did know a thing or two about words. “His...heartbeat was irregular? And he had fluid in his lungs?”

The doctor shot him a reappraising look. “Ah yes, they did tell me you were something of a scholar. I must say that yesterday his situation looked very dire, indeed.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” the doctor freely admitted. “If his condition continues to improve, I would venture that your father will be hale enough to leave his bed in a few weeks. It’s still too early to make any promises, though,” he added hastily.

“Thank you, Doctor Thibault.” Brendan rose to shake hands again, but the other man held up his hands with a disarming smile.

“Please, call me Gustav. We are brothers now, after all,” he said with a twinkle. He pulled up the other chair and sat down with a sigh. “It’s a bit of a trek to get here. We have a modest home in town, but when your father fell ill, Catherine insisted upon staying here.”

Brendan gave him a crooked grin. “Had I known you were courting her, I would have given you a piece of fair warning. My sister can be a bit overbearing at times, doctor.”

“I am well aware.” He folded his instruments back into his bag, falling silent for several beats. “I do care for your sister very much.”

“I am glad to hear it. I wish...” Brendan cleared his throat, “I wish I had been present for the wedding.”

The doctor seemed embarrassed. “It was a...hasty affair, I am shamed to say. But I am sure you’re pleased that you’ll be here for Marguerite’s wedding, come July.”

“What?!?” Brendan exclaimed loudly, then forcibly calmed himself down after a glance at his still-slumbering father. “Marguerite has gotten engaged?”

“Oh, yes. Did nobody tell you? Ah, women! They can be such frustrating creatures. Monsieur Beaumont proposed three weeks ago.”

“I do not know the man.” Brendan blinked, feeling once again overwhelmed. What else had happened in his absence? It had only been a few months and suddenly everyone was getting married and having babies and buying up greengrocers.

Doctor Thibault laughed. “I take it you did not expect to find things so changed?”
“I am still having a hard time coming to grips with the fact that I’m going to be an uncle.”

Gustav chuckled. “We were planning on naming it after you, you know.”

Astonished, Brendan stared. “Really?”

“My wife insisted! They were all very distraught, you know.” His tone was slightly reproachful.

His answer took some careful thought to compose. “I was unable to send a letter or employ a messenger.”

The doctor eyed him thoughtfully. “I see. I will not pry, sir, but suffice to say, it must have been an uncommonly strange place you have been.”

Though his tongue felt very dry, Brendan answered. “Indeed it was, Gustav. Indeed it was.”

***

“Beauty.”

She tore her attention away from her embroidery. “Yes?”

“Can you trim up my hair? You always were so good at it.”

Beauty clucked her tongue and set aside her work. “You’ll never let me live that down, will you?”

When she was ten, Beauty had chopped her hair off so it came right under her ears. It gave their governess fits.

“Never,” he replied with a cheeky grin. He stood up and followed her into the kitchen where she pulled out her good pair of scissors.

“It’s never wise to tease a woman holding a sharp pair of scissors, you know. Sit.” She wrapped a cloth around his shoulders and asked, “An inch or two off, hmm?”

“No,” he said firmly. “Above the ears, please.”

“Oh, Bren! Not your handsome hair!” Beauty burst out, taken aback. “Are you sure?”

His lips were thin, and white around the edges. “Quite sure.” Beauty watched him carefully for a long second, then sighed.

Long curls of dark hair fell to the kitchen floor with each metallic snick.

***

Each day Etienne recovered a little bit more. After few days he could walk quite steadily to the kitchen to fetch his own tea, and had taken to joining his children in the living room for their now-customary chats every evening.

Brendan spoke little, and his sisters treated him a bit like he was made of glass and would shatter at the slightest provocation. Sometimes he felt like that, too.

He ran his fingers over his short hair, still not used to the sensation of cold ears and bare neck, how strangely light his head felt.

Beauty had showed him around the cottage, talking excitedly of the changes she had ‘suggested’ to
Father, all the things they had done with the money Father brought home in his saddlebags.

She explained about the goats, and the new mare (who Jean-Luc seemed very enamored with), and the household repairs, and the smart investments Father had made in town.

When she brought him round the back of the cottage, he went very still. Twining profusely up the back of the house were red rosebushes, beautiful in unseasonably full bloom. They were unmistakably Beast’s roses.

She smiled, mistaking his expression for mere surprise. “You took away that strange rose Father brought back for you, of course, but you left enough of the twig that I was able to plant a cutting. They really shot right up, didn’t they? And already in bloom! I think it must be magic,” she said thoughtfully. She then noticed Brendan’s expression and quickly changed the subject, not wanting to upset her brother by bringing up his harrowing experience. “I had thought Father would object to them -- you know how he can be about flowers since Mother died -- but he didn’t. He’s changed, I think, since you left.” She held her brother’s hand broke him out of his melancholic trance. “I tried to reason with him but he thought...well, he thought you were dead.”

Brendan ducked his head in chagrin. As happy as his family was to have him back, he was deeply sorry that he had been the cause of such grief. “I’m so sorry, Beauty.”

“Yes, well.” She lead him back around the house briskly. “Least said, soonest mended.” She gave him a bright smile.

Then she told him how she had tried to ride to the castle herself, to find him and bring him back. “I must have circled the same outcropping of rocks a dozen times! I swear, Brendan, it was like the road itself was trying to keep me out!” He listened, and didn’t say a word.

Later that week he asked if she also had gotten engaged, or if there was a suitor somewhere hidden away.

“Goodness no!” Beauty dismissed the idea. “There is a fellow...”

“Mm-hmm.” He gave her a sly smile. “I knew it.”

“Nothing like that!” She laughed. “There is a man who owns a school in Clermont that I am in correspondence with. He’s going to hire me on as a teacher next year.”

Brendan, yet again, was completely taken by surprise. “That’s wonderful! Does Father know?”

“Yes. He wasn’t sold on the idea at first, but then I told him I had already spent my dowry on travel plans. He just threw up his hands and said that if I wanted to waste my life and become an old spinster, than that was my business.” Her larkspur eyes sparkled. “But I think he’s secretly very proud.”

“He ought to be!” He gave her a quick hug. “You’ll be a brilliant teacher.” She flushed pink with pleasure.

Most nights since he’d come home he slept in drips and drabs, sometimes waking bolt upright with that last roar echoing from the empty cavern of his dreams. Other times he woke aching for touch, and had to clench his hands in the sheets and count backwards from a thousand before oblivion would reclaim him. But this night, sleep came a little more easily.

A voice softly called his name. “Brendan...”
In the dreamy haze of half-sleep, he muttered into the pillow. “Beast?”

Suddenly he was ice cold, soaking wet, and wide awake. He was also on the floor, having tumbled out of the bed during his startled flailing. When he tore the clinging sheets off his head he blinked furiously at the slowly focusing shape standing at the foot of his bed.

Beauty stood in her nightdress, a lit candle in one hand, and in the other an empty pail.

“That’s for knocking me unconscious and leaving me behind like some helpless damsel.” She nodded once with satisfaction, and without any further ado, turned on her heel and walked out the door.

Brendan blinked as ice water dripped off his nose. Why couldn’t I have been an only child?

***

By the weekend, Etienne was well enough to take short walks in the evenings, to ‘build up his strength,’ as he put it.

All four siblings gathered in the living room. Brendan was staring mindlessly into the fire when he noticed the girls glancing about furtively before uncovering an earthen jug from under a basket of knitting. Marguerite poured four glasses and handed him one. He quirked an eyebrow questioningly.

“What’s this?”

“Just some cider.”

The first drop vaporized instantly on his tongue, and he coughed. “Mère de Dieu! Where did you girls get this?”


“Good for the pipes,” Marguerite wheezed, taking an unladylike swig.

“Don’t let Father see,” warned Catherine, “he drinks the whole jug himself and then gets terribly ill.”

Brendan held up a hand. “Wouldn’t dream of it.” He took another sip. It wasn’t too bad. It would likely strip paint off a barn, but it really tasted none the worse for that.

They chatted idly, Brendan relaxing by inches. Last night he had been flipping through one of his old books and stumbled across a passage that had once been read aloud to him, in an enormous library while golden daylight streamed in. He had slammed the book closed and barely been able to sleep, trying to rein in memories the way a farrier did a wild horse.

Today, however, he had seen or heard nothing that reminded him of...before, and he counted that as a good day.

“So tell me,” he chimed in, “who is this Monsieur Beaumont that Gustav says you are engaged to, Marguerite? Why didn’t you tell me you were getting married?”

It was Marguerite’s turn to blush. “I thought you had enough to worry you without me adding to it. He’s a tailor. He owns his own store in town.”

“The tailor?” Brendan tilted his head. “I thought you and that banker fellow had an...understanding?”

Marguerite’s cheeks grew even pinker. “We did! But...then I met Jérémie.”
“She stared after him like a mooncalf,” hooted Catherine.

“I did not!”

“Oh, you liar, you did too.”

“It was quite sweet, actually,” Beauty interjected, calming and smoothing the rankles in the conversation. Brendan admired her ability to do that, and wondered, briefly, how she would have fared against the Beast’s mercurial mood swings and occasional violent outbursts. He wrenched his thoughts back to the present, angry with himself.

Father appeared in the doorway, dressed for his evening stroll and beaming proudly at seeing all his children safe at home. “Yes, Marguerite’s getting married, and dear Catherine is soon to give me my first grandchild. When are you going to find a nice girl to settle down with, son?” Brendan swallowed a heated reply, and then noticed that each of his sisters had gone eerily silent. Each woman had her eyes trained on some innocuous object across the room; a cabinet, a bowl of flowers, nothing of any interest whatsoever. Beauty’s thin eyebrows were raised slightly, and she coughed delicately and sipped her tea.

Good God, they knew. They all knew.

He could only sit, thunderstruck, as his father waited for an answer. Catherine suddenly piped up, “Oh, Father, leave him be. Two marriages in one year is quite enough for any family, I should think.”

“Oh, of course, my dear. Well, I’m off. Don’t wait up!” Their father smiled fondly, and left for his constitutional, taking the cane set by the front door for this express purpose.

Marguerite reached over and patted Brendan on the knee. “Never mind him, brother.”

He was still reeling over this new information -- that his sisters knew about him and didn’t care -- and just nodded dumbly. Marguerite turned away from him and resumed talk of her upcoming wedding with the other two, comparing the merits of satins and tulles.

He listened to their bland conversation for a few minutes before gathering his wits enough to speak. “You...you all know?”

Three pairs of eyes blinked at him. “Know what?” One of the twins asked.

“You know that...that I. Uh.” He was totally at a loss for how to phrase his question; he had certainly never planned for this eventuality.

Understanding dawned on Beauty’s face. “Oh, that. Well. Yes.” She gave a pointed look to the twins, and through some feminine mystery they seemed to understand her silent communication.

“Ohhh!” said Marguerite, “Well, of course we do.”

“We are not complete fools, Brendan.” Catherine sipped her tea and looked down her nose at him. “You never were interested in any of the young ladies we introduced you to, not even one.”

“And after we moved here and you got a job at the store, if a handsome fellow ordered something you would practically leap over the counter to get his things.”

Brendan gaped at Marguerite. “I certainly did not!”
“You did too!”

“You did tend to pay a little more attention to the good-looking men than any other customers, brother,” Beauty broke in gently.

A reluctant smile tugged at his lips. He drew his hand up to his chest in exaggerated shock. “Betrayal! From you of all people. *Et tu, Beauty?*”

Catherine sighed impatiently. “This is very interesting and all, but is nobody going to ask about the castle?” Catherine complained. “Honestly, we’ve waited for *days*.”

“Hush, Catherine.” Marguerite said sharply. “He’ll speak of it when he’s ready.”

“Can’t he be ready now?” she whined.

The twins bickered for a full minute, and Beauty shared an exasperated look with her brother. For a split second, Brendan was transported to his youth, the two youngest siblings rolling their eyes as the twins argued *yet again*. With all the changes the d’Aumales had seen, this core truth never varied.

Brendan dropped his face into his hands and laughed as if he’d never stop. All three women turned to stare at him in astonishment.

“Are you quite well, Brendan?” Beauty asked, setting down her teacup and leaning over in concern.

“I’m fine!” he choked out. “Ah, I’m fine. It’s just...so comforting to see that some things never change.”

“I just wanted to know if it was very grand, is all,” Catherine snapped waspishly.

“It was.” Brendan settled his hands on the arms of the chair. “It was very grand. A bit disheveled, in a state of some disrepair, but quite grand for all that.”

And at this, a flood of questions erupted from the three of them, and Brendan did his best to smile and answer each of them, as they asked of gardens and stables and ornaments and never, not even once, asked about the Beast.

***

Etienne’s illness meant that many of his business matters had fallen by the wayside, left in the hands of his manager. “Jasper’s a good man with the customers, but not very adept at numbers, I fear,” Etienne mentioned in passing at breakfast. “There’s sure to be a pile of things that will need cleaning up when I get back.”

Brendan glanced up from his plate of eggs and potatoes. The last few days he had been feeling a bit like a lazy layabout, with his sisters always keeping themselves so busy. “I’ll go, Father.”

Etienne seemed surprised. “Are you sure? It’s dreadfully tiresome, balancing the books and signing inventories. And there’s no telling what state Jasper has left the paperwork in!”

He shrugged carelessly. “It’s no trouble. I’d be happy to help.” His father beamed at him, and with only a fraction of hesitation, Brendan smiled back.

***

It was a small town, and he hadn’t been absent so long that the townsfolk had forgotten the young man who had worked the counter of the general store, even for as briefly as he had. Men hailed him
as he passed, and women smiled. The aroma of fresh bread wafted through the spring air and voices mingled to create a constant, pleasant buzz of activity.

The sign of the grocery merely said ‘GreenGrocer’, with a newly painted head of lettuce beneath it. A bell chimed as he opened the door.

A fussy-looking man of middle years with alarmingly red hair looked up and gave him a broad, welcoming grin. “A fine morning, sir! Anything I can get you?” Then, before Brendan could answer, the man smacked himself on the forehead. “Ah! How foolish of me! Of course, you are Monsieur d’Aumale’s son! I did not recognize you without the hair.”

Brendan ruffled his shorn locks ruefully, then laughed and shook the man’s hand. “And you are Jasper. My father speaks highly of you.”

“That is very kind of him. I’ve kept things running as best I could, but, well, the books...” Jasper winced. “I never did have a head for figures, I fear. And the merchants, they cause trouble. Your father always handled them, but I’m afraid I’m at a bit of a loss.”

“If you could show me to the office, I’ll see what I can do about the bookkeeping.” Jasper thanked him effusively and showed him to the cramped little side room that apparently served as his father’s office. Brendan’s eyes widened; haphazardly stacked order slips and scribbled receipts were strewn about the desk in a messy pile.

“Shall I bring you in some tea, sir?”

“That would be very welcome, thank you.” Brendan sat down at the desk and inwardly sighed. Math had never been his favorite subject. “And Jasper? If any of these trouble-causing merchants show up, you may direct them to me.”

“Very good, sir!”

Some time later, Brendan was puzzling over some odd discrepancies in a batch of contracts and receipts, and with a weary sigh set them in the ‘To Be Resolved’ stack. He had made considerable progress; all inventories had been brought current, the ledger had its mistakes corrected, and every order slip was carefully organized. A half-full cup of cold tea sat forgotten at his elbow. Brendan underscored questionable numbers with one hand, and propped up his head with the other, his temples throbbing.

A hunch struck him. He reached for the stack he had just set aside and read through them again, this time more carefully. Huh, he thought.

Jasper poked his head in the room. “Sir? There is a merchant here to see the owner. Should I send him in?”

Brendan scrubbed his face in an effort to reinvigorate himself before answering. “That’ll be fine, Jasper. Send him in.” Jasper looked relieved, and ducked back out into the shop. A loud, unctuous voice heralded the arrival of a well-dressed man sporting an enormous mustache.

“What is the meaning of this delay? Where is Etienne?” The man seemed to fill up the entire office -- with his voice, at least, if not with his girth, though that was considerable, as well.

Brendan stood and extended his hand. “He is at home recovering from an illness. I am his son. Perhaps I can help you, sir?”

“Ha!” The man ignored the proffered hand and scowled. “I doubt it. I told that manager of yours that
I am still owed thirty-two francs, but the fool claimed he didn’t have the authority to give me my money! This is an outrage!”

The amount was familiar. Brendan glanced down at the receipt in his hand. “Ah, you are Leon, the apricot seller? Actually, you are just the man I wanted to see.”

Leon the apricot seller hadn’t listened to a word he had said. “Your father still owes me double for last week’s shipment! What do you intend to do about it, hmm?”

Brendan’s tone was contrite. “I’m terribly sorry, sir. I’m sure there must have been some mistake.”

“Yes, there must have! I had to take today -- the first day of my holiday, might I add -- to come down here and get what I am owed.” The man managed to look down his nose at Brendan, despite behind nearly a head shorter than he.

Brendan pulled out a sheaf of receipts from the organized piles in front of him. “Is this your signature here?”

Stride broken, the merchant gave a cursory glance at the paper Brendan held up. “Yes, yes, that is by my hand. What of it?”

“You’ve been providing this grocery with apricots for...six weeks, now?”

The merchant flapped a hand dismissively. “Yes, yes, that is-”

“As I am sure you are aware, sir, our contract with you is that we pay you the market rate per pound of produce, yes?”

“Yes, but I fail to see how that-”

“An estimated weight is given before shipment, yes?”

“That is the standard-”

“As stated in our contract, when the weight of the goods is more than expected, an extra fee is applied, written here as a ‘over encumbrance surcharge’. He held up the relevant receipt. “This is your writing, sir?”

“Yes,” the man snapped, face reddening.

“It would appear that every single trip you make, without fail, our goods exceed the pre-agreed weight estimate. Would you agree?”

“Well, I-”

Brendan smiled, sharklike. “I believe you are the one who makes the initial estimate. Correct?”

Showing an unusual amount of wisdom, the merchant fell silent.

“So, you tell us you expect to bring us two boxes of apricots weighing fourteen pounds total, then when you arrive here with the goods, it turns out they in fact weigh nineteen? And, as previously agreed in our contract, a weight overage of at least five pounds carries with it a surcharge of double the original price? Is that correct, sir?”

The merchant fidgeted, sweat beginning to bead on his forehead. “Now see here-”
“No, you see here.” Brendan sprang to his feet, dropping the feigned politeness and letting his fury break through. “You have been scamming my father for six weeks, and it stops now. I have been figuring sums for the past three hours and have an incredibly unpleasant headache, so I am not in the best of moods. What I want is for you to refund the entire amount that you have stolen from us, and I want it today.”

Leon the apricot seller blustered. “Preposterous! Your claims are utterly spurious. I will not stand here and be accused-”

“Of course, we can settle this an easier way. I can always call the local constabulary and you can spend your holiday in gaol for fraud. Does that sound like a more agreeable arrangement?”

The merchant stared at him, agog. He then cleared his throat and nervously smoothed his mustache.

“...How much?”

Brendan smiled.

***

The next day it was business as usual. Following breakfast Brendan groomed the horses and helped take in the laundry from the clothesline. It was easier to get through each day if he remembered to relish the simple things, like the familiar smell of horses and the cool crispness in the air. It kept his mind clear.

A hand fell on his shoulder. “I think it’s time we had that talk, son.” Brendan turned about, surprised. “Shall we take a walk?” Etienne motioned to the winding path towards town invitingly.

Brendan set down the basket and nodded, stomach tightening with apprehension at the prospect of a heart-to-heart with his father. He never knew how to talk to the man. “Of course, Father. If you’re felling well enough, that is?”

Etienne’s eyes crinkled when he smiled. “I am quite hale, I think. The doctor says he’s never seen a recovery so fast and so complete.” They moved out together and started an easy pace on the well-worn path.

Though he smiled and nodded, inwardly Brendan cringed. If his father’s sickness had indeed been magical, as he was certain it was, then it practically proved the horrible suspicion that it had been fabricated solely to wrest Brendan from the castle.

And he only knew one person skilled in magic.

He belatedly realized his father had been asking him a question. “I’m sorry, Father, what was that?”

“I asked if you were feeling alright.”

“I’m fine,” he replied quickly. Etienne gave him an indecipherable look.

“Truly? I...I only ask because you have been...not quite yourself, since you have returned home...” Brendan bit his lip, and Etienne hurriedly continued, “Not that I’m prying! Unlike your sisters, I have actually seen the Beast with my own eyes, and I...” his voice faltered, “and I know you must have experienced...terrible things, trapped in that unspeakable place.”

Brendan looked away, into the dusky treetops. He felt like a charlatan, letting his silence lie for him. But how could he begin to explain, that it had been as wonderful as it had been terrifying, the
marvels he had seen, that he had been happier there than he’d ever been before?

So he said nothing.

After an uncomfortable stretch of silence, Etienne cleared his throat. “This isn’t why I asked you to accompany me.” At Brendan’s curious look, Etienne smiled. “Jasper came by to see me. He told me how you handled the apricot merchant.”

“Oh. That. Yes?”

Etienne beamed at him. “Jasper tells me the man actually apologized to him! However did you manage that?”

Brendan shrugged. “It was fairly easy to expose his theft. However did he convince you to sign that contract, Father? It was highway robbery!”

His father looked embarrassed. “Well, the fellow can be very intimidating.”

_Ha_, thought Brendan. _I’ve seen worse._ Out loud, he said, “I was happy to help.” His father reached out and clapped his back heartily.

“It was well done, son.” Flustered, Brendan ducked his head. Suddenly Etienne drew to a halt, turned, and took Brendan’s shoulders in his hands. Startled, Brendan met his Father’s frank stare. “I am so glad that you have returned home. I thought...I thought I had caused your death. I grieved for you.”

Swallowing against the lump that had formed unexpectedly in his throat, Brendan scrambled for something to say. Without fail, no matter how adroit with words he supposedly was, he never knew what to say to his Father. Until now, it had seemed mutual. “You...grieved?”

“You are my only son,” Etienne said with feeling. “I thought I’d lost you. Of course it grieved me. I thought my own foolishness and cowardice had killed you.” He glanced at his raw-knuckled hands for a long moment. “I hadn’t felt grief like that since your mother died. Do you remember her much?”

Brendan nearly stumbled. His father had never, not once, spoken to him of his mother since she died. “I...remember only that she had very long hair. And...her hands. Her voice, a bit, I think.”

A soft, wistful smile graced Etienne’s face, left him looking like a much younger man. “My friends all told me to remarry, but how could I? I loved your mother more than I thought a mortal man could love. When I met her, my life forever changed. And without her...I was alone.”

A vivid memory of Beast’s quicksilver smile flashed behind Brendan’s eyes, and he felt a stab of longing so acute that it physically hurt.

“I did the best I could for you four. I must have done something right; look at how all of you turned out! I couldn’t be more proud of you.”

Brendan nodded agreeably. “Yes, the twins are marrying well, Beauty has a promising career lined up.”

“I didn’t mean them! I meant you!”

Brendan looked at him with shock.
“The girls are all doing well, yes, and that’s wonderful, but you...you put your own life on the line to protect your sister. You did what I could not do, my boy, what I dare not do. It should have been me. I should have been willing to sacrifice myself for this family, as you were. I knew you were bright; I never knew you were brave.”

Realizing he was gaping like an idiot, Brendan shut his mouth with a click.

“It’s not easy to have a son smarter than you are, you know. You’re always pushing, pushing...but that’s how I know you’ll do alright, lad.” Etienne smiled broadly, eyes crinkling. “Because you’re a tenacious one, I’ll give you that. You never gave up on anything in your life.” He squeezed once and released his son’s shoulders from his grip. “Now, what say we head back home and let the girls fix us some lunch?”

***

He lay in bed, staring up at the rafters of his room. It was so late in the night that it could be argued that he was just awake very early.

Had everything been a lie? Every kiss, every touch? Had that last, amazing night meant nothing? How could have he been so wrong about everything?

It made a sick sort of sense; it had always been him who pursued, who initiated physical contact. It was possible that the same pattern had been repeated countless times before -- lure an innocent traveler to the castle and play the brooding, tragic prince until the traveler’s sympathy got the better of them. How could he be sure of anything?

He had known, anyways, that Beast didn’t love him, or else the spell would have broken. But it was unbearable to think that Beast was laughing at him. That he didn’t care for him at all. That he had been used.

His eyes burned. He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyelids until he could see shapes and colors burst like stars across his vision. He felt like a frayed rope, sawed away strand by strand until he was naught but one, single straining thread.

He even missed the damn fish.
In Which There is Truth

Gustav pronounced Etienne well and truly cured, and the family celebrated with a cozy dinner party, both twins rosy-cheeked and beaming on the arms of their beaus, and the man of the hour himself drinking too many glasses of homemade cider and loudly toasting everyone in turn.

Afterwards Catherine packed her things and accompanied the doctor to their house in town, promising to stop by for tea whenever she could.

After nursing a nasty hangover the next morning, Etienne went into town and at last resumed his position, much to the relief of an overworked Jasper. He came home early some days, an armful of unfinished paperwork, stating that he would rather work in the presence of his family than in his stuffy office. Sometimes Brendan helped out at the shop, Etienne explaining the details of shop-ownership in a rather obvious ploy to groom his son to take over for him someday. Brendan, for his part, humored his father, as it was better than sitting in the attic staring at books he couldn’t bring himself to read or at a violin he couldn’t bear to practice.

Maybe he would take over the grocery someday. The prospect gave him no joy, but what else could he do? His future was empty.

The evenings brought with them the promise of a simple, home-cooked meal (something he had admittedly missed in the months of dining on sweetmeats shaped like swans and smothered in unpronounceable sauces) and fireside conversation. He listened far more than he spoke, asking only the occasional question.

“Any word from your Clermont fellow, Beauty?”

“The headmaster,” she corrected vaguely, her attention on the letter she held in her slim hands. “He says admissions are better than he expected. And the construction on my suite is almost done.”

Marguerite somehow made a simple cluck of her tongue into a noise of utter outrage. “You get your own suite?!?”

One corner of Beauty’s mouth quirked upwards, but she said nothing.

Parental instincts aroused, Etienne looked up from his ledger, ink stains on the bridge of his nose where he had been rubbing at a headache. “Marguerite,” he began wearily.

“There’s some letters for you, Brendan,” added Beauty, with her trademark ability to change uncomfortable subjects. She sifted through a stack of correspondence piled neatly on the desk and handed him a bundle. “We finally started getting our mail. Some of them had been sent to our old manor, and it took just forever to get them redirected. Here.”

Brendan leafed through the handful of letters with mild surprise. “Thanks, Beauty.” He surreptitiously flipped them over.

Marguerite noticed. “They’re all sealed,” she said, annoyed. “You’re not interesting enough to spy on, brother.”

“That’s never stopped you from snooping through my things before,” he shot back.

“Now, now, you’re all grown adults.” Etienne broke in, again looking up from his bookkeeping. “Must you still snipe at each other?”
“Sorry, Father,” Marguerite simpered quickly, robbing Brendan the opportunity of being the first to offer apologies and thusly appear the more grown-up of the pair. He shot her a narrow glare, and she stuck her tongue out at him.

“Some things never change,” Beauty sighed, bending back over her needlework.

Later, sprawled on his bed in the soft light of an oil lamp, Brendan began going through the letters. A few were from friends -- acquaintances, really -- in the city, expressing their sympathies for the d’Aumale’s sad state of affairs. Brendan huffed in amusement; though it was not unheard of for letters to take months to reach their intended destinations, the messengers had really taken their time tracking down his family.

There were several from former professors and tutors at university who remembered him fondly, and he read those with enjoyment. One even tried to give him homework conjugating Latin. He chuckled, before thinking of all the language translations he had done at the castle’s library and quickly suppressed the pang of heartache that accompanied it.

His favorite tutor wrote, *Just because your formal education cannot continue does not mean that you will ever stop learning. You have a fire in you; a resoluteness that some might mistake for pure obstinacy. It is in you to make something of yourself; I sincerely hope that you do so.* Brendan reread it several times, touched, and set that letter aside for later.

The last envelope bore on its face, simply, *Monsieur Brendan d’Aumale* with the old manor’s address below it, like all the others had, but at seeing those words Brendan froze, his hands going very still. He knew that writing. Knew it well. When he turned it over, the impression on the wax seal was of a crowned stag.

Slowly, he picked up the letter opener and slid through the wax seal. He unfolded it with unsteady hands. The spidery scrawl was just the same as he remembered it, swoops and whorls added in unnecessary flourishes.

*Brendan,*

*I hope this letter reaches you. This is the only address that I have, so with luck it will find its way to you eventually. I have heard of the unfortunate circumstances that have befallen your family, and wish to extend my condolences. It must have been a wrench for you to leave the University. I know how you loved it there.*

*I am well. My holdings are doing better, and the crops have had a fine year. I have a son now. It’s strange how having a child can change the way you look at the world, but there it is. I have a wife, I have a child, my lands are prosperous, and while I cannot truthfully say that I am happy, I can say that I am doing my duty, and must be satisfied with that. I am known in these parts as a God-fearing family man, and I’m hoping that if I pretend for long enough, it will become true.*

*Did you know we have a Saint Brendan? We love our saints here, we do, a saint for every little thing. Aileen is very keen on Sunday service, and hearing the vicar say your name may have been the only time I’ve ever actually paid attention to what the daft man said. The story goes that this Welsh fellow went on a seven year voyage to find the Garden of Eden, had mad adventures and ate*
a sea monster. Saint Brendan the Bold, he’s sometimes called. I thought you’d get a laugh out of that.

Anyway, I find that I’m dancing around the meat of this missive, so I’ll stop stalling and just write it.

I’m sorry.

I know I didn’t say that in my last letter, and I certainly don’t blame you for never writing me back. I made a lot of promises that I never kept, or even intended to keep. Things seemed different back then, with you, and when I told you that anything was possible, well, perhaps I even believed it a little. I probably cannot say it enough, but you can read this next sentence over a few dozen times until you are satisfied -- I am sorry.

I want you to know that I sincerely, truly, valued your friendship. Knowing you made me the person I am today, and sometimes, when I look in the mirror, I think that all the good things I see you helped put there.

I must laugh at myself, reading over what I have written. I talk so much of myself when I intended only to offer my well wishes. I suppose I’m a more selfish creature than I like to admit.

I hope you’ve found a bit of happiness, Brendan. If you haven’t yet, well, when you do find it, you make sure to grab on to it and to blazes with what anyone else says. I ran away, but you don’t have to. You’re not the sort to give up. You deserve to keep some joy. I could say that I regret that I’m not the person to give it to you, but I think we both know that it’s foolish to pretend that I ever could have been.

We have a saying here we use to say thanks; Go raibh mile maith agat. It means, May you have a thousand good things.

With warmest regards,

Kieran Seghainn

He set the letter down, and watched the moon rise over the shadowy forest through his attic window.
The day had been spent with his father, lending a hand at the grocery. When evening fell, he escorted Catherine to their cottage for dinner. She insisted he touch her round belly, and at her cajoling he finally did. He felt the faint kick of little Brendan (or perhaps little Brenda) with a broad, genuine grin.

After dinner he was trying vainly to read in front of the fireplace while the girls argued over the evening’s proposed entertainment.

“Oh, a poetry recital!” squealed Beauty, clapping her hands together, and Catherine eagerly seconded the idea. She stood up, slightly clumsy with child, and read out a short piece from memory.


“You are in a rare mood today, aren’t you?” sniped Catherine.

After reading the same paragraph for the fifth time, Brendan gave up and set down his book. The twins stopped bickering as he got to his feet and cleared his throat. Perhaps he was finally learning Beauty’s conciliatory conversational skill. A poem had been in his mind all day, and without examining the reasons why, he gave it voice.

“O rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.”

A soft silence fell, which Marguerite broke with an abrupt snort. “A worm that flies? What a terrible metaphor.”

The other twin sniffed. “You never could fathom Blake, Marguerite. It was well recited, brother.”

“Hm? Oh. Thank you.” Brendan seemed jolted out of some strange distant reverie, and sat down hastily, returning to his book. Beauty watched him furtively, a single line of worry creased between her eyes.

***

The next day marked a full fortnight since Brendan’s homecoming. Refreshed after a mid-morning bath and a shave, Brendan descended the stairs from his room to find an empty house.
This was odd, as there was always someone puttering around doing odd jobs, and Brendan wondered if he had missed some previously agreed upon appointment in town. He wandered into the kitchen, snatching a few scones he knew Marguerite was saving for her tea.

As he poured himself some tea the kitchen door opened to reveal his youngest sister, carrying in her arms a fresh loaf of bread and a wheel of cheese. “Oh!” she said. “I’m glad you’ve come down. I’m just back from town. Let me put these things away...there. Now.” She turned to him with an expression so firm and purposeful he took an unconscious step back.

“Is something the matter, Beauty?”

Beauty motioned to a chair. “Won’t you have a seat, brother?”

He looked at her oddly, but did as she asked. She scooted a chair across from him and sat down, leaning forward earnestly. “I have Marguerite running an errand in town, and Catherine is busy at her and Gustav’s house. Father is at work. We have the house to ourselves.”

“Ooookay.” Brendan raised his eyebrows in inquiry. “Why do we need the house to ourselves?”

She laced her fingers together and met his eyes steadily. “I think it’s time you told me what really happened at that castle.”

Brendan went still as a hare hearing a twig snap behind it.

“Something is tearing you up inside, brother, I can see it. And you’ve been acting so strange, so distant since you’ve returned. You seem like a different person, Bren,” she beseeched him, using the pet name she had rarely uttered since they were in the nursery together. “I don’t think you were tortured, or kept captive, or any of the horrible things the others imagine.” Her small, knowing smile was soft with compassion. “I think you are heartbroken.”

He could not find the words to answer her, his clever, crafty sister. After a moment she reached out and took his cold hand. “I am here for you, brother. You can tell me what happened. I promise I will not judge you nor think less of you, no matter what you tell me.”

Tongue dry, he swallowed thickly. Beauty waited, silent, encouraging. He took a deep breath, and told her everything.

At first the words tripped out haltingly, but swiftly they gathered a momentum of their own and he could do nothing but ride along, hearing himself speak as if someone else was telling his tale through his lips. Listening to his own voice was too much, the shaky walls he’d built around his hurt and heartbreak and loss came tumbling down, and the numbness that had encased him in a surreal fog since he’d come home melted away, leaving him exhausted and aching.

She sat quietly throughout the whole story, briefly pressing her lips together when he finally related those last moments, even as he glossed over what had happened in the greenhouse that final fateful night.

There was a lengthy pause. “Then, I came home,” he finished lamely, throat raw. Beauty tilted her head back and closed her eyes as if praying.

Finally she spoke. “I’m so sorry, Brendan.”

Brendan looked down and fiddled with the crumbs on the table. “Yeah. Thanks,” he said softly. She grasped his hands so earnestly he looked up, startled. Her eyes brimmed with trickling tears. He tore his gaze away; he was absolutely useless when his sister cried. He never knew what to do. “Don’t
cry, Beauty."

“But it’s so awfu-”

“I know it is!” She jumped and dropped his hands. “You’re right! It is awful. I feel like I had everything I wanted and then lost it all. I’ve never felt that way about anyone before, and it was so perfect, and I was unbelievably happy and I thought he cared about me and I was an idiot to believe anything good could happen to me and he was a complete and utter bastard but damn it no matter how hard I try I just can’t stop loving him.” He struggled for air. “I have enough to feel terrible about without making you cry, as well.”

She blinked, then gathered herself, wiping her eyes. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s...” He sighed, feeling like a total cad. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have shouted. None of this is your fault.” He looked down at his hands as they clenched into useless fists. “It’s mine.” He had to fight past the lump in his throat to continue. “When I made the choice, I knew there were very few ways it could end. I thought...I thought that he was worth the risk.”

They sat quietly. Then Beauty gently asked, “What did Beast say when you first told him?”

Brendan frowned, uncomprehending. “What?”

“What did Beast say when you first told him that you loved him? Not in the garden, that awful night when you left, but before that. How did he respond when you told him you loved him then?”

“Oh, honestly, Brendan.” Her eyes rolled in exasperation. “You never even told him?”

“I...no?”

“Well, there’s your problem.” She shook her head with a fond, sad smile. “You were right. You are an idiot.”
Brendan buried his face in his hands. “I know, I know! I wanted to tell him! Dozens of times.”

“Well, how did you expect him to know, Brendan?”

“It...I...thought he would just know.” He paused. “Okay, so it makes less sense when I say it out loud, but-”

She sighed. “So what was the last thing he said to you, then?”

Brendan sat remembering for a long painful moment. “After I told him, he said he didn’t love me, that I was just...a diversion. Something to occupy him over the winter. And...” he swallowed and had to force the words from his throat, “that I wasn’t the first.”

Beauty stared at him. “He said all that?”

Brendan nodded miserably.

“You are really an idiot.”

Brendan blinked. “You know, I remember you being better at this whole sympathetic conversation thing.”

She clucked her tongue. “Oh, please. Think, Brendan. You remember that stray cat, when we were children? The orange one that kept coming ’round the kitchen window, and that horrible maid said she was going to poison it if she saw it again?”

“Yes...”

“How did we get it to finally go away? We yelled and threw things at it. Remember? We told it, go away! We don’t want you!” She gave him a look people normally reserved for the mentally infirm, or village idiots. “I can’t believe you fell for that, Brendan.”

Gaping, he protested. “But that....! That is not the same!”

“I think it is.”

“How would you know?” He snapped at her. “You weren’t there! You can’t know what it was like!” He clenched his hands in his lap. “I was a fool for thinking my feelings for him would be somehow strong enough to...I don’t know. I thought it would prove that it didn’t matter to me, how he looked.”

“There’s more involved than looks, Brendan.” He shot her a glare, and she held up her hands disarmingly. “I know, I wasn’t there, and I can’t know what it was like. But think about it. He can’t leave the castle. Ever. Are you prepared to spend the rest of your life there, a prisoner too?”

Fresh, painful memories flooded in, perilous waves on a jagged shore. Dark eyes burning like embers; throat bared with a steady throb of heartbeat fluttering against his lips; the sound of his name gasped desperately into his ear; the unguarded smile he wore only when he thought it couldn’t be seen, his low laugh, his strength, his wit, his kindness.

His Beast.

Head bowed, voice hushed, he breathed, “With him, I would.”

“Oh, Bren. You truly do love him, don’t you?”
Suddenly furious -- not at his sister, but with himself, with Beast, with the insurmountable distance between them he had vainly spent months trying to bridge -- he threw his hands out wildly to his sides. “What use is it? It obviously wasn’t enough, loving him. I’ve never cared about anyone the way I care about him. I can’t even conceive of a life without him, and it still wasn’t enough. What use is love if it can’t break some stupid spell?”

A sudden shadow passed over Beauty’s face. She spoke in a soft undertone, like she had forgotten he was there. “Love is not real if it is a secret.”

“...What?”

She looked up, unsettled. “It’s from a dream I had. The night before you came back... a voice spoke to me, in the dream. I just now remembered it.” Her voice lowered as she continued earnestly. “I’ve been having such strange dreams, Brendan. Twirling in some mirrored ballroom, wearing a golden dress. Dancing with somebody in velvet. Flowers and celebrations. Fine things, princess things...”

Pained, Brendan turned his face away. “Perhaps it would be for the best. Maybe you were supposed to go, like you wanted from the start. If I hadn’t stopped you that night, maybe you’d both be happier.”

Beauty gave a very unladylike snort. “First of all, I’d look terrible in gold. Secondly, I don’t have time to go twirling about wearing fripperies. The twins would love that, but not me.”

Brendan managed a weak grin. “No, you’re going to challenge conventional thinking and turn academic tradition on its head.”

“What I’m going to do,” she said pointedly, “is teach children to think for themselves. That’s what I want out of life. Maybe, someday, I’ll meet someone special and have children of my own, but that will be my choice to make, not the choice of some silly dream.” Her eyes, twin blue to his own, burned keenly. “Thirdly, you love him. And I think he loves you, too.”

He exhaled raggedly, the breath catching in his tight chest. He slumped over his knees and clenched his fingers into his cropped hair. “I don’t know,” he whispered. “Beauty, I miss him so much it hurts.”

“Well, then,” she said briskly. “You have your own choice to make, brother.” She patted his hand, rose from the table and left him alone with his tangled thoughts.

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I did the right thing. Whenever sorrow loomed up to drown him he would repeat the words in a desperate refrain. This was the right decision. He wandered the empty, honeycomb hallways in a sleepwalk. He knew something wasn’t right -- the castle too cold, the walls too cracked, the servants trailing after him aimlessly -- but none of it seemed important. He drifted, blindly seeking something he couldn’t even name.

He stopped, briefly, in the doorframe of the guest bedroom. Without its inhabitant, it was just another empty room like all the countless others, devoid save for one wilting rose on the bedside table. He touched it lightly with an outstretched talon, recoiling as half of its petals shuddered off with a dry hiss. He moved to the window and looked out at the great iron gate, hoping to see something, someone, there and hating himself for it.
The servants had already changed the sheets, but he crawled onto the bed anyway and twisted in the covers, trying vainly to catch the smallest trace of familiar sandalwood scent.

_This was the right thing._

Sometimes, it vaguely seemed that something wasn’t right with the woven fabric of magic that bound him and encompassed his whole world, but it didn’t strike him as important, so he ignored the little niggle of concern until it was nothing but a faint whisper of unease at the back of his mind.

The garden pathways were littered with fallen leaves and petals, crunching under his clawed feet. He caught a faint whiff of sweetness and rot, looking up at the slender branches in puzzlement. Had the jasmine flowers always been so brown and shriveled? He couldn’t remember. His vision was fuzzy at the edges, like a daydream or a fever.

The marble bench was cold, but everything felt cold lately. He sat under the dying jasmine for a long time before realizing where he was.

This was where Brendan kissed him, really kissed him, for the first time. The memory broke through the fugue, for just a moment, and color bled back into the edges of the world.

He had asked Brendan about his dead mother, about living with the weakness of grief. Looking back, he couldn’t believe how callously he had behaved, trivializing the loss...no, he _could_ believe it. If he gathered up every instance of careless cruelty he’d ever displayed, he would be unable to count them all, even if he another two hundred years of doing nothing else. _I made the right decision_, he reminded himself.

“Is it worth it to have loved so fiercely, that you still feel the loss of it so many years after?” he had asked, and Brendan answered almost immediately. “Of course it’s worth it.”

He understood now. Too late.

“I love him,” Beast exhaled in a harsh whisper, “I love him and he’ll never know.” His head sank to his hands and he remained there for hours or minutes or days, time whiting out into stillness.

When he stood up he fought off a brief wave of dizziness. He hadn’t eaten since...when had it been? He brushed it off as unimportant. He stood over the silver pond and watched the contrasting shapes swim in overlapping circles, tracing the letters to a language he did not understand. “He’s never coming back, is he?”

The fish sounded genuinely sorry. “No.”

Eventually he nodded. “That is good,” he said tonelessly, and wandered away.
Once upon a time, in a small and beautiful French village, there lived a simple and happy grocer. Though he had lost a great fortune and a fine manor in the city, he had found contentment in his four wonderful children. The two oldest were twin sisters of strong wills and proud temperaments, both having made fine matches and were starting families of their own. The middle child was the grocer’s only son, who had recently returned home after a harrowing adventure, and helped out at his father’s store without complaint. Now, the youngest daughter was a sweet-natured, intelligent woman named Beauty, and it seemed to her that the day’s work was never done. No sooner had she finished washing the dirty dishes than the sink sprouted new ones, and still the rugs needed beating and the table scrubbing, before she could even think of going into town to take lunch to her father and brother.

She preferred country life to that of the city, and enjoyed the hard honest work; but she did sometimes wish that there wasn’t quite so much of it.

Later, when the chores were all done and a haunch roasting in the oven for dinner, Beauty set off for town with a substantial basket of food and a feeling of accomplishment. Sunlight poured through the cracks in the heavy clouds, the day newly washed as if fresh from a bath. The occasional raindrop pattered down, and robins hunted merrily for worms everywhere she looked. The main road gradually began to emerge from the little brown path, until eventually the dirt gave up entirely and her sensible shoes clicked against the cobblestones. She crossed the town center through the hustle and bustle, trading polite nods with the baker’s wife.

A young man -- a farrier, from the looks of him -- nearly walked face-first into a post, he was too busy watching her pass by to mind his own feet.

Her cheeks grew warm. Beauty kept walking as if nothing had happened, allowing the farrier to regain his dignity in peace. In this town she did not lack for prospects, as her sisters had always referred to men they considered to be good enough for marriage, if she wanted them. There had been plenty of suitors who had come to call after the d’Aumales had first moved into their little cottage, provincial men both young and not-so-young eager to snap up a courtly city-bred wife, even if her talents lie in embroidery and ballroom dancing rather than in useful skills like milking a cow or darning a sock. No doubt she could have her pick of men to wed. But Brendan had been right; that wasn’t what she wanted out of life. The world often wasn’t kind to bright or ambitious women, but Beauty was certainly bright enough to hide that she had any ambitions at all. As much as she enjoyed country life, a country husband did not fit into those ambitions one bit.

The bell jingled cheerfully as she pushed inside her father’s shop. Three heads immediately turned her way, making her the center of their very focused attention. “Goodness! I feel quite like a dragonfly that’s blundered into a frog pond.”

“Ribbit,” said her father with feigned dignity, taking her basket and guiding her to a chair. “I do apologize for our intensity, my dear, our appetites got the better of us. We’ve worked up quite an appetite during the morning rush.” He flipped the sign in the window to ‘closed’ and began laying
out the basket’s contents, setting up a very respectable luncheon.

“We must have had half the town in here already, seems like,” said Brendan in his low, musical voice. “It’s been a busy morning.” Out of the corner of her eye Beauty watched her brother as he gathered some mismatched glasses from under the counter and poured them all some wine. He looked good with his hair short, she finally decided. It made him look older, more mature, while at the same time bringing out the line of his jaw and the color and clarity of his eyes. Though she supposed it was somewhat narcissistic to think that, as the two of them shared that particular feature - - a gift from their departed mother.

A third man was peering longingly into the basket, and with a smile Beauty handed him a cloth-wrapped package. “I made a sandwich for you as well, Jasper.”

The man took it gratefully. “Oh, you are too kind, mademoiselle. Too kind.” Slipping the sandwich into his coat pocket, Jasper gathered up a tightly bound stack of papers. “I’ll just run these over the clerk’s office now, shall I sir?”

Etienne glanced up and waved a hand vaguely. “Very good, thank you, Jasper.”

The little manager put on his hat and doffed it respectfully to Beauty before trundling out the door, the bell ringing behind him.

Beauty took the wineglass her brother proffered. “So, ah,” he began, and she looked at him sharply, immediately catching the nervous timbre in his tone, like an instrument with one note off-key. “The twins might come by for a visit,” he ventured.

“Oh?” asked their father around a bite of ham. “What for?”

With a forced shrug, her brother answered a little too breezily. “I mentioned we’d be having lunch. I thought a family get-together would be nice.”

“Hm.” That surely could not be the only reason. After hearing the fullness of his tale, at last understanding everything Brendan had been through during the winter, she supposed he was entitled to a bit of mysteriousness. “Well, I think there will be enough for everyone,” was all she said, letting things lie for now. Besides, she could always wrangle an answer out of him later if he was still acting so odd.

They spoke and ate for only a handful of minutes before the bell gently chimed again, and the twins came scurrying in, untying their bonnets and shaking the light rain off their cloaks. Greetings were shared, extra chairs were found and two more glasses of wine poured. They joined the rest of their family, remarking on the dreariness of the weather and the new fabrics Beaumont’s had gotten in that morning. Catherine declined the wine to sip at water instead, explaining sourly that Gustav had insisted spirits were bad for the baby.

“All the other pregnant women drink wine,” she grumbled. “It’s all this silly nonsense about medicine he natters on about. He’s even making me eat things, like iron filings, for the vitamins.” Her mouth twisted on the word like it tasted, indeed, of metal.

“You married a doctor, you know,” Brendan added with a slight rolling of his eyes, though Beauty noted he still sat a little too stiffly in his chair. “What else would he ‘natter on’ about but medicine?”

Etienne patted Catherine’s hand consolingly. “There, there, my child. He seems a sensible chap. I’m sure he has only your best interests at heart.”

Marguerite huffed a low laugh. “If Jeremié tries shaving off bits of horseshoes into my food, I can tell
you it will not go well for him. However do you manage it?”

“Well, it’s only a little bit. And not every day,” Catherine conceded.

“Isn’t this nice!” exclaimed Beauty over her sisters’ grousing. “Such a good idea, Brendan.” She smiled warmly at him before nibbling delicately at a biscuit.

Fondly, Etienne’s eyes crinkled at the corners. “A very fine idea indeed. It does my heart good, having the whole family together again.” Brendan’s hand snuck up to pinch the bridge of his nose, as if he were vainly trying to stave off a nasty headache. What on earth was bothering him so much? Beauty wondered.

“Yes, well,” he said, smoothing his napkin several times, despite the fact that it had nary a wrinkle in it, and realization struck her. It seemed he had made his choice, after all. Her heart swelled with pride, though tempered with just a smidgen of worry. There was always the possibility that this time, when he left, he’d never return.

“I actually had an ulterior motive for asking you all here,” Brendan finally forced out. The others turned their heads curiously, and Beauty tried to prepare herself.

“What is it, son?”

Lifting his chin a fraction, Brendan said, “I have an announcement to make.” He looked at each of them in turn, and only Beauty noticed the faintest of tremors in his hands. “I’m going back to the castle.”

There was an immediate outcry. “Certainly not!” cried their father.

“What?! That’s ridiculous!” from Catherine.

“Whatever for? You must be mad, Brendan!” from Marguerite.

Her brother held up his hands beseechingly, attempting to calm them into silence. “I know you all probably have questions--”

“Damn right we do!” Marguerite slammed down her glass so hard that wine sloshed over the table. “After everything that happened to you there, what on earth could possess you to go back to that horrid place?”

Red-faced, Etienne shot to his feet. “I absolutely forbid it!”

With a rueful smile, Brendan shook his head. “Father,” he began gently. “I’m nearly twenty. My decisions are my own.”

The twins stood up as well, and out of ingrained courtesy Brendan followed. Beauty remained sitting; she may as well finish the last biscuit, since nobody was paying any attention to her. She picked off a raisin and took a bite as above her head Catherine railed incredulously. “You’re going back? To that… that monster?”

“He’s no monster, Catherine. Just a man.”

Their father stared at him, aghast. “You...you have pity for that creature?”

Brendan met his gaze calmly, “No. But I do care for him.”

Mouth gaping a few times, Etienne finally managed to say, “I don’t understand. I have seen the
Beast, with my own two eyes! I know the danger you are proposing to walk back into! I have experienced firsthand his barbarism, his cruelty.”

“He is my friend, Father.” Confusion written in careworn lines on Etienne’s face, he fell quiet. Marguerite sucked in a shocked breath, trading a glance with Beauty, who did nothing aside from very slightly raise up one eyebrow, and finish her biscuit.

“Beauty!” Catherine flapped her hands at her erstwhile silent sister. “Have you nothing to say? Tell him what you think of all this!”

“Safe travel, brother.” Beauty said softly.

He smiled down at her. “Thank you, Beauty.”

Catherine gawped at Beauty. “How can you be so calm? After all we went through? You yourself must have made a dozen trips into the forest trying to find him! Now, he’s just going to go skipping back, and you’re all right with that?”

Unruffled, Beauty sipped her wine. “I hardly think he’ll be skipping, Catherine.” Hands on her hips, Catherine huffed with exasperation.

Marguerite lowered her hand from her mouth and set it to her heart, her shock fading into something else. “Are you really sure about this, Brendan? I mean, really, truly, completely sure?”

Without a shadow of hesitation, Brendan nodded. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

Catherine pursed her lips and stared at her brother for several long heartbeats. Finally, she sighed, throwing up her hands in resignation. “If you insist upon this foolish endeavor, you must at least make me a promise. Promise you will come back to us someday.” She placed a hand on the swell of her stomach. “I don’t want him growing up without an uncle.” She glanced away, cleared her throat to mask the roughness of her voice. “So when are you leaving?”

“Right away. Tonight.”

“But you can’t!” Marguerite burst out, near tears. “What if you miss my wedding? We need you!” Brendan turned to Marguerite with surprise. He shook his head with a fond smile.

“No, you don’t, Mar. None of you do.” He leaned forward and brushed a kiss to her forehead. “You’ll all do fine without me.”

Etienne’s posture was slumped in defeat. “But...what about the shop?”

Brendan gave a low, self-deprecating chuckle. “Father, you and I both know that I’d be a useless shopkeeper. I’m glad to have helped out, but you’ll do fine. Better than fine.”

“But...I still don’t understand.” At the tone of her father’s voice, how completely lost he sounded, Beauty felt a pang of sorrow. Judging by Brendan’s expression, he felt the same way she did -- regret, but regretting the necessity of the decision, not the decision itself.

“I know, Father,” he said feelingly, “and I am sorry for that. I do not mean to cause you any distress. Any of you. But you all have found your callings. You’ve made your choices and are living your lives. It’s time I do the same.”

Beauty got to her feet and reached for her cloak.
“Beauty, you are leaving? Where are you going?” Etienne asked, bewildered.

“Home,” she said briskly. “I think you four might still have some things to discuss. And I think somebody ought to pack my dear brother something to eat for his trip, don’t you?” The smile Brendan gave her could have lit up a darkened room.

As she picked her way around puddles, hearing the voices of her family rising behind her, Beauty shook her head and smiled. The others may rant and rail all they wished; Brendan would not be swayed, if the adamant set of his stance was anything to go by, but nevertheless, Beauty was sure that her brother’s eloquence would be put to the test.

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Night softened, giving ground to the ineludible approach of morning, the forest still slumbering around him.

The very first time he had made this trip, it had been all freezing rain and cloudy skies, sharp winds and muddy roads. The second time he had been so numb he barely remembered it, as if he had ridden through a thick and clinging fog.

But this time, every step of the journey was made in crisp clarity. He followed the thin road through the ancient forest till it was naught but a slim ribbon of dust cutting through the grass, all the while strikingly aware of every fleeting detail. The susurration of branches swaying overhead, the weaselly tang of some distant skunk, the steady jolts of Jean-Luc’s hooves against the ground. He was alive; as present and aware as if he had just awakened from a long and stifling sleep.

He had no idea what to expect when he returned, none whatsoever, and in some measure, that very uncertainty was welcome. Perhaps Beast would be glad to see him. Perhaps he wouldn’t. Perhaps he would be furious, or penitent, or grateful, or perhaps a hundred unpredictable, shadowy outcomes -- but all Brendan could do was follow each step with another. The future would have to sort itself out. The feeling was extraordinarily freeing, each step forward a decision remade.

Trepidation was still there, caution that perched in the back of his mind, but it was a tiny and unimportant thing compared to the absolute certainty that this was the right decision; perhaps even the only decision. Since he’d left the castle, running home clutching the pieces of his broken heart, he’d been lost and adrift, a bit of flotsam atop the white-cresting sea. It was only now, going back, that he could feel the waves pushing him to land, the sandy shore under his feet.

Even if every bladed word Beast had said that night in the garden had been true, and even if it had been by his magical arts that Etienne had fallen ill and Brendan driven away, that didn’t change the truth. His place was with Beast. There was nowhere else.

He let his hands rest loosely on the reins, trusting in the horse to remember the way and praying fervently that the magic wouldn’t turn the road back on itself and deny him entry.

Through the evening he rode, into the night, through those small still hours of gray that prefaced the dawn, and remembered the color of Beast’s eyes as they opened to the morning, endless brown lit up with gold like tiny sparks of sunlight.

At last he saw the towering shape of the great iron gates appear at the end of the uneven path, and he breathed out in relief, kicking Jean-Luc into a hasty trot. As he drew nearer, he pulled up short with surprise. The gates appeared to be tangled in vines, thick ropes of vegetation climbing up the bars with leaves as wide as his outstretched hand.
Perplexed, Brendan slid out of the saddle and approached the gates. He reached out and touched an iron bar through a wild spray of ivy, his fingers coming away with flakes of brown rust on them.

“What is this?” he muttered. This is...wrong, he thought. There hadn’t been one speck of rust on this gate when I’d left. Wrapping his fingers around the bars, he swung the doors open. Or rather, he tried to. The hinges creaked like an old woman’s complaints, but did not budge an inch. Brow creased in consternation, Brendan set his boots firmly against the path and pulled at the gate with all his might.

He may as well have been trying to yank down the moon.

Panting with exertion, Brendan stopped. Foreboding traced goosebumps up his spine. Something was very, very wrong. Was there some trick to this, some hidden latch? Suddenly he remembered being in the kitchen with Beast murmuring against his ear, and shivering with the words, I do believe you have demonstrated a few tricks of your own. He tried to shove the memory away, fix his attention on the present.

After another appraising look at the gate, Brendan turned back to his horse and stroked the stripe on his broad forehead. “I think I can squeeze through, but there’s no way I’m getting you in there. Think you’ll be all right out here, boy?” The gelding whickered softly and put his velvety nose into Brendan’s palm. “Good boy.” He tied up the reins on a bit of iron and left his bulky cloak draped over the saddle.

It took some careful maneuvering to slip between the iron bars, but with a few minor scrapes he was through, brushing bits of rust from his clothes.

Brendan looked up. A choked gasp died on his lips.

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Beast stood, head bowed, at the castle’s tallest tower, the jutting spire still standing from the original stronghold. Long ago, each brother had been given a piece of territory to rule as their own. This land had once belonged to a great-great-great uncle as a country hunting lodge, each generation adding as their holdings grew, their wealth increased, the noble lineage thinning as royal blood grew scarcer.

So many had gone before him in this very castle, trod upon the very stones he now stood, and he had treated it as his personal pleasure house, wherein everything and everyone had existed merely to keep him occupied and amused.

How empty he had been.

How empty he remained.

A mere husk, a shell, a twisted body given to shape the ugliness he had always truly been.

He had sent the servants away, no longer able to bear the brunt of their silent accusations, hoping beyond hope that when the inevitable finally descended upon him, they at least, might be free.

This tower, this castle, this land, was irrevocably his. He was its lord absolute, with power unmatched.

And it was nothing. He held nothing in his hands but his own regrets.

***

Brendan stared. The castle was a ruin, weathered and crumbling as if it had been doing so for years beyond counting. The beautiful stained glass windows that had once looked out like gemstone eyes from the castle’s face were all smashed and yellowed. The grounds lay in a careless mess as if
neglected for decades. Weeds and saplings grew up through the cracked cobblestones leading to the main stairs, and all flanking it the red roses were dry and withered on the bush, like old drops of blood. The air felt dead, quiet, like a graveyard.

It looked as if time had forgotten this place for hundreds of years. A sudden fear gripped his heart, fear that everything had been some kind of dream, a hallucination, that his memories of fine marble and grand gardens had been some sort of mad delusion, and all that had ever stood here was the broken bones of some long forgotten keep.

“Beast,” a whisper slipped from his lips unbidden. The sound jolted him from his frozen horror, and he started to run towards the doors. He had to find Beast. He would never have allowed his castle to fall into such disrepair, never, not unless he...

He shook the thought from his head violently, falling against the doors in his haste. The great wooden doors had slid off their hinges and keeled against each other. He reached for a knocker, but it fell off at his feet with a hollow thud, more rust than metal.

“Beast!” he called out, near frantic. “Let me in! Please! Beast? Anybody!” Not a sound, not a whisper. Not even the whisk of movement of one of the servants. He tried tugging at the fallen doors, but as with the iron gates, they would not move. They only groaned ominously, as if they would topple over on him.

“Beast!” He beat upon the door with his fists, the sound swallowed up by the plants that were choking their way up the castle stones. How had they grown so much in only a few weeks? Why was nobody answering the door?!

With a frustrated growl, Brendan tore himself away, dashing alongside the wall. He recalled there was a side door, past the hedge maze and the sculpture garden, near the stables. If he could just get there, then surely he could find his way inside the castle, and Beast would be okay and everything would be fine and...he drew in a shuddering breath. Damn it, why had he been gone so long?

Mother Mary, is this my fault? He snorted, furious at himself. This castle stood for centuries until I interfered! Somehow, I am to blame for this. He circled the reflection pool, barely recognizable to him as the same one he had almost drowned in without its concealing blanket of snow. He could see now that it was surrounded by fountains, dry as bones and falling apart. If Beast is hurt, or worse, if he is...he shied away from the thought, unwilling to even give the terrifying possibility a name -- If he’s hurt, and I am responsible...

The thought went unfinished. Instead he remembered a crooked grin cast across the salle, Beast twisting his rapier with careless grace.

Roots and brambles seemed to spring up under his feet, several times nearly tripping him as he rounded the corner. As he approached, he had to slow down, weaving through thornbrushes to get into the sculpture garden. Corinthian pillars flanked the path, once proud, tall columns the color of parchment, but now as dirtied and worn as old Roman ruins. He once walked this garden with Beast, and he remembered the way Beast had held his hand, unsure and bold in equal measures.

The air felt eerily too cold, the fine hairs on the back of his neck all prickling up, and he caught the slight scent of a lighting storm.

A woman stepped out from around a crumbling column. It was instantly apparent that she was not entirely human. Though she had the usual assemblage of arms and legs and so forth, and they were arranged in a very beautiful manner, her eyes had the high unnatural shine of polished onyx and her black hair moved like weeds underwater. “Honestly,” she said, clarion voice ringing strangely, echoing where no echo should sound. “What do I have to do to get you people to do as you are
supposed to?"

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This was as good as any place to lay down. He let his mind drift. It had been such a short time, really – just one winter out of two hundred – but that one winter had held the only days of his entire life that he had been truly happy.

Grateful even to be left memories, Beast closed his eyes with weary acceptance.

***

“Why didn’t the girl come, instead of you?”

Brendan froze and eyed the sorceress warily, for he knew without a shadow of doubt that this must be her; she was exactly as the book had described her, silver-black and gossamer-clad. After a long pause he managed to find his voice. “I am very stubborn.”

Her head tilted slightly in acknowledgment. “That is readily apparent.” She looked like a woodcut, all ink and blank paper.

Brendan swallowed his apprehension, muscles tightening in his jaw. “What have you done to him?” If she had hurt him, if Beast was harmed in any way...

“The prince? Not a thing. I have done nothing more than endeavor to weave a tale, child. It is what I do.” She watched him the way cats watched garden voles; circling around with amused indifference right up until the time came to pounce. “Though I find myself curious, stubborn boy. What exactly would you do, if I was intending to do something with the prince?”

A good question. Though unsure of how exactly he would accomplish it, one thing was certain. “I’d stop you,” he responded flatly.

“Would you really?” Thinly the woman smiled, her perfectly even teeth glinting like ivory. “Are you a sorcerer, by chance? Know you the hidden, eldritch ways of magic?”

He shifted slightly from one foot to another. “I can wiggle my ears, a bit.”

She stared at him, this cold apparition of a woman. Then she threw her head back and laughed in a way he had never heard a lady do before, loud and unself-conscious. Her black stone eyes warmed, and the ground at her feet started to sprout little seedlings. “The prince must have had his work cut out for him with you around.”

Brendan didn’t like the way she spoke of Beast in past tense, and his eyes narrowed, suddenly keen as steel. "If you’ve hurt him, witch, I will end you."

Silence stretched taut in the air, his hands closed into fists. “This little scholar suddenly turned warrior before me, hm?” The sorceress studied him with the same intensity people gave horses they were considering for purchase. "Perhaps you were well chosen, after all,” she said, almost to herself.

Realization suddenly coursed through him. “You…you did all this.” He felt like a fool for not thinking of it sooner. Of course, Beast hadn’t made his father sick; she had. The one responsible for everything. The sorceress who had set the entire thing in motion. The one playing games with Beast’s life. “You made my father sick. Sent Beauty the dreams. I suppose you are to blame for the state of the castle, as well.”
“You mean this?” She indicated the decaying grounds around them with a dove-white hand. “No. The spell itself despairs, and falls under its own weight. This happens, sometimes, when spells get very old and they adopt some measure of autonomy. I had no part of it. I have no wish to see my own work wasted. As for your other suppositions, yes. I arranged matters with your family.”

Something ugly roiled in his gut, and his eyes flashed. “My father almost died.”

Her hand made a gentle, brushing motion like a falling feather. “No. My spell would not have claimed his life. It was only necessary for a short time.”

“Why?” he asked roughly.

She shrugged one elegant shoulder. “My reasons are my own.”

“How, then?” Despite the dire circumstances, curiosity nipped at him like a harrying dog. “How did you do...well, any of this?”

Her lips curved slightly. “There are powers far more ancient than your sacrificed god and your virgin goddess.”

Somewhat taken aback, Brendan irrelevantly rejoined, “I... What? Mary isn’t a goddess.”

“Is she not?” The sorceress looked amused. “As you say.” She turned her gaze to a nearby statue, marble in cloven chunks at its base. “Nothing is truly eternal, not even the strongest magic. You can see that.” The full weight of her inhuman eyes bored into him. “The proof is all around you.”

His eyes quickly flicked from the broken statue back to the woman. “Your point?”

“Magic fades, like memories. Neither one so quickly or so easily as we tend to believe; but they do. In time it will fade for you, Brendan.” He barely masked his reaction, jerking back as she spoke his name. She watched him knowingly and went on. “This place will crumble into earth -- no magic now can keep it standing -- and you will forget.”

Anger momentarily stole his voice from him, and as he struggled to regain some measure of control, blood pounding in his brain, the sorceress took a gentle, fawnlike step forward.

“I have upset you. You misunderstand me. I am offering you a gift.”

Incredulously, “A gift?”

“You came here to save the prince. You could not have known that what you chose was an impossible task. When a ship sinks, no mere man may deprive the ocean of its prize. There is no reason for it to drag you down as well.”

She leaned towards him, her words a conspiratorial whisper. “I can make you forget. You can return to your life; to your fine, loving family, to a new life, to an open world of endless possibilities.” Her face expressed only sincere, earnest kindness. “It is what he would want.”

With throat parched, he said, “You act like you know everything. Like you know me. You don’t.” He shook his head. “I didn’t come here to save Beast. I came here to be with him.” He fixed her with an even, razor-edged glare. “And nothing you say can dissuade me. Keep your gift, sorceress, and let. Me. Pass.”

The sorceress looked at him as if she could see right through him, saw his heart beating beneath clear, glass skin. She sighed, her expression changing, sphinxlike and inscrutable, to reflect some
unspoken decision. She inclined her head towards him, respectfully, as one did when meeting an equal. "Sometimes, one has to trust in the magic. That is an old wisdom, the very first lesson that is taught to my kind. It is one I may have neglected to consider."

“What you have neglected to consider,” he returned heatedly, “is that time is wasting. I know Beast is here somewhere, and he may be dying, and yet you still stand in my way.” Her eyes raked over him, taking in his raw anguish, pain that underlay an unshakeable strength.

“You know,” she mentioned thoughtfully, “I do not think you were chosen, after all.” Brendan drew himself up and squared his shoulders. He couldn’t begin to guess what sort of things she might be able to do to him, but he was ready for whatever she might try. She did nothing more than put her head to the side, and with a crescent-moon smile said, “I think you were the one who chose.”

Brendan shook his head, wanting only to get past this strange colorless woman and find his Beast. “I do not know what you mean.”

“I would not expect you to.” She watched him for another moment with her head half-turned, like a bird. “It is rare for anyone to pen their own story.” She tapped finely carved fingers against her wrist musingly. “I believe there is a common saying about curiosity. It would seem that I am as susceptible to it as any feline. I will not hinder your passage.”

With an arch of his brows, Brendan asked, “Is this a trick?”

“No,” she said simply.

He let out a breath he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding. “Then let me pass.”

Without any further conversation, she stepped aside delicately, the hem of her filmy gown flowing around her bare feet like water. Still leery of chicanery and trickery both, Brendan edged along the path, not daring to take his eyes off her.

Just as he was ready to turn, she spoke. “May I impart some wisdom to you?”

Warily, Brendan nodded.

“Remember this; sometimes once a thing is done, it can never be undone. That is the second lesson that is taught to my kind.”

Puzzled, but suspicious of her soft sorrowful tone, he turned from her and stepped out of the sculpture garden onto the grass. He turned back for a moment, but of course, she had disappeared.

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Moving was laborious, so he stopped. He was so, so tired. Each breath brought with it new regrets, harpstrings cutting sharp and discordant through his heart.

Brendan.

Every endless second, Beast ached for the slightest touch of his hand, the merest whisper of his voice, the smallest glimpse of those clever-long fingers or that chestnut-rich hair.

If fate was kind, far kinder than it had been to himself, Brendan would live out his days happily, making music and visiting libraries and laughing low and sultry over a candlelit dinner with someone far better suited for him than some broken antiquity.
With the last vestiges of his strength, he wished only for another’s happiness.

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Finally his feet found the riding path that he knew would lead him back to the castle. As Brendan passed the stables he remembered the way Beast had often stilled under his touch, had to be gentled like a skittish colt.

At last, after what felt like ages, he came to the door. It was completely hidden by briars. He tore at them, grunting as thorns pierced his skin. The door itself was warped in its frame, but he managed to wrench it open, the hinges wailing in protest.

He burst through the doorway, yelling Beast’s name at the top of his lungs.

The shadowed hallway devoured the sound of his voice, and he faltered. Deep cracks crept up the walls, bits of plaster fallen and rotting on damp, threadbare carpets. stunned, he walked on.

Everything was in ruins. Lamps did not light as he passed them, no gentle nudges directed him, and every little absence only amplified the sensation that this castle had been long since abandoned.

It was dark, only the faintest of pre-dawn light sneaking its way in through filth-encrusted windows. He moved as if walking in a nightmare, legs too slow to respond, like slogging through thick mud. He passed the doors to the library, paused, and pushed them open. There was a good chance that Beast might be in there.

A portion of the shelving had collapsed, and books were scattered over the wooden floors, leather covers curled back with some long-ago dampness, now so dry they were disintegrating as he watched. Had circumstances been less dire, at any other time, Brendan would have mourned their loss, so much knowledge now only appreciated by dust-motes and booklice. He remembered sitting in this library as Beast laughed with surprise, as if his own amusement was unexpected, as Brendan joked about long-dead authors over the dreg of a wine bottle.

He backed out of the room, shaking his head in disbelief. Where else, his mind raced, where could he be? The greenhouse? The solarium, his bedroom, the music room? The castle possessed more rooms than he could begin to count, and probably dozens more that he’d never even known existed.

Without question, he would search each room, each hall, every parlor and foyer and in every last cobwebbed corner if he had to...but what if he was already too late?

He put his face in his hands, forcibly holding back a shaky sob. Why had he waited so long, why had he spent so many foolish days agonizing over the decision to come back? Too indecisive to leave his old life behind. Too proud to go back to someone that had hurt him so deeply. Too much of a coward to hear the man he loved turn him away again.

Drawing in a deep, fortifying breath, Brendan let his hands fall to his sides. Not this time. I will find him.

There was a light touch on his arm, like the brush of a spider, and he spun around with a startled gasp, seeing nothing but a dark and dusty hall. After a breathless second, his heart moved from his throat back down to its proper place, and he exhaled heavily with relief. There was the familiar brush of air that always had heralded the presence of one of the servants, a welcoming ambience he had unknowingly become accustomed to. He grinned widely, nearly giddy at the company.

“I am so glad to see you. Well, not see, exactly, but...” Something odd caught his eye, and he tilted his head to the side. Actually, he could see something, when the light shifted. Like an outline -- a thin, oily haze where the edges of a body might be. “What...what has happened to you?”
Something grabbed the cuff of his sleeve and pulled him away from the library doors. He nodded curtly. “Right. You know where Beast is? Take me there. Is he all right?”

Without warning, the servant staggered, the grip on his sleeve weakening. Brendan automatically tried to reach for the invisible, but grasped only shadows. Concerned, he asked, “Are you hurt?” He couldn’t catch the servant’s smoky outline; it was only visible when the light was just barely there, still half-shadow. After a moment the grip became firmer, the servant regained its footing, yanking insistently at his sleeve. All Brendan could do was follow.

The hall opened to a narrow chamber cluttered with an armory’s debris, Brendan picking his way carefully over rusting suits of armor. Prone on the tiles, they lay like soldiers that had simply given up their vigils and laid down at their posts. He stepped over a red-plumed helm, a hand on the wall for balance. Skimming his fingers across the exposed plaster, he remembered being pushed up against the wall of the portrait gallery, Beast’s kisses stealing the breath from him.

“Is it much farther?” he rasped. The servant paused at a doorway, twisting from side to side as if unsure which direction to take. With a pang of worry, Brendan tried to lean in towards his unseen guide. As frantic as he was to get to Beast, this servant did not seem well. Briefly he wondered if it was the same one that had kissed him, once upon a time, but dismissed the notion as unlikely. The castle had so very many servants. “Stop a moment. You seem confused. Are you unwell?” He craned his head and squinted, trying unsuccessfully to see the faint haze where the servant stood. “Is there anything I can do for you? To help you?”

The fingers on his sleeve wrapped around his wrist and squeezed, as if to comfort him, then pulled meaningfully. He managed a sort of lopsided smile. “Okay, okay. Let’s go.” The servant led him through a moldering parlor, down another darkened hall, to a small and unremarkable door. It was flanked by twin sconces bearing unlit torches, which was odd. Most of the castle had at some point been outfitted with newer lamps and chandeliers. Perhaps this part of the castle was older than the rest, or had just never been important enough to change it from its medieval fittings.

The thick plank door opened to a long set of steep and narrow stairs, winding upwards to a tower Brendan had never seen before.

His boots scraped against the slab steps that curved up and around the central pillar, thin arrow slits letting in slivers of the rising dawn. In between the spaces of shadow Brendan could sometimes catch sight of the servant’s shape, undefined but certainly there.

The hand guiding him trembled, sliding off his arm. Brendan stopped and took a step towards the invisible. He could barely make it out, a mere suggestion of shape bracing itself against the outer wall.

“Take it easy,” Brendan said anxiously. “The spell is failing, and you’re a part of that, right? You shouldn’t waste your strength-”

A hand set itself on his shoulder and pushed him hard, urging him up the stairs on his own. “Is Beast up there?” More firmly he was pushed again. “But...will you be all right?”

Two hands shoved him this time, as if to say just go, you idiot! Seeing the wisdom in this, Brendan lingered a moment more only to utter a fervent, “Thank you.”

He dashed up the stairs as fast as he could, taking two or three steps at a time. It was a tall tower, and by the time he reached the top his lungs burned, and he propped himself against the arched doorway, struggling for breath.
The stairs opened into a circular room, all stone and open windows carved like delicate lace, perhaps at one time a watchtower or observatory. A breeze ruffled freely in his hair through the arched windows, the rafters of the pointed tower creaking slightly above him. The room stood empty except for a solitary heap of cloth and furs in its center.

The heap moved. A shallow breath in. Out. And in again.

A singular second stretched for an hour, every muscle in his body locked fast. When he was finally able to move, Brendan ran and collapsed to the floor. “Beast,” he whispered, throat too tight for anything louder.

A sharp indrawn breath, and dark amber eyes blinked open.

“Beast!” Brendan rolled the limp figure onto its back, his heart a tangled tumult of relief and fear and happiness and dread.

Beast’s head lolled towards him. “Another one,” he croaked, the words dragged out painfully.

Eyes flicking desperately, searching for any injuries, Brendan could barely hear him. “What?”

Again, this time a little clearer, “Another one. Dream. This is a...strange one, though.” The sentence seemed to exhaust him, and his eyelids shuttered. Brendan leaned over him and cupped that proud face between his palms. He kissed him once, lightly, just proving to himself that this wasn’t a trick, some kind of leftover illusion the sorceress had left as a cruel joke. But the mouth beneath his own was familiar, the same lips that had been haunting his dreams for every night he had lain awake in his cramped little attic room. A part of him melted with relief.

At last, at last, his mind chanted. This was real, he had finally found him. His Beast was safe.

“Hey, hey, don’t fall asleep. I’m here, I’m here.” He tried to keep his voice soft and soothing. “I’m not a dream, Beast. I’m here.” When Beast finally turned to look at him, he smiled, though it felt shaky. “I came back.”

Beast grunted, sitting up a little.

“Are you injured? Where are you hurt?” He ran his hands over Beast’s body, seeking the source of his ailment. “We have to get you down from this tower, get you somewhere warm-”

“Not hurt.” A hand came up and gently caressed Brendan’s cheek. He went still, feeling like the wind had been knocked from his chest. Finally he closed his eyes and leaned into the touch, sliding his own hand atop Beast’s.

For a moment, everything was perfect.

When he opened his eyes Beast was staring at him, some of his lucidity returned. “You’re here,” he grated, as if just realizing it for truth.

Brendan bit his lip, nodding. “I’m here, Beast.”

Leonine features hardened with something, regret and anger mixed. “You shouldn’t be. I told you to go. Why? Why didn’t you listen to...” Shutting his eyes against a wave of weakness, Beast swallowed thickly.

He tried to shape a feeble smile. “I never do what you tell me to, remember?”

Beast’s laugh twisted into a cough. “Your one flaw.” Brendan laughed too, hearing the low,
hysterical edge of it. “Shouldn’t have come back. Seen me like this.”

Brendan shook his head fiercely. “I had to.”

“Didn’t think...after what I said...” Beast turned his face away in shame. With a soft touch Brendan turned it back, and with one meaningful glance told Beast that all had been forgiven. Beast’s next breath came a little lighter, as if a weight had been removed.

“I had to come back,” Brendan told him, voice hushed and breaking. “My life is empty without you, Beast. I love you.”

Beast’s eyes squeezed shut, as if the other man’s words caused him physical pain. “Brendan…”

“Shh. You shouldn’t talk. Just...just take it easy, I can go get help-”

“Please.” The word, so plaintive and so rarely heard from that tongue, gave Brendan pause. He listened.

“I have done so many bad things in my life, Brendan. So, so many. Made so many mistakes. But right now. My only regret.” Again his furred hand came up, skating over Brendan’s cheekbone, tracing the line of his jaw. The red dawn painted his eyes until they burned golden fire. “My only regret. I never told you...never told you that I-”

“Shh,” Brendan insisted desperately, covering Beast’s lips with his fingers, head shaking in refusal. The words were killing him, ripping him apart piece by painful piece, when Beast’s every labored breath was saying goodbye. He couldn’t bear it, the finality in that splintered voice. “You don’t have to say it. You shouldn’t speak, you need to rest, you need-”

Beast weakly moved Brendan’s hand from his lips, held it fast. “Need to tell you,” he whispered. “My only regret is that I never told you I love you.”

And his eyes fluttered shut, his head sinking to the stones.

In that great chest a breath rattled, then went still.

Beast’s hand fell limply from his grasp.

Too stunned by grief to move, to think, to even breathe, Brendan remained beside his lover’s body, the cold seeping into his knees and a clamor of silence ringing in his ears.

This wasn’t how things were supposed to go.

This couldn’t be the way it ended.

Disbelief held him still. Silence roared.

“Wake up, damn you.” He wasn’t even conscious of speaking, bare skeletons of words that scratched their way from his throat unbidden, his hands moving to grip Beast’s collar without waiting for their owners’ consent. He crouched over his lover’s prone form, the only sound rising to the rafters his own strangled breaths.

“Wake up,” the whisper barely audible, back bending till his forehead came to rest on Beast’s unmoving chest, as he had lain only a handful of times before, lost in the steady thrum of his lover’s heartbeat while counting the minutes and wishing they would last forever.

The book, the fish, his sister, the witch, all of them had lied. This wasn’t how the story was meant to
end, an abbreviated inksplotch drying on a blank and uncaring page.

No blood stirred that heartbeat. No sound. No breath. He stayed there, no intention of ever being moved from this spot; let the castle crumble, the tower fall, the earth swallow them up, let night descend forever, it didn’t matter.

Nothing mattered. Not anymore.

He took no note of the handful of dried leaves that blew in though the open windows, or of the sudden gust that sent them skittering in circles on the stone floor.

The dawn spilled in brightly as if the wind carried it. It built in strength like a flame on a fresh lampwick, spreading until it touched every stone and crevice of the circular room. The light glared so bright that it shone red through Brendan’s closed eyelids. Reluctantly, he slowly raised his head from Beast’s still body. The breeze abandoned the dancing leaves and tugged instead at his clothes, so strongly that it could not simply be a trick of the wind, and with none of the telltale gentleness of the servants.

He sat up, alarmed. An unseen force began to pull Beast’s body away from him, drawing it up off the ground. Beast’s head hung back limply, russet hair trailing across the stones as he inexorably rose. “No!” Brendan exclaimed, lunging forward. “You can’t take him from me!” He clawed desperately for Beast, for an arm or a scrap of tattered clothing, but it slid from his grasp as Beast was lifted higher and higher. Light separated into vines or tendrils of brilliance that oozed around the body and wrapped it tightly within them, their glow swelling tenfold.

The light grew so burningly bright that he had to shield his eyes or go blind.

There was a sound like the world breaking, a soft, soughing shatter.

As suddenly as it had arrived the gale died down, and the glare faded, once again only the gentle sunlight of dawn.

Blinking spots from his vision, Brendan turned back. He was relieved to see that Beast’s body was still there, and no longer floating ethereally.

Then the shape moved, and Brendan’s heart stopped.

Hope welled up within him. “Beast!” he cried, quickly scrambling over to Beast’s side.

“Brendan?” muttered Beast, weakly, but alive.

Alive, praise every saint he’d ever heard of, and even those he hadn’t. Elated, Brendan draped himself over his lover and began scattering kisses over his face, his hands, anywhere he could reach. Quickly Beast seemed to regain his strength, and began returning the kiss with enthusiasm, his tongue scraping over Brendan’s lower lip, a hand moving up to entangle in his hair.

Abruptly Beast pulled back, eyes scanning the other man as if seeing him for the first time. “You cut your hair,” he said with a slight frown.

Brendan gaped incredulously, then laughed in pure and undiluted joy. “Is that all you have to say?”

“But...it’s short,” Beast said with surprise.

Blue eyes twinkled. “Do you like it?”
“No.”

Again he laughed. “You were dead and now you’re not, and all you can say is—” he began, but Beast dragged him back down and caught his mouth with his own, pressing up into him hot and ardent.

“Was I really?” Beast murmured into the kiss. Brendan nibbled ecstatic bites across Beast’s lips with a questioning noise. “Was I really dead?” Beast clarified, a touch of hesitation clinging to the query.

Brendan stilled, his hands spasming hard enough to bruise, able only to answer with a shaking “Yes.”

Beast stroked Brendan’s hair, the way one reassured a frightened creature. “Hey. I’m okay. Never felt better.” He pressed his lips to Brendan’s temple. “You’re here.” Brendan melted against him and they fell into a deep, jubilant kiss. Beast drew the tips of his claws down the back of Brendan’s neck, and he shivered and broke out of the kiss with a light moan.

“Wait,” Beast interjected, his heavy brows drawn together, and he pulled back his hand in alarm. In one smooth motion he got to his feet, and mystified, Brendan clambered up with slightly less grace.

Beast stared down at himself in disbelief. He let out a low growl and brought up his hands, flipping them from back to palm repeatedly. “But...no, this isn’t right.” Beast looked up from his claws frantically. “The spell broke. I can feel it, the difference, I am no longer bound by it, and...” His head shook forcefully. “It...this is wrong. The spell said I would have my true shape restored to me. What...what is this?” He looked down at his taloned feet and his lashing tail with an expression of betrayal, then up at his lover with broken anguish.

“No, it didn’t,” Brendan breathed.

Beast’s brows shadowed his eyes with confusion. “What?”

“It never said that at all.”

“Brendan, what in God’s name are you talking about?”

“I saw the book. It said, ‘like a beast he shall remain, until he learns to love and is loved in return.’” He slowly shook his head, a wry smile on his face. “That tricky bitch,” he added with a sort of twisted admiration.

“I don’t...I don’t understand.” At his lost, forlorn tone, Brendan took his hands, reveling in their warm heaviness, the silk of their golden pelt.

“Once a thing is done, it can never be undone.” Still seeing no glimmer of understanding, Brendan smiled gently. “This is you now, my love.”

Beast took a step back, shaking his head in refusal. “But I’m still a monster!”

“No,” insisted Brendan. “You aren’t. I think monsters, and beasts, only exist in here,” and he placed his hand over Beast’s heart, where he could feel it flutter like a frightened bird. Beast looked deeply into his eyes, then slowly wrapped his powerful hands around Brendan’s and held him close.

“This is your true shape now. This,” he held Beast’s cheek in his cupped hand, “this is who I fell in love with. And you’re still that same man.” He flashed him a smile. “I must admit, I’m actually relieved.”
A disbelieving snort through that curved, aristocratic nose. “Why the hell would you be relieved?!”

Wordlessly the young man slipped into his arms, and despite his distress, Beast clung tightly to him. All that time spent in a waking nightmare, wanting and regretting, telling himself over and over that the right thing had been to drive Brendan away, telling himself that he would never get the chance to see Brendan again, to touch him, -- some deeply lost core of himself at last found anchor in the firm body he held within his arms. He placed a wondering kiss at the crown of Brendan’s cropped hair.

“I’m relieved because it would be like…like kissing a stranger.” He nuzzled into Beast’s neck, breathing deep his comforting scent, wildness and warm velvet.

Beast’s arms unconsciously tightened. “No kissing strangers.”

Brendan pulled back and grinned. “I faced an enchanted forest, crumbling ruins, and a very intimidating sorceress to reach you, and already you’re questioning my fidelity?” He had meant it lightly, but he faltered as Beast’s eyes locked on his own, great and dark beneath the arches of his golden brows.

His face, normally so well-controlled and every expression shuttered, was as bare and open as he had only seen in their most intimate moments, when their bodies had been joined. “I lost you once, Brendan. It nearly killed me.” His breath caught at the faint tremble in the words, the naked honesty of them, and before he could answer he was caught in a hard, searching kiss.

When their lips parted, both gasping slightly, Brendan spoke, voice going rough at the edges. “You won’t lose me again.” A glad rumble emanated from the broad chest pressed against him. It was very nearly a purr. “No matter what shape you’re in, Beast, I won’t be parted from you again.”

Searching, Beast’s eyes bored into his own. After a breathless span, Beast found the truth he sought there. “Well,” he husked before claiming another kiss, “I suppose I can live with that.” Brendan laughed between kisses, gladness painting everything beautiful.

“I love you,” Beast whispered against his lips, sending a spark of electricity through Brendan’s every waking nerve. “And...you still love me?” A touch of uncertainty, still, after everything?

“Yes,” Brendan answered with a small smile of exasperation. The last bit of tension went out of Beast’s shoulders, and he grinned brightly, fangs and all.

“Good.”

Gently disentangling from their embrace, Beast looked out the windows at all the castle wreckage, at all he’d known of life now in rubble and ashes around him. “But…what now?”

Brendan went over and stood beside him. In the horizon the sun was rising warm and golden over the roses and brambles. “How do you feel about Prague?” Brendan asked.

Beast quirked an eyebrow in puzzlement. “Prague?”

“Always wanted to see Prague,” Brendan continued lightly.

Though he found the idealism certainly endearing, Beast couldn’t help rolling his eyes at the impossibility of it. He flexed his claws out in exaggeration, touching his other hand to the tips of his pronounced horns. “Splendid idea. You know, if I wear a collar, we might merely be hanged instead of burned at the stake.”

Brendan cast him a grin so sly that he could have stolen it off a fox. “You remember when you
showed me the blueberry trick?”

“The...blueberry trick?”

“You made it into a strawberry.” Brendan looked at him expectantly. Beast felt quite dense, not catching on. Brendan rolled his azure eyes heavenward. “To be more precise, you made it look like a strawberry. Correct?”

Beast stared at him blankly, an amazed smile slowly dawning on his face. “You…you’re brilliant.”

Brendan grinned. “Then you think you can manage an illusion on something a bit bigger than a piece of fruit?”

As he had told Brendan before, he was certainly no wizard, but he had learned a few useful tricks during his long solitude. And some tricks were too good not to use. “With practice, I believe so.” He shook his head in admiration. “As I said, you’re brilliant.”

Brendan shrugged. “It doesn’t have to be Prague, of course. We could start somewhere closer. Or stay in the country. Or-”

He stopped as Beast took his hands, his eyes so searing in their intensity that Brendan felt as trapped in them as a fly in honey. Beast gave him a small, candid smile like it was a gift. “I don’t care where we go. As long as we are together.” With that he pulled Brendan into his arms and caught him in a scorching kiss. A fire raced back and forth between them, giving and taking in equal measure.

Brendan gasped under his open mouth, the warm wet drag of his tongue, burying eager fingers into Beast’s thick mane of hair. His lips traveled a burning path to a pointed ear, and let his voice hit that deep throaty register that never failed to make Beast shiver; “Always.”

Beast murmured in agreement, and they stood simply wrapped up in each other for minutes or perhaps hours. Reluctantly Brendan turned, light footsteps taking him to a lacework window. He looked out at the vista of broken marble and overgrown hedges sadly. “It’s such a shame about your home, though.”

Beast shrugged carelessly, the sensation of being free and unfettered nearly as intoxicating as the young man next to him. “Let the castle be forgotten. Its time is done.” Beast looked over at him and smiled. “Ours is just beginning.”

He extended his hand, waiting.

Grinning, Brendan took it.

“Shall we, then?”

And they left the castle together.

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Somewhere in the world, two scaly shapes chortled, smug as only fish could be, their bodies twining so closely as to appear as one.

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Some Time Later, Greece

In the privacy of their rented room, with no need to wear his manufactured illusion like a familiar,
well-fitting jacket, Beast stood by the dresser and folded his shirts. No matter how long he had been attempting to master the skill, no matter how often he practiced, he remained persistently terrible at it. His shirts always ended up creased in places that it shouldn’t have been possible to crease. Nevertheless he was determined to learn how to do things properly, without the benefit of servants. Once Brendan had offered to do it for him, to which he had gruffly replied, “You aren’t my wife.” Brendan had laughed at that same open, honest way that had always driven Beast a little bit crazy, and suggested they hire a valet instead. A single, scoffing snort expressed what he thought of that idea, and so Beast continued to obstinately mangle his clothing by himself.

A fancy scrolled mirror hung over the dresser where Beast stood, and in its reflection, just over his shoulder, he could watch Brendan lounging bonelessly in a plush chair, absorbed in reading a sheaf of music. Every few seconds he would hum quietly to himself, unconsciously swaying his finger like a conductor.

Beast couldn’t help smiling at the sight. Brendan set down the papers with a tired sigh and rubbed at his eyes.

“Nervous about playing for the symposium?” he inquired. It wasn’t Brendan’s first concerto by any degree, though it just might be the largest. And word on the street was that a visiting daughter-in-law of some Ottoman sultan was planning to attend. There was no shame in being a little jittery at the prospect; Beast himself felt the occasional quaver of nerves on his lover’s behalf.

“Oddly, no.” Brendan stood, stretching out the stiffness in his back with a catlike grace. He crossed the room and wrapped his arms around Beast, nestling as high as he could reach against the back of his neck, warm breath tickling Beast’s mane. “After all, one of us has to make some money,” he murmured teasingly, nipping at Beast’s pointed ear lightly.

Abandoning his hopeless task, Beast snorted, trailing his large hands over the slender forearms encircling his middle. “We have plenty of money, love,” he said fondly.

He could feel Brendan’s smile against the fur of his shoulder. “It’s always good to have more to send to the nieces and nephews.”

“Hmm. Perhaps this time, we will have reached the magic amount that will finally endear me to your sister.”

“She’ll come around eventually,” Brendan assured, “Father did.”

“Only after we had that fight. Do you suggest I try the same strategy with Catherine?” He leaned his head back against Brendan’s, mouth in the bare twist of a smile.

Against him Brendan shook with mirth. “I most certainly do not. Father backed down; she definitely wouldn’t.”

He made a soft sound of agreement, and stood still for a minute, basking in the comforting presence of his lover, letting the tips of his talons trace slow caresses against bare wrists. Brendan broke the companionable silence with a hesitant cough. “There is, ah, something I wanted to talk to you about, mon coeur.”

Beast met those blue eyes in the reflection of the mirror. “That sounds ominous.”

Worrying at his lower lip nervously, Brendan started with, “Now, I don’t want you to panic.”

“Oh, that definitely doesn’t sound good.” He raised his eyebrows in alarm.
Reaching up, Brendan unlaced the neck of Beast’s loose linen shirt. Beast growled lightly, the touch instantly tantalizing and electric. “Is this just a cunning attempt to seduce me?”

“No! Well. Maybe. We’ll see.” With an impish grin, Brendan pulled down the collar of the shirt and dug his fingers into the thick mane trailing down Beast’s chest. He was unable to bite back a low, rumbling purr. Brendan chuckled, propping his chin on Beast’s shoulder. “Hey, pay attention, you. I’m trying to break some bad news to you, and you are making it very difficult.”

He threw the other man a skeptical, lopsided smile. “What is more likely, Brendan, that there is bad news buried in my chest hair, or that you are just looking for an excuse to get your hands on it. Again.”

“I need an excuse now?” Brendan answered sweetly. “As much as I do enjoy fondling you, mon coeur, look here.” Obligingly Beast followed the path of his fingers in the mirror and nearly jumped back in shock.

He looked down, just in case the mirror had made a mistake, but no, there it was. A single gray hair, curling brazenly from the golden thatch of his chest.

He stared in open amazement as his heart eventually started beating again.

A gray hair.

He had a gray hair.

Elation coursed through him, heady and rich like a wine made of promise. He wasn’t stuck forever in some prison of a static stagnation. He would not watch the world pass by while he remained changeless forever. This was utter, irrevocable proof that the spell was finally, truly, broken.

They could grow old together; he could grow old.

Practically drunk on happiness, he scooped Brendan in his arms and swung him around the room in a big hug, his lover putting up only a token protest before melting into his glad embrace.

“Well, I hope you don’t expect me to be this thrilled when I get my first gray hair,” Brendan said with a laugh, and kissed him joyfully.

And they lived happily, not ‘ever after’, as eternity is an unkindness to wish on anyone, but very happily indeed.

The End

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Chapter End Notes

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thousand thanks.

In the coming months I will be seeking to make Brendan and the Beast available as a book, both print and digital. If you’d like to follow that process, receive news and updates as I trip merrily along the path to self-publication, please see my blog at http://brendanandthebeast.wordpress.com/

Thank you so much for reading!

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