Cold Burn

by whitesheets

Summary

If she is to choose one word to describe her stepmother, Cinderella will choose ‘ice’.

Notes

I'm not really sure if anyone is ever going to read this. It just happened.

No beta, please excuse any mistakes. Enjoy!
Chapter 1

If she is to choose one word to describe her stepmother, Cinderella will choose ‘ice’.

Stepmother has no feelings, lips curling in mockery whenever Cinderella missteps, eyes flashing in amusement when Cinderella misspeaks – there is nothing gentle or warm about Lady Tremaine.

She is like ice – bone-chilling, sharp, and unforgiving.

Cinderella doesn’t remember much about her life before – she barely remembers her father’s death. Worst of all, she doesn’t remember how her mother looks like, doesn’t remember anything but a few wisps of an old lullaby, sung in a warm, husky voice.

But her days are no longer warm and winter has crept over the lands – turning lush forests into stark whites and barren trees. Her friends have all gone away, spreading their wings to seek shelter from the cold in warmer climates.

She is supposed to be cleaning the windows, but left alone, her mind wanders. How unfair, Cinderella thinks, squinting in the glare of the white snow.

She wants desperately, to fly away too, but she has no wings and the gateless estate mocks her – like Stepmother’s green eyes.

Cinderella’s room in the tower has no heat – and she sleeps in layers upon layers of clothing, along with an old fur coat that is large enough to cover her petite frame. Still, she shivers in her sleep and wakes up every morning curled up in a ball, back aching and nose red from the chill.

Though, she must have been through twelve or thirteen winters in this little room, so she’s certain that she will survive.

She’s the first to wake every morning, but sometimes, Cinderella’s sure that Stepmother is awake as well, although the older woman doesn’t leave her quarters.

On days like these, she rushes to have breakfast prepared, careful not to spill scalding hot coffee as she climbs the grand staircase of the chateau and makes her way to her stepmother’s room.

Her stepsisters are away this winter, visiting their mother’s relatives in the south, and Cinderella feels like a trapped mouse, sharing the large mansion with only one other person. It is the first time she has been left alone with Lady Tremaine, and she worries about surviving her more than surviving the winter.

She raps once on the whitewashed door, and waits.

“Come in, child,” Stepmother’s voice floats, and sends a chill straight to Cinderella’s belly. It has been years, and yet, she has never been able to rid herself of the nervousness that besets her each time she finds herself in the older woman’s presence.

The room is still dark, but she knows that she is being watched intently.

“Your breakfast, Stepmother,” Cinderella announces needlessly, and places the tray gingerly on the nightstand. She takes a few steps backwards, because she dares not face her back to the imposing woman lounging on the bed.
“Are you ill?” Stepmother asks, suddenly, and Cinderella frowns.

“No, I don’t think so. Why do you ask?”

“Your hands are shaking,” she says, almost like an accusation.

“Oh!” Cinderella clenches both hands into fists. Has she been that cold? She hasn’t noticed all morning. “It is slightly chilly this morning, that’s all. It has been – it’s been colder than usual.”

“Is that so?”

“Y-yes,” Cinderella stammers.

“Have I not been allowing you sufficient clothes, Cinderella?” Stepmother murmurs, and picks up the cup of hot liquid.

“No, Stepmother.” She feels rooted to the Persian rug, unable to move. “The clothes are sufficient.”

“Then it may be wise to wear them.”

“Yes, of course, Stepmother.”

“Carry along,” the other woman dismisses her, and Cinderella is only too relieved to take her leave.

She runs all the way back to her small room, removes her outer garments and slips on another camisole before redressing. Once she starts on her chores, the cold will leave her alone, she is sure. After all, she will be sweating with exertion once she is done with the heavy draperies in the main hall.

Lady Tremaine doesn’t leave her rooms for the entire morning, and Cinderella thanks heaven for the small reprieve.

Lunch comes and goes without fanfare and she eats in the kitchen after her stepmother retreats to the upper rooms.

“I suppose it’s a blessing to be here alone – it’s less to cook and less to clean,” Cinderella sighs, as she scrubs a pot.

Something squeaks, and she looks down to see a small, brown mouse, watching her from under the heavy working table. She has never seen it around before.

“You agree with me?” she says, to the mouse.

It squeaks, whiskers twitching.

“Oh, you’re a smart one. I just know you are! You must be hungry.”

Abandoning the pot, Cinderella unwraps a block of cheese nearby, and makes a small slice. She tosses the yellow piece onto the floor, and the mouse shrinks back.

“Don’t be afraid, it’s for you,” she says, and goes back to the pot. The mouse approaches the offering and picks it up, nose twitching. Its black, beady eyes watch Cinderella, as if wondering if she’s to be trusted. “Go on, it’s yours. Where are your friends, anyway? You should be careful of Lucifer, he likes wondering in here during the day,” she continues. “Or are you alone?”
The mouse nibbles on the cheese, shooting tentative looks at its human companion.

“Well, I’m alone too,” Cinderella confides.

“Are you now?”

She jumps, dropping the pot into the sink, with a loud clang.

“Must you be so clumsy?” Stepmother says, and glides into the room. She looks remarkably out of place, the elegance of her dress contrasting against the plain stone walls of the kitchen.

Cinderella stares, uncomprehending. The kitchen has always been hers – she cannot remember anyone else in the household ever stepping foot in here.

“Did you – did you need something, Stepmother?” Cinderella composes herself enough to ask, wondering if somehow, she has missed a bell.

“Must I need something?” Stepmother takes a few steps closer, bright green eyes casting a sideway glance to the brown mouse. “I wasn’t aware that you are in a habit of talking to rodents, child. But then again, you are peculiar.”

Cinderella swallows and opens her mouth to protest – but realises that she cannot. If not for the glowing embers in the fireplace, Cinderella is sure that the temperature in the room has dropped as her stomach quivers.

Lady Tremaine watches her for a brief moment, before sweeping her intimidating gaze across the kitchen. “Well, you’ve certainly kept the place tidy …” she says, long fingers grazing across a work surface as if to check for dust.

Cinderella bows her head, afraid to catch the gaze of the taller woman.

“Amuse yourself with your new friend, if you must. You need not prepare for dinner. I have decided to attend Countess Mertueille’s ball and will return later in the evening.”

“Of course, Stepmother,” Cinderella says. “Enjoy the party.”

She doesn’t get a response, because when she looks up, Lady Tremaine is no longer standing in front of her.

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That evening, Cinderella soaks her feet in a tub of hot water, listening to the howling winds outside her window rattling the hinges. There are many things to be afraid of in this world, but she’s not afraid of nature, so she’s not afraid at all of being alone in her room.

The wind is so strong that she doesn’t hear the hooves of horses and when she finally notices the distant flickering of lamps approaching, Cinderella leaps out of her chair, slipping into her shoes without pausing to dry them.

She runs all the way to the main door in a coat and tries in vain to catch her breath. Through a frosted window pane, she watches the carriage come to a halt below the steps. The footman helps Lady Tremaine out of the carriage, her face obscured by a sable hood and Cinderella takes the cue to pull the heavy door open. The wind almost knocks her off her feet and she marvels at how the tall woman keeps her unrelenting posture in spite of the weather.

“Good evening, Stepmother,” Cinderella greets.
The other woman doesn’t acknowledge her, instead, distractedly brushes snow off the fur of her cloak before undoing the fastenings.

Cinderella dutifully pulls the garment off stately shoulders and lets the weight settle across her arm.

“Bring tea to my room,” Stepmother instructs, already walking towards the staircase. Fabric rustles with each sway of her hips, and Cinderella absently wonders if she will ever wear something so decidedly grand.

The water takes a while to boil, and by the time Cinderella goes upstairs, Stepmother has stepped out of her gown and filled the bath with hot water. The steam radiates like the sun and Cinderella wants to stay longer, simply for the respite from the cold.

She places the tray onto a stool and resists the temptation to dip her cold hands into the hot water. She also places a bar of hard soap on the edge of the bath – it smells like Provence, or at least what she imagines it to be, and much unlike the soap she uses, of wood ash and soda.

“Help me, child.”

Obediently, Cinderella narrows the gap between them and pulls at the knot of the other woman’s corset. She has done this a thousand times and is always, always surprised to find the structured garment so warm – surprised that someone so icy can leave such warmth lingering on clothes.

Once the corset is unlaced, she removes it and takes a step back.

“You may retire after this. The tray can be collected tomorrow,” Stepmother says, waving a hand. Her arms, often covered by the sleeves of her frocks, are long and lithe. Cinderella tries not to look at the other woman’s bosom and the evidence of the chill she must be feeling, barely concealed by thin underclothes.

She wonders if her step-sisters take after their father more than they do their mother, their forms immature and boyish in comparison to –

“Are you listening, Cinderella?” Lady Tremaine snaps.

Heat rushes to her cheeks. “Yes, Stepmother. Goodnight, Stepmother.”

Cinderella brings a cup of hot tea to her own bedroom, but it is only lukewarm by the time she touches her lips to the liquid.

The cold seeps through the layers, crawling up against her skin and leaving goose-pimples in their wake. Her nipples tighten in the brisk cold, but when she remembers the warmth of Stepmother’s corset, heat flares in her stomach.

If anything, the storm from the night before does not relent, flaring each time Cinderella thinks that it is beginning to die down. The snow piles on, and frost creeps inward on each windowpane like dust and cobwebs left far too long.

She checks on the firewood – there is enough to last them for weeks, if she only has the kitchen and Stepmother’s room to keep warm, and occasionally, the dining hall.

The whistling kettle tugs her out of her thoughts, and she pulls it off the fire in a hurry before the water boils over.
Cups filled with an assortment of herbs and remedies sit stacked in the sink. Cinderella has tried everything she knows – honey, ginger root, elderflower but nothing has worked so this time, she tries a concoction of both honey and boiled ginger root. She waits for the tea to cool slightly, and pulls the blanket tighter around her shoulders.

It must be close to midnight.

She doesn’t knock on the door before entering the dimly lit room and tries to keep quiet as she makes her way to the bedside.

“Stepmother?” Cinderella whispers gently, but Lady Tremaine barely responds.

Cinderella touches a hand to her forehead, and gasps at the temperature – nothing has worked, and her stupid honey and ginger root won’t help a single bit. She goes to the basin and dips a piece of fresh linen into the cool water, wringing it so water doesn’t dampen the pillow.

She folds the cloth into a narrow pad, and places it carefully on the feverish woman’s forehead.

“Would you like something to drink?” Cinderella asks anyhow, when unfocused eyes slip open for a brief moment.

A weak nod is all she gets in return.

“All right.” She slips her arm under the other woman’s neck and lifts gently. “Slowly,” Cinderella soothes, without expecting an answer. “It’s hot,” she cautions, holding the cup of tea to parched lips. When Lady Tremaine finally turns away, Cinderella softly eases her back down onto the pillow.

Cinderella has only seen her stepmother ill once and vaguely remembers her father angry (she doesn’t recall the reasons why), but much of that memory has faded. It is odd to see the usually proud, and regal woman, drift in and out of lucidity, unable to tell her what to do or reprimand her for her mistakes.

Her chest pounds, as she lowers herself down onto the armchair she has dragged from across the room earlier in the day.

She is terrified.

Terrified that it isn’t just a fever, terrified that it is something much worse, that she is ill-equipped to help if so.

Terrified that she will truly be left alone and unwanted in the world.

“I hope the weather relents tomorrow. I – I don’t know what to do, Stepmother, and I can’t get word to a doctor. Feel better, please,” Cinderella says, as if she is praying. “Please –”

And she prays, throughout the night, by her stepmother’s bedside until she falls asleep in her chair.

Lady Tremaine’s sleep is fitful, waking Cinderella on more than one occasion with her coughing and trashing, but at least she is moving, and very much alive.

Cinderella wakes up with an ache in her neck, and a throbbing head before dawn cracks. The leftover of the fire she built last night has slowed to barely warm, fading embers.
She forgets her discomfort when she leans forward to check on the slumbering woman.

“Thank you,” she mutters, to whoever that has been listening to her prayers. The fever has broken, and she touches clammy, but very warm flesh, not the burning heat from last night.

It will be fine, she thinks.

She takes the cold unfinished tea downstairs, and washes all the used cups with soap and water, and then pours boiling hot water over them to make sure they are clean. She remembers elusively, watching a nurse doing so, after a bout of illness with both Drisella and Anastasia many years ago. It doesn’t hurt to be careful.

She eats quickly for breakfast – bread, butter and a bit of cheese – and sets about making soup, because she wants to be prepared in case her stepmother is want for more substantial nourishment.

Yet, it is only at three o’clock in the afternoon, that the bell rings for the first time today.

Relief and apprehension wash over Cinderella at once.

She tries to keep her nervousness at bay as she knocks on the door. Now that the older woman is well, she slips into her old customs – knocking on doors, trembling in her belly.

“Come in,” she hears and obliges, although the voice is lighter in timbre, weaker than usual.

“Are you well, Stepmother?”

Lady Tremaine clears her throat, perhaps to swallow a cough. Her skin is pale, but she is upright, so Cinderella tramples the worry that makes her want to approach. She is not allowed to approach, until she is asked. It will not do to forget that.

“Of course, child. Do fetch more water, and do not disturb me for the rest of the day.” Her voice is slightly icy, as though she is trying to make up for the weakness she has shown.

“Do you – ah, want something to eat?” Cinderella tries, thinking of the soup she has prepared.

“Not at all. Now go. Water.”

“Yes, Stepmother.”

She fills a jug and delivers it to the older woman, also leaving behind a small jar of honey on the nightstand. Just in case.

After dinner, Cinderella spends the evening in the kitchen – where she sits close to the fire and enjoys the heat for as long as she can. Her new friend sits nearby, also presumably attracted to the heat. She tells him (she has decided that it is a he) about her day, about being terrified, about the warmth in Lady Tremaine’s room. He doesn’t always look at her, but when he does, his eyes are somehow intelligent, and Cinderella is reassured that he is listening.

“I may not like her,” she whispers, giving voice to something forbidden to think or say. “But I do not know of any other person who would take me and I – I don’t want to go to the workhouse.” She prods at the burning wood with the fire iron, mindlessly, staring into the flickering flame. “She hasn’t been unpleasant to me for a few weeks now, you know.”

She’s not sure why she says the things she says, doesn’t know how to feel about it when she hears
the words for herself.

*Ice* is the last thing she thinks about when she thinks about the proud Lady Tremaine.

- It is so cold in her tower room that the water left in her washing basin this morning has frozen.

She wraps herself in the old fur, tries to sleep but spends two hours tracing shadows on the threadbare walls from the blue moonlight.

When her eyes tire, she dozes, not more than two or three hours before she stirs.

Giving up, she pulls the fur over her shoulders and makes her way to the kitchen with an oil lamp. The fire has died, leaving a gaping darkness in the stone structure but with some work, heat glows through the room again.

Cinderella sleeps in a chair by the fireplace, and dreams of sleeping in a chair by her stepmother’s side.

- *Fire, she is hot like fire.*

*She is burning – she burns –*

Cinderella jolts awake, and white searing sunlight blinds her temporarily.

She uncurls herself from the awkward angle, and stretches, wincing when a sharp ache shoots up her back. At least she has done with the draperies for the week and –

“Oh!” She almost forgets and goes straight to work, setting out the breakfast tray.

Except, she hears no response when she knocks on the door. Cinderella contemplates leaving – it may be that Stepmother is still asleep – but worry makes her ignore her fear, and she enters the room anyway. Bright slivers of light shine through the cracks between curtains.

“Stepmother?”

Her feet quickens their pace, and she ignores the milk spilling in her haste.

Lady Tremaine’s face is flushed, beads of sweat resting on her forehead. Cinderella doesn’t need to touch her skin to know the other woman is burning. *Hot like fire.* She abandons the tray, picks up the linen that hangs haphazardly on the side of the basin and soaks it with cold water. This time, she doesn’t bother wringing it, and carries the whole basin to the bed.

Cinderella pulls the sheets and a heavy duvet off with some effort.

The flannel is hot and damp to the touch. Her fingers tremble as she works to unfasten the buttons and once she’s done, she slowly maneuvers the barely conscious woman out of the nightdress.

Sweat has soaked through her underclothes, clinging onto skin and Cinderella flushes when she sees the clear swell of full breasts. She forcefully averts her gaze, tries to look for tell-tale rashes that all terrible illnesses seem to invoke – didn’t little Marie Bouvier in the village succumb to something similar, only five months ago?

She finds no rash of any kind. In fact, Stepmother’s skin is smooth, softer than she expects. It is
nothing, she tells herself, but one of those common ailments that come with winter.

“Charles?”

*Father?*

“No, Stepmother. It is Cinderella.”

The often haughty face pinches, in pain. “It’s lost, Charlie. It’s lost,” Lady Tremaine murmurs, in her delirium. Her emerald eyes are glassy, and she gazes at a point beyond Cinderella’s shoulder.

Cinderella pauses, hesitates.

“Shh, it’s all right,” she says, biting her lip. “You will be all right.” She presses the cool cloth to a long, elegant neck.

The wet linen becomes warm quickly, and Cinderella dips it again in the cold water, wiping each inch of exposed skin, repeating the motions until the other woman drifts off into sleep.

There is too much snow to make it all the way to town, but she hopes fervently that the local midwife knows enough to help. She walks two miles to Madame Christie’s cottage, and knocks three times on the door. It swings open so fast, that the old woman must have been expecting visitors.

“Why, hello, child,” Madame says, with some surprise. “How may I – oh, dear, child!”

Hot tears roll down her cold face, but Cinderella cannot help it.

Another storm brews on the day Lady Tremaine recovers enough to take lunch in the dining hall.

Cinderella keeps the fire stoked, and waits inconspicuously to a side while the other woman nibbles without much appetite on her food. She dreads returning to her tower room tonight, because she has spent the last seven nights in a warm room, but she dreads her stepmother’s lucid presence even more.

The grandfather’s clock ticks agonisingly slow, blunt punctuations in the midst of silence.

Feeling a familiar gaze settle over her, Cinderella looks up nervously.

Oh, the glass is almost empty. Of course.

She approaches the table and moves to pick up the jug but Stepmother’s smooth, low voice stops her.

“Sit.”

“Ah. But –”

“But?” Stepmother raises her arched eyebrows, her hooded eyes daring Cinderella to argue.

“Nothing, Stepmother.”

She sits, a chair away from the other woman, and stares at the empty space on the table in front of her.
“Well?”

When she hears nothing from her step-daughter, Lady Tremaine continues.

“Eat.”

Cinderella stares at her blankly. Then catching herself, she averts her eyes. *I eat in the kitchen,* she wants to say, but instead, hears her own voice: “There is no plate.”

The older woman sighs and holds out the bread plate, with still half a loaf on it. “It is not as if you can tell the difference.”

But that is untrue – Cinderella *can* tell a difference. She has been the one setting out plates for the longest time, cleaning up after her step-family, hasn’t she? Anger flares within her at her stepmother’s slight. And Cinderella, common like a servant, has been the one to have tended to the mighty Lady Tremaine when the white fever almost killed her!

“Is something the matter, child?” Stepmother asks, matter-of-fact. Cool and sharp to the ears. She is still holding the plate, as if it is an offering.

“No,” Cinderella says, and takes the plate.

She hasn’t had a meal in this room in the longest time and it feels peculiar. Not only does she feel out of place, but she suddenly realises that she doesn’t, in fact, *like* the lavishness of ornate silverware and delicate plates. Maybe she *is* as common as they say she is.

Cinderella takes the plate and breaks off a piece of bread. She knows she is being watched, judged to be inferior. So she takes a bite, instead of breaking the loaf into a smaller pieces. Her stepmother says nothing, and out of morbid curiosity, she looks sideways.

Lady Tremaine has indeed noticed the small rebellion, but her eyes flash in amusement. Is it enjoyment derived from the perceived affirmation of Cinderella’s less than polished manners? Or something else?

A shiver runs through her body at her audaciousness, at the *look* she is being given, at having gotten away without rebuke.

The moment passes all too soon.

They eat in silence and when they finish, Cinderella stands and begins to work, clearing dishes off the table. Balancing multiple plates on her arm with skill, she performs her task to perfection in front of her lone audience. She is used to being scrutinized as she works, but rarely does she feel such overwhelming desire to impress.

“Would you like to have your coffee here, Stepmother?”

“No coffee today,” Lady Tremaine says, wrinkling her nose. “Off with you.”

“Yes, Stepmother,” Cinderella nods.

She feels eyes on her back until the barrier of a door separates them.

As she cleans the dishes, and tidies up the kitchen, Cinderella already thinks of dinner.

Nevertheless, she eats alone in the kitchen because she is dismissed early, the other woman choosing to retire for the evening.
When night falls, she shivers under her old fur coat, thinks of nights spent in a stiff chair of a warm room, and falls asleep with strange regret in her chest.
Firstly, I would like to apologise for taking so long to produce this update. I'd quit my job, taken a new one, gotten married and have been distracted by various other fandoms! Nonetheless, this fic has always been at the back of my mind and although I wasn't actively writing this chapter all the time, it consistently remained as that "thing I need to get back to writing" for over a year.

It's just before midnight on Christmas Day where I am, so I suppose this is a Christmas offering of sorts to those of you still reading! :)

I hope you enjoy this chapter. No beta, so please excuse mistakes.

Lady Tremaine receives a letter from Anastasia, beautifully written in practiced penmanship, on a fairly warm Monday morning. While all the music lessons seem to have gone to waste, her stepsister appears to have at least managed to learn something from her stepmother’s exasperated efforts (perhaps, the only thing, because her stepsister has none of Lady Tremaine’s poise or wit).

It turns out that Anastasia has made the acquaintance of a young man who has proposed marriage. He has no relations with members of the aristocracy, no title, plain as flour. But he is the son of a wealthy merchant, free of scandal which so often besets the affluent. Lady Tremaine notes this aloud as she reads Anastasia’s letter, and Cinderella pretends not to hear.

She pretends not to hear her stepmother’s soft breathing in the still of the drawing room, something of a new development – as if it now takes effort to draw air into her lungs.

The scratching of pen on paper behind her is quick and decisive. She knows what it means. Beggars must not be choosers. Lady Tremaine will never allow Anastasia to reject such an opportunity.

The silver on the mantel glisten in the afternoon light as Cinderella presses her lips together in satisfaction. She has polished the silver in this room a hundred times over the years, but it is still one of her favourite chores, almost as much as dusting the bookshelves in the library. She likes the bright gleam of accomplishment, shining back at her once she is done.

“Are you finished?”

“Almost, Stepmother,” Cinderella says, without turning, her words floating like feathers gently onto the ground.

There are no harsh words, just silence.

It doesn’t feel as odd, performing her chores in front of the other woman, not anymore. In fact, it has been the routine for weeks. She doesn’t question why, and it’s comforting to know that her work is adequate – the lack of rebuke is enough as acknowledgement of that fact.

“Fine,” Lady Tremaine says, without ice.
Now, *that* – the *lack* of biting coldness in Lady Tremaine’s voice – is strange to Cinderella, makes her stand much too straight, knots her stomach up and gives her a general feeling of being ill-equipped.

The scratching stops, and Cinderella watches the piece of paper holding Anastasia’s fate, being folded twice. Tapered fingertips run along the edges, pressing the folds into flat, neat edges. She polishes the last piece of silver and tucks the cloth into her pocket. She turns around, arms hanging limply by her sides, waiting for her next task.

“I must say,” Lady Tremaine starts, running a finger against her bottom lip. “That I am most pleased by the turn of events.” Her face is pensive, as if in contemplation of the good luck that has beset her daughter.

“I am sure, Stepmother.”

Lady Tremaine purses her lips in thought, scrutinising the silver in the background. “She doesn’t like him, you know. But what does *like* have to do with anything?”

Cinderella tries to imagine marrying someone she doesn’t like (and what about love?). She regrets it immediately, when Lady Tremaine raises an eyebrow.

“You disagree?”

*Yes*, Cinderella thinks, but shakes her head.

The older woman shrugs, clearly disbelieving.

“I do not blame you, whatever you may think. You are a child, with foolish thoughts and notions but I would be surprised to find a child without some sort of ridiculous fancy or other.” Although Cinderella keeps silent, Lady Tremaine continues. “Fondness can grow between a man and a woman, if enough effort is made.”

“Yes, Stepmother.”

“I see you don’t believe me still.”

“Well –“

“Well?”

“What if a man and a woman try to *be* fond of one another, but are ultimately unsuccessful?”

“I would not worry about the man, if I were you, child. Men are such simple creatures, and you will find that they are extraordinarily easy to please,” Lady Tremaine says, amused.

“What about the woman?”

“A woman will be happy to know that she will be well-cared for, for the rest of her life. Wanting *more* will be her downfall.”

Lady Tremaine watches her, as if waiting for a response.

But all Cinderella does is nod, chest heavy like lead.

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It is a cruel, long winter.
Cinderella keeps two cushions in the kitchen for nights that are too cold to spend in her tower room. She has discovered that if she pushes three large chairs together, and throws a blanket over the seats, she can fit quite comfortably on her makeshift bed in the kitchen.

Her secret nights down here are quite pleasant – she makes a cup of hot tea, sweetened with honey, and reads Dumas’ *La Dame aux camélias* in the firelight until she falls asleep. She enjoys the tragedy of the situation, but worries at the same time that she is developing a morbid streak. The book is “borrowed”, from the library, but Cinderella doesn’t think that Lady Tremaine will notice a missing volume amongst hundreds.

In two weeks, she spends five nights in her kitchen and on her sixth night, she receives an unexpected visitor.

“What are you doing here at this time of the night, child?” Lady Tremaine’s surprise wakes Cinderella from sleep.

Cinderella gasps, sitting straight up in shock. The volume she has been cradling falls onto the stone floor with a thump, splayed open. She stares up at the older woman, who hovers over her with a hand on her hip.

“Did you – did you need something, Stepmother?”

Lady Tremaine ignores her question, raising a lamp in front of Cinderella’s face despite the glow from the fire. “Have you been – *sleeping* in the kitchen, *child*?”

Cinderella’s heart races, like the wings of a hummingbird. She rubs the sleep out of her eyes. “No – yes, I mean, I fell asleep,” she stutters, and stops abruptly.

Lady Tremaine raises a hand, and refuses to let Cinderella finish. Her lips are pinched in displeasure, and there is a faint red on her pale skin.

Cinderella takes the cue to move, pulling the blanket off the chair and begins to fold it. “I’m sorry, Stepmother,” she says again. “I didn’t mean –”

The older woman turns away, ignoring Cinderella completely. “Stop *apologising*,” she snaps.

But instead of returning to her rooms, Lady Tremaine takes a rare turn, and begins ascending the narrow, twisting steps of the tower.

“It is cold up there – her stepmother really ought not to go around exposing herself to draughts that will send her back to her sickbed when her lungs are still weak. The doctor had said to avoid the cold as much as possible. With slight annoyance, Cinderella follows, shivering in the blanket she has wrapped herself in.

When she reaches the tower room, Lady Tremaine is standing in the middle of the pitiful abode lit
by the flickering lamp in her hand. Her eyes glide across the barren furniture, littered with Cinderella’s few possessions thrown haphazardly across them. She stares at the bed, the pile of threadbare sheets on it, the old fur coat, and then at Cinderella standing nervously at the doorway.

“You will pack your things…” Lady Tremaine starts, and then trails off, as if changing her mind.

No! A depressing, terrifying image of the workhouse flashes through her mind. Cinderella holds her breath.

The other woman gives the room a last glance and the silence, Cinderella thinks, is something one can actually hear.

“I trust you remember where your old bedroom is,” she says, and Cinderella feels faint.

“Y-yes,” she finally manages, once Lady Tremaine is only but a foot away.

She has never seen her stepmother’s eyes look so clear and green before. They skim over Cinderella’s face, perusing, assessing and deciding on matters Cinderella has no way of knowing.

“Good,” Lady Tremaine says, clipped and exacting. She steps past Cinderella, but pauses briefly: “You will be wise to learn that Mademoiselle Gautier’s suffering is from wanting more.”

Cinderella gasps.

“I –” she starts, but doesn’t know how to continue. Does she apologise for taking the book? Or worse, for hiding the book?

“Hurry along,” Lady Tremaine interrupts instead, and doesn’t wait to hear the rest.

Cinderella spends a week cleaning her old bedroom, nose perpetually red from the snuffles brought on by a decade of dust, red draperies now washed-out by sunlight. Aside from that, it is as if the room has been preserved in time by its neglect – and the inexpressible delight leaves her breathless.

Small dresses – clearly belonging to a child – still hang in the ornate closet she has all but forgotten about. Beneath them are shoes, frilled and ribboned, belonging to the same child. Drawers hold old barrettes, satin ribbons, an old ivory hairbrush with golden curls still tangled in the bristles, a Bible, notebooks, dried flowers pressed within which she had picked from the fields so many years ago. She finds a gilt-framed oval mirror with a pair of doves adorning the sides on the carpet under a table, and her old violin, sitting in its case on a shelf.

Cinderella doesn’t remember how to play anymore, but the deep, red wood of the instrument’s body is beautiful so she cleans it up and sets it up on a stand.

On the same shelf, a photograph of a man and a woman looks out from a silver frame, and Cinderella almost doesn’t recognise them for who they are. When she does, she cries and laughs at the same time, pressing the print to her chest.

She packs her old dresses into a trunk to be stored away and moves her present clothes into the newly-emptied closet space. They look out of place – drab, belonging to a scullery maid, unbefitting a little girl who once dressed in fine muslin and satin sashes. But Cinderella doesn’t care because she has a soft bed and most importantly, a stone fireplace which promises warmth.

There is a corner in the bedroom that has daylight lasting from dawn until dusk, where a small
child-sized easel stands. Cinderella dismantles it and arranges it neatly in a box she will bring to town to sell, or perhaps donate to the church.

In its place, she sets up a small worktable, for her thread and needles, fabric she has salvaged from Drizella’s and Anastasia’s old dresses. Her accommodations may have changed, but she still receives a meagre allowance and must make do with the remnants of her step-siblings’ fineries.

She scrubs, wipes, polishes, and arranges things (her things, she has to constantly remind herself) all week, the dim glow of the winter sun keeping her company as she works each day.

Lunches are quiet, and Cinderella eats at the dining table, on scalloped china that threatens to crack each time Cinderella lays down her cutlery. There is little conversation between both women, and naturally, Lady Tremaine doesn’t go out of her way to be friendly.

A million questions sit at the edge of Cinderella’s tongue. She doesn’t know why she has been given access to her old bedroom again, and wants desperately to ask. Why did they not sell or be rid of her things? Why hasn’t Lady Tremaine reproached her for anything of late? Why does she abhor Cinderella so much – and does she still?

She doesn’t ask, because she remembers asking for the first time so many years ago, and still shudders at the words she had received in return.

Cinderella thinks of all the times that Lady Tremaine has treated her with spite, the cruel words she has been subjected to, and tries to reconcile her memories with the present moment, when silence fills up most of their time. She doesn’t particularly know how to feel, but then again, she has never known it, and has substituted rightful feelings of anger with improvised contentment in her own world and solace from unconventional companionship. Otherwise, she would have gone mad.

She thinks of Mademoiselle Gautier’s tragedy in *La Dame aux camellias*, of heartache she doesn’t understand, unfulfilled love, and thinks of wanting more.

But she doesn’t want more, or at least, she doesn’t know what she wants, not really. She has always believed that she wants freedom, wants to run away, but her actions when Lady Tremaine was ill has proven otherwise, hasn’t it?

Has Stepmother ever wanted anything more?

Surely she has.

But Cinderella knows more of what she doesn’t want (to be left alone, to be sent to the workhouse), than what she wants.

The last page of the novel turns up soon, on the first night she spends in her old bedroom, and she returns it to the library the next morning. She still cannot explain why Lady Tremaine saw fit to enter the kitchen that night or why the older woman has not admonished her for taking the book from the library without asking.

Cinderella fights the urge to borrow another book and leaves the library empty-handed.

A greedy mouse is bound to step into a trap one day.

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A gentleman calls one afternoon – a bank man, Cinderella thinks, if she interprets correctly, the letterhead on the documents he pulls out of his leather case. He uses words Cinderella barely
understands and sounds mechanical, as if reciting from a script he has repeated a thousand times over.

She pours him coffee, and watches him drink it without milk or sugar. What an odd little man! Cinderella distrusts him immediately.

With a small notebook on his lap, he scribbles as her stepmother speaks, head bobbing like a puppet. There are a few things Cinderella catches while serving Lady Tremaine her tea; like the barely perceptible flash of annoyance across her face, mentions of a certain Monsieur in Lyon, and the mechanical man’s monotonous acknowledgements and repeated sips of his coffee. She does not understand what anything means, but she knows that the little crease between Stepmother’s eyebrows signal immense displeasure at the situation, whatever it may be.

After he leaves, Stepmother spends the afternoon in the library alone and only reappears for dinner, looking less annoyed than before.

“I shall make a trip to Paris next week,” the older woman announces, sinking a silver spoon into a bowl of consommé.

“Yes, Stepmother,” Cinderella acknowledges.

“It will not be a lengthy one, I hope. Paris can be tiresome – ah, the people, more so than the place.”

“I don’t remember Paris,” Cinderella says, and then snaps her mouth shut when she realises she has made a comment without invitation.

Her heart pounds as green eyes watch her dispassionately, but a rebuke never comes.

Lady Tremaine shrugs. “People and noise.”

Cinderella’s fingers curl around her spoon tightly. Is this – a conversation?

“I am sure there is more than that,” Cinderella attempts bravely, and pauses as the other woman’s clear eyes land on her. She thinks of the slim volume, an old theatre programme Madame Bouchard from the village bookshop gifted her many months ago; the old newspapers she salvages after Lady Tremaine is done with them still stacked up under the frame of her small bed in the tower room.

“They are not your kind of people,” Lady Tremaine murmurs.

Ah, so the rebuke comes after all. Cinderella’s cheeks burn with embarrassment at her stepmother’s insinuation and a flash of anger at herself courses through her being. She bites her lip, wills herself into silence because she does not enjoy the idea of even more chores after dinner.

“You don’t agree, I see.”

Cinderella avoids the eyes skimming her face, choosing to stare hard at a large emerald ring glistening on long, slim fingers.

Lady Tremaine keeps silent until it becomes unbearable.

“Yes,” Cinderella finally says, mustering all the courage she can into a single syllable. She looks up and forces herself to be resolute under the older woman’s steady gaze. Anger burns hotter in her belly when she sees the barely concealed amusement – at her, at her commonness, doubtless. I am not an idiot, she thinks, but the courage is not nearly enough. Instead, she says, “I can read.”
She wants to say more than that. She wants to say; \textit{I read more than Drizella. More than Anastasia. I read as much as you do.}

Lady Tremaine smirks. “Ah, we know that, don’t we?”

\textit{I wrote your ungrateful daughters’ essays on their behalf last spring!}

“I – I know music.” It isn’t a lie, Cinderella tells herself. She knows how it should sound and she thinks she can sing fairly well.

Her stepmother’s eyes are challenging. “\textit{Do} you?”

Cinderella wavers, suddenly thinking of all she does \textit{not} know – the musical notes she has long forgotten how to read, the different compositions from people whose names she does \textit{not} know.

Her anger dies and the burning courage turns to ashen embarrassment. Of course, she does \textit{not} know. She has no tutor, has never had lessons in anything. She is still, at the heart of it all, just a maid.

Silence hangs in the still evening air between them until Lady Tremaine breaks it sometime later with a crisp instruction.

“Prepare the same for tomorrow’s dinner.”

Warmth pooled again in Cinderella’s belly, but this time, it has nothing to do with anger.

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Cinderella realises she has forgotten about 
\textit{Noël} until the next morning, when Step-mother sends her into the village to deliver a few letters and she sees candle-lit trees through windows framed with frost, and the unmistakable joy in the faces of children playing on the streets. She wonders why Step-mother has not instructed her to put up the tree yet, why there are no instructions for the dinner she has been preparing for years now. Perhaps the festivities are unnecessary for just the both of them – after all, she supposes the decorations and the presents have always been for the benefit of her stepsisters.

She pays for the delivery of the letters, and stops by Madame Bouchard’s for a brief moment. She doesn’t have enough money of her own to afford anything, but she likes flipping through the pages of a new book all the same. Before leaving, she picks up some éclairs from a patisserie, for Step-mother later in the afternoon. She still thinks of mealtime as Step-mother’s (Step-mother’s coffee, Step-mother’s dinner) but in truth, it has become \textit{theirs} – she has spent every single meal with her Step-mother in the past few weeks.

It is only slightly before lunch when Cinderella returns, and rushes immediately to the kitchen to prepare. She is hovering over a pot of onion soup when a soft hum behind her makes her jump.

“You are so easily frightened, child,” Step-mother says, slightly amused.

Cinderella shakes her head. Lunch will be late – she’d stayed too long at the bookstore. “I’m sorry.”

The older woman waves a hand. “There is nothing to be sorry about.” She glances across the room, at the unprepared cuts of meat on the wooden work surface and the unbaked pie-crust in its pan. “One can be patient,” she adds, and – Cinderella’s eyes widen – sits down on a chair.

Cinderella wants to ask why – the same way she has wanted to ask \textit{why} since Step-mother caught
her sleeping in the kitchen – the other woman has seen fit to start making this side of the house a common fixture in her routine, but she presses her lips tight together.

“Ah – I could – I am just about done with this. If you are hungry, Stepmother, we could have this first.” She ladles the rich, caramel liquid into a bowl, and then prepares another bowl.

“Fine,” Stepmother says, and Cinderella masterfully pretends she isn’t shocked.

She brings the soup to the other woman, places it on the table and brings a small plate with a spoon, and pieces of bread she baked early this morning.

“Where is yours?”

“Here,” Cinderella says, having already gone to bring her own bowl and spoon.

It’s strangely unceremonious, and Cinderella isn’t even using a soup spoon, but she doesn’t think it matters, especially not now, when Stepmother is sitting in the kitchen, drinking soup beside unbaked pie.

There is a brief silence, before Cinderella speaks. “Would you like me to put up the tree today?”

Stepmother looks at her and Cinderella realises too late that she is seated so closely to the other woman that she could see the speckled gold in her green eyes. She has never noticed it before.

“Would you like to?”

Cinderella frowns. Is – is Stepmother asking her what she would like to do?

“I – ” she has never been particularly fond of Noël – it is hard to be fond of a time in the year which often reminds her of how alone she is, especially watching her stepsisters opening gifts, enjoying the cake she’s had to toil in the kitchen to make, as she stands at the side with a tray in hand. She shakes off the unpleasant feeling that is beginning to creep up her throat.

“There is no need,” Stepmother finally says, as if she can read Cinderella’s thoughts. “What point is there to have an unlit tree, without anyone here?”

“Without anyone here?”

“We will be in Paris, will we not?”

Cinderella tries to hide her confusion. “Of course,” she agrees, hoping her beating heart did not betray her. Paris! She fights the urge to grin.

“We can leave the pie for dinner, I am quite full now,” Stepmother says, barely halfway into her soup. Cinderella doesn’t think the soup was nearly enough, but it is still better than weeks before. She can still see a slight hollow in Stepmother’s cheeks, but the gauntness is gone and Cinderella is glad for it.

“Coffee, Stepmother?”

“Yes.”

Even without seeing, she can feel eyes on her back as she works in the kitchen. The kettle rattling as the water boils is the only sound in the room, until she hears paper being unwrapped.

“I thought you’d like éclairs at four,” Cinderella feels compelled to explain.
“Ah,” the other woman murmurs, and Cinderella feels her cheeks heat at the pleasure in the timbre of her voice. “Why wait until four?”

“With your afternoon coffee.”

She watches as Lady Tremaine picks an éclair up and takes a bite anyway. Cinderella’s cheeks burn hotter and she looks away. She brews the coffee, but is unable to keep her eyes away from her stepmother for long. The delight in her chiseled face is rare and affecting. That, along with the fact that Stepmother has just told her she will be going to Paris too, made her feel – she stopped. *I don’t know how I feel.*

“Now is as good time as any,” her stepmother says, with relish.

“Yes,” Cinderella says, and brings coffee and milk to the table.

She knows how Stepmother feels about her. *They are not your kind of people.* But if so, why does the lady of the house speak to her as if – as if it is something she has always done? Will it remain so when her stepsisters return? She hopes, at least, that she will be able to keep her room. There is no sense in otherwise, she thinks, and Stepmother has never struck her as someone with no sense.

No heart, perhaps, but always sense.

“Did you enjoy Dumas?” the older woman asks, sipping her coffee.

Cinderella hesitates.

“Yes, I think so.”

“Despite it’s fatalist heroine and the foolish Armand?”

Cinderella bristles. She feels sorry for Armand in losing his love but doesn’t think he was foolish, per se. And Marguerite, she’d given up everything for love, a noble, selfless gesture – an arguably *senseless* gesture, if Cinderella scrutinises it with the cold detachment she imagines her stepmother does.

“It is all right to disagree, child.” Again, the other woman has demonstrated that she can, in fact, read Cinderella’s mind. “You disagree, don’t you?”

“There is no wrong in making sacrifices for love.”

“I wouldn’t disagree with that.”

“Why do you think Armand is foolish?”

The other woman shrugs. “If he truly loves her, as he says he does, truly knows her heart, he will know that all she has done, has been done out of her love for him. But it is just a work of fiction, after all.”

“It is,” Cinderella agrees, although she doesn’t say that until now, her only source of knowledge of the world has been through works of fiction amongst others. An old seed of resentment returns to her chest. “I don’t understand.” She hears her voice, before she can stop herself.

“I beg your pardon?”

Cinderella knows she should stop talking. She’s always been very good at *not* talking. She doesn’t know why she is talking now. “Why do you talk to me?” she continues, her intense confusion
over the chain of events in the past weeks finally bubbling over. *Why do you care where I sleep? Why do you want to know what I think about a novel, of all things? Why are you here in the kitchen?*

Lady Tremaine’s eyes flash.

Cinderella holds her breath.

The silence is heavy until it is broken. “Very well. If you prefer to keep conversations with your – animal friends – then, by all means, don’t let me stop you.” She moves to stand, coffee and half-eaten éclair forgotten, height suddenly more imposing than before.

“That’s not what I meant,” Cinderella protests, jumping to her feet. Her stomach churns with regret at how her stepmother has chosen to take her words. “Stepmother, I –”

“I hope you haven’t forgotten the consommé for dinner,” the older woman interrupts, barely sparing Cinderella a glance before sweeping out of the kitchen.

Cinderella stares at her back until she is out of sight.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

I am amazed at myself that I managed to get this up. Writing Lady Tremaine from Cinderella’s perspective is truly a challenge. The next part may take a while - I already foresee an incredibly busy Feb and Mar, but I hope you’ll stick with this. I’ll try my best to work on this as and when I find the time.

No beta, please excuse the mistakes. As always, enjoy!

To Cinderella’s disappointment, Lady Tremaine calls for her afternoon coffee from the library after their brief interlude in the kitchen and then proceeds to dismiss her immediately after. She barely looks up from the letters on her desk when Cinderella places the cup beside her, definitely doesn’t seem to notice Cinderella’s leaving.

In what feels like a lifetime ago, Cinderella would have welcomed the silence, preferring to be left to her own devices. A good day used to be when her stepmother was too busy to notice her or her mistakes. Now, the silence is intolerable, and Cinderella wishes - she must be losing her mind - for Stepmother to tell her that the coffee is too hot, or too cold - or send her to fetch something because that will mean that Cinderella has a reason to return to the library.

All afternoon, she waits for the ring of a bell, a sharp “Cinderella”, but nothing comes. Stepmother doesn’t call for her again, and Cinderella tells herself the gloom she feels has nothing to do with wanting to see the other woman.

She spends the afternoon washing, carefully hanging clean chemises and blouses up to dry afterward. Alone with her thoughts, she is reminded of Stepmother’s flushed skin and white cloth made sheer from the dampness of sweat each time she pegs a similarly wet chemise up on the clothesline. It keeps her warm, although perhaps, she is simply flushed with the exertion from scrubbing.

Her little mouse-friend watches curiously from a corner, nibbling from his treat of the day - Lady Tremaine’s unfinished éclair.

“It’s not that I like her talking to me. She still terrifies me, you know.”

The mouse squeaks - agreeably, Cinderella fancies.

“But it does make it a little less lonely. I’m glad she’s eating more now. And I’m sure she likes the consommé. Why, she never used to like anything! It’s a bit strange, to think that she can like something. It’s as if…”

Cinderella looks around - just to be sure, since Stepmother has now developed a habit of appearing behind her and scaring her half to death.

Quite certain that she is alone, Cinderella takes a deep breath. “It’s as if she has feelings, you know.” It comes out in a whispered rush, a forbidden admission. Her heart skips when she hears herself.
Her little friend freezes, stares at her, and then scurries away, éclair forgotten.

“Come back! I didn’t mean to scare you,” she says, pathetically. A small part of her is still terrified that Stepmother will know, somehow, that Cinderella has been thinking of her and she lowers her voice. “Oh, do come back!”

The mouse disappears behind a barrel.

“Fine, go on, everyone leaves anyhow!” Cinderella huffs, and swipes at the chemise she’s just pinned up in frustration. It slips from the cloth pegs’ hold onto the stone floor. “Oh, darn it!”

Lady Tremaine finally emerges with impeccable timing, just as Cinderella finishes setting the table. By then, the sun is nothing but a red streak, sinking behind the horizon, throwing blue shadows into the dining room.

“Dinner is ready, Stepmother,” Cinderella says, unnecessarily.

“Just as well,” Lady Tremaine replies, the bottom of her skirt ghosting against Cinderella’s bare ankles as she walks by. She takes her customary seat at the head of the table, perusing the prepared dishes laid out in front of her, before pursing her lips at Cinderella in dismay.

Cinderella cannot keep her nervousness out of her voice. “Yes, Stepmother?”

“Do you intend to stand there, all evening?” the other woman asks, lifting an arched eyebrow.

“No, Stepmother.”

“Then, sit.”

“But - ” Cinderella stammers, trying to put her thoughts into tangible words.

“Ah, questioning why, I see,” Stepmother says, with a lick of mockery in her words. “If you also prefer to have your meals downstairs…”

“Oh, Stepmother!” Cinderella exclaims, exasperated. Despite claiming so, Stepmother did not see at all! It frustrates her, to a point where she can no longer keep silent. “I’ve never said that I preferred anything. I didn’t mean it that way.”

“No?” If Lady Tremaine is surprised at her outburst, it doesn’t show. She lifts a wine-filled chalice to her lips.

“I was just confused - I wanted to know why you’ve taken to talking to me… you’ve never spoken to me as if - ” Cinderella swallows, wringing her hands together. As if I matter. “I’ve never said whatever it is you think I’ve said.”

“And pray, tell, what it is you believe I think?”

She doesn’t know if she is walking into a trap because it seems overwhelmingly like one. With that knowledge, Cinderella still cannot help herself.

“That I don’t want you to talk to me.” She knows it isn’t true the moment she hears the words that come out of her mouth. Stepmother’s unrelenting gaze makes her corset feel too tight, makes her breathless. Suddenly, it is very important indeed, that Cinderella corrects this false notion. “I - I want you to talk to me,” she admits, and knows it is true.

Her heart makes that familiar, terrifying skip again as she watches the other woman barely react to
her admission.

She wants to make coffee while Stepmother watches on, wants the older woman to ask her about Dumas, wants her to steal éclairs and everything else. She wants so much more than she has ever wanted before.

She doesn’t want to be alone.

“All right,” Stepmother says, as if Cinderella’s outburst has been nothing but a polite request.

All right?

Cinderella searches her face, but sees no sign of the earlier derision which exasperated her and prompted her to speak up in the first place.

“Now,” Stepmother says, firmly. “I’d like to dine while the food is still warm, child. Sit.”

Cinderella hesitates, for the briefest moment, but decides that she must be thankful. Obediently, she does as she is told, oddly pleased with the way Stepmother looks at her.

“I have sent for a dressmaker. She will be here to take your measurements tomorrow morning,” Lady Tremaine proffered, dispassionately, as if articulating a charitable assessment of one of Anastasia’s pitiful attempts at watercolours. Truly, Cinderella thinks with some spite, her step-sisters have inherited nothing from their mother.

“A dressmaker?” Cinderella repeats, stupidly.

“Yes,” Stepmother says, and doesn’t elaborate.

Cinderella wants to ask, but dares not, afraid that Stepmother will accuse her of questioning again, and refuse to speak to her - but she doesn’t like the silence, feeling something amiss.

“Is dinner to your liking, Stepmother?” she tries.

Lady Tremaine turns to her, her eyes caressing Cinderella’s face in a once-over, curious and probing. Cinderella holds her gaze bravely. Finally, her lips quirk. “If you must know, yes, it is satisfactory.”

Warm with pleasure, Cinderella smiles. “I’m glad you think so.”

Stepmother doesn’t return her smile, but somehow, when Cinderella peers into her eyes, they don’t feel nearly as cold as they once felt.

“Her limbs are too thin,” the dressmaker tells Stepmother crossly, as if Cinderella can help being thin. Cinderella frowns, disliking the way the fat, stern woman speaks of her. “But she does have a bosom,” she continues, lifting Cinderella’s breast through her thin underdress with a long wooden ruler.

Cinderella’s cheeks flame with embarrassment as the probing makes goosebumps rise across her flesh. Balancing on a low stool, she is forced to keep her posture straight. They’ve spent the morning - or what feels like it - in Stepmother’s bedroom, with Cinderella undressed for the most
part. She has half a heart to tell her stepmother that she can make her own clothes but bites her
tongue.

Stepmother circles them, observing keenly as Madame Lesage takes each measurement, her tape
hanging around her neck like a strange, flat necklace. “How soon can they be ready?”

The catalogues Madame Lesage brought with her sit open on a nearby table, Stepmother having
already made up her mind, it seems.

“Three weeks,” the dressmaker says.

“Very well.”

Cinderella tries to ignore the discomfort of having a stranger’s hands on her as Madame Lesage
finishes her work, scribbling a few final notes in her book.

The moment the dressmaker pulls the measuring tape off her neck, Stepmother dismisses her. “We
are finished, child. Hurry along.”

Stepping off the stool gratefully, Cinderella hurries behind the Chinese Coromandel to dress.

“She has a pretty face,” Madame Lesage says, in a way one comments on something on display in
a museum, or at a fair.

Stepmother hums. “She takes after the first Lady Tremaine.”

Cinderella’s fingers stop on the fastenings of her frock. She has never heard her Step-mother - or
anyone, for that matter - speak of her mother before. She strains to listen, but the women don’t
say any more on the subject and Cinderella finishes dressing in disappointment.

“See Madame Lesage out, will you?” Step-mother says, when Cinderella emerges behind the
folding screen.

“Yes, Stepmother.”

They walk in silence along the corridors, until the matronly woman speaks, unprompted. “Lady
Tremaine looks to be doing well.”

“Yes,” Cinderella responds.

“I’m surprised at her generosity,” Madame Lesage continues, airily.

“How do you mean, Madame Lesage?” She is familiar with the tone - it reminds her,
unpleasantly, of the way her step-sisters speak to her, mock her.

“Oh, just these dresses she’s ordered for you. They are fine dresses.”

“They are and I am thankful,” Cinderella says, unwilling to be baited. They descend the grand
staircase, into the foyer, and she quickens her pace to the door, pulling it open. The wind stings
her skin, but she ignores it.

“You should be,” the woman intones, from behind her. “Your father’s death left a great burden on
her shoulders.”

Cinderella freezes, chest turning icy cold, and turns around. “Burden on her shoulders?” Suddenly
she wants to scream. *What of my burden? What of my shoulders?*
“Why, twice a widow with two children to fend for herself, and suddenly a step-child...”

“It wasn’t my father’s fault,” Cinderella responds, in quiet anger. It cannot possibly be someone’s fault for dying.

“Of course not, child,” the Madame Lesage says, in false sympathy. “Well, I shall see you in three weeks. Good-day.”

Cinderella nods, but doesn’t return the greeting. She stands in the cold, watching the carriage drive away until it is merely a faraway black dot.

Three days before their scheduled departure, Cinderella begins to prepare - laying out Lady Tremaine’s travelling dress, making arrangements for Little Victor to come by and feed the horses and Lucifer everyday, and finishing the small adjustments she has to make to Anastasia’s dresses so that they will fit her. Pick out whatever you may need for Paris, Stepmother had said, clearly aware that Cinderella has only her servant’s garb to wear. Drisella’s dresses will fit her better, Cinderella knows just by looking at the width of the bodices, but she likes Anastasia’s favoured colours a lot more. She is careful not to take any of the dresses she knows Anastasia particularly likes.

She works in her bedroom, using material from her old dresses she can no longer wear - oddly enough, she doesn’t feel any regret when her scissors snip through the delicate lace and muslin, doesn’t remember how those dresses felt like on her as a child. The old photograph of her parents stare at her from its newly polished frame and Cinderella wonders why she’s never seen any photographs of her father with her Stepmother.

In the final flurry of activity on the last day before they leave, Cinderella doesn’t lay out the table for lunch - she brings Lady Tremaine her meal in the library, and then retreats to the older woman’s bedroom to finish the packing.

Her stepmother lends her a trunk to use, and she half-wishes that her own clothes would have sufficed - at least it would have been much easier to pack and would make less of a comfortable bed for Lucifer.

“Shoo! You’re getting fur all over everything!” Cinderella chastises repeatedly, to no effect. As much as she is tempted to put her Stepmother’s Persian outside, she is just as keen to avoid trouble - many a time she has been (unjustly) admonished for Lucifer’s mistreatment.

She packs a fur-lined travelling coat for Lady Tremaine, in addition to the sable - she doesn’t know how cold the weather will get in Paris, but the trip to the train station in town will take an hour, and the carriage is always chilly.

The door clicks open at half-past six.

“Are you done, Cinderella?” Lady Tremaine’s voice carries a distance, despite its quiet nature. It is a remarkable quality that will always amaze and terrify Cinderella in equal measure.

“Almost, Stepmother,” Cinderella answers, looking up from folding a piece of Lady Tremaine’s blouses.

“I’d not noticed the time,” the older woman mutters, crossing the room with envelopes and a few
volumes in hand. She presses her fingers against a temple and sighs, barely glancing at Cinderella’s progress, and throws the envelopes - perhaps containing the letters she’s been reading (or writing) - into an open leather hand luggage at her feet.

Lady Tremaine has spent the most of last week, in the library, seemingly doing nothing but reading old and recent correspondence. Sometimes, Cinderella sees her making notes in the margins. Although Cinderella knows next to nothing about the reasons for Stepmother’s visit to Paris, she suspects this is a part of it in some way.

“Would you like to have dinner served ear -”

Her stepmother waves a hand and sits down on a chaise. “No, no. Let us have some bread and soup up here.” Lucifer climbs onto her lap, purring for attention but in an uncharacteristic move, she lifts him up and drops him onto the floor.

“Yes, Stepmother.”

Cinderella tries not to worry that each time Stepmother emerges from her solitude, her face is pinched and tired, appetite all but disappeared. Bread and soup are scarcely enough, she wants to object, but dares not. She hopes that this is a temporary affliction, and once whatever it is in Paris is sorted, her appetite will returns.

“And a cup of tea.”

“Yes, Stepmother,” Cinderella repeats, and hurries to the kitchen.

Every time she imagines Stepmother ill, remembers those dreadful nights weeks ago, her stomach churns with nervousness, along with a vice-like grip of fear on her heart. In truth, Cinderella has never had the occasion to ponder life on her own - in all her rare childish fantasies of one day leaving to seek her own destiny, her thoughts have never ventured further than the cities she will see, the freedom to stay however long she wants at the bookstore without fear of reprimand.

Twenty minutes later, she returns to Stepmother’s bedroom with a tray of what has been requested, only to find Lady Tremaine resting on the chaise. Unable to stop the seed of worry, she sets the tray down on a side table and tentatively approaches the sleeping woman. Kneeling down by the sofa, Cinderella watches the slow rise and fall of her chest, the tightness in Cinderella’s own chest releasing in comfort with each breath the other woman takes.

Heady with relief, Cinderella’s eyes wander, drawn to the other woman’s face - the lines on her forehead, so pronounced in her stress before Cinderella left the room, are smoothed out, lips moist and full, lashes thick and dark, eyes green and -

Staring right back at her.

Frozen, Cinderella flushes hot and cold all at once, cursing herself for her foolishness.

“Yes, child?”

“I’m - I came up with dinner. You were - I - I was worried and wanted to see that you were all right.”

“Did you now?” Lady Tremaine asks, sitting up slowly, although she keeps her legs tucked under.

“Y-yes.”

The older woman shakes her head. “You needn’t worry yourself. I have a most unpleasant
headache, and only meant to rest my eyes. But -” she pauses, as if deliberating on her next words. Cinderella waits, worrying her lip. When Stepmother finally speaks, all she says is: “Bring my tea,” and Cinderella has a feeling it has nothing to do with what she was contemplating on saying.

Slightly flustered, Cinderella fetches the tea and wishes she has the courage to ask.

The room is dark, curtains drawn, but warm, the fireplace flickering with amber flames. Even so, Cinderella shivers under her petticoat. Vaguely, she understands that she is not allowed in here, nor are her step-sisters, but her feet carry her to the bedside regardless.

Where is Father?

She is barely tall enough to see the woman lying under the blankets, her sickly pallor making her look like a stranger.

“Stepmother?” Cinderella whispers.

The woman stirs, but her eyes remain closed. Cinderella reaches out to touch her hand, and gasps - her skin is burning hot.

“Charlie?”

Cinderella shakes her head. “No, Stepmother. I don’t know where Father is. Do you know where he is?”

Stepmother doesn’t seem to hear anything Cinderella says at all.

She tugs at slim fingers persistently. “There’s nobody here, Stepmother. I’m scared.”

“It’s lost, Charlie.”

“I’m not Father!” Cinderella shouts, pulling away.

“She”

She blinks in stupor, eyes focusing slowly on her stepmother, who has a hand on her shoulder, still shaking her awake.

“You were having a nightmare, child.”

“Oh.”

Satisfied that Cinderella is fully awake, Lady Tremaine returns to her seat, although she hovers on the edge, as if ready to stand again if required. The car sways to a softened, rumbling melody that has inevitably lulled her to sleep. Cinderella pushes a lock of hair that has escaped its pins away from her eyes. Her heart is still racing, blood still prickly under her skin. She straightens herself so that she is sitting upright.

Illuminated by late morning glow from the window, Stepmother’s green eyes are almost amber.

“You appeared to be… very distressed.”

“It was just a dream,” Cinderella says, swallowing thickly.
“Yes, I suppose it was,” Stepmother concedes, not unkindly.

Cinderella lowers her gaze, fiddling with a button on her - Anastasia’s - travel coat. She doesn’t always have nightmares, and this isn’t truly one - it is part of a memory, long forgotten. Suddenly, she remembers hiding behind the shadows while Father lost his temper at the doctor, fragments of raised voices, eating dinner alone with her step-sisters, three terrified children left to go through their days with Cook and a tutor whose name she doesn’t know anymore. Something else lingers at the edge of her recollection, unwilling to come to the forefront of her mind, fuelling her confusion.

“Here,” the other woman says, bringing her out of her thoughts. She holds out a book, with another in her lap.

Cinderella takes it hesitantly and reads the title. “Madame Bovary. Mœurs de province.” She looks up again at the older woman, uncomprehending.

“From the library. It should keep you occupied for the rest of the journey.” Lady Tremaine leans back into her seat, casually watching the frozen scenery pass by. Her coat is unbuttoned, revealing the dark green dress Cinderella had helped her into this morning, and in the privacy of their carriage, she has removed her hat and gloves. It is no longer snowing, the windows cloudy with condensation. “It rather is the sort of story you are partial to, I believe. Tragedy.”

Without glancing at Cinderella, Lady Tremaine leafs through her own book, unperturbed by the chugging, churning sound outside.

Cinderella wants to say that she isn’t partial to tragedy, but the warmth in her belly at Stepmother’s unspoken tease keeps her from speaking, afraid that the pleasantness will disappear if she misspeaks. A part of her is moved that the older woman had thought of her, and had thought of her enough to also consider the sort of stories she is ‘partial’ to. Naturally, why is still a large part of her thoughts, as it has been for the past weeks, but she has learnt her lesson and is not keen to have Stepmother misunderstand her again.

Left alone, she begins to read the first page of the book, easily falling into a steady pace after a few pages, each word absorbed with a sponge-like fervour. From time to time, she looks up from the novel, but Stepmother barely glimpses her way.

Cinderella has never eaten a meal prepared by any other than herself, and the lunch spread on the table assaults her senses with its decadence. Men with hair slicked back and stiff linen aprons serve salads, sturgeon in champagne, lamb in a style Cinderella has never seen before, roasted potatoes, and burgundy wine. Other passengers in the restaurant car murmur amongst themselves as waiters hurry up and down the aisle, balancing trays with a skill she finds herself envying. She catches the eye of a gentleman from a nearby table, and he tips his hat at her with a friendly smile. Her lips curl upward in response.

“Are you always in the habit of eating your meals cold, Cinderella?”

“No, Stepmother,” Cinderella says, meekly, and reaches for her cutlery.

Lady Tremaine chastises her. “How easily distracted you are.”
“It’s just - there are so many interesting people.”

Cinderella takes a tentative bite out of her salad. The lettuce is crisp, more delightful than it has any right to be. Mayhaps it is the fact that she isn’t the cook, or that she is dining in a car full of people who do not seem much different from her, dressing as she does. Or that she is not merely eating a meal on the same table as Stepmother, but eating with her, for there is a difference. Even the wine tastes sweeter, and in recent weeks, Cinderella has tasted some of the fine burgundies Lady Tremaine keeps at home.

“You have yet to see interesting, child.”

“There must be plenty in the city.”

“Ah, you cannot even begin to imagine. The interesting, the insane, the immoral, the incongruous.”

“Is it truly so … bad?” It cannot be, not if the books she has read have any truth to them.

Lady Tremaine makes a sound, a hum of consideration. “I never said it was bad.”

“Oh.” Cinderella has never noticed. She likes this tentative exchange, though not quite yet robust enough to be conversation. Growing bold, she adds: “Just full of people and noise?”

Her stepmother smirks in amusement, sending an exhilarating rush of triumph coursing through her being.

“You fill your head with such foolish notions. The city is a great many things, but what you see may not be what you’ve imagined it to be.”

“I know.” Cinderella does. She knows, akin to many moments in her life, that disappointment is never too far a distance away. Yet, she burns with bright hope, that the world outside is as wondrous as she’s grown up to believe. Why, the wine is sweeter already!

A waiter appears to clear their empty salad dishes, so accurate is his timing that Cinderella suspects he must have been watching them eat. She shifts self-consciously, smoothing a hand over her wool skirt.

“Anastasia’s dresses are suitable, I trust?” Stepmother asks.

Cinderella nods. “Yes, thank you.” Her step-sister’s narrow, straight silhouette is especially snug around her chest, so she chose to wear a blouse under the basque this morning. It isn’t a detail she is want to share with the older woman, nonetheless.

“Good.”

Lady Tremaine cuts into the lamb, making delicate slices of the red meat and roasted potatoes before putting the knife down and taking the fork into her right hand. Cinderella has always thought such a manner of eating inconvenient - why can’t one just use both utensils in tandem? A quick glance around the car tells her that nobody minds the inconvenience at all - as it may be, the only distinction between a servant and a lady is the way one uses one’s cutlery.

Their eyes meet.

The resolution within her rises with starting clarity - especially for something quite trivial. Cinderella picks up the fork in her left hand and knife in her right, intending to defy the knowing gaze of the older woman. She cuts the meat on her plate into smaller pieces and puts the knife
down, mirroring carefully what her stepmother has done. The first bite of lamb is tender, rich and buttery. She measures her movements with purpose, feeling like an exhibit, half play-acting and desperately craving something she cannot fathom.

The other woman does not say a word, appearing to ignore her, but still, Cinderella can feel the unmistakable brush of her scrutiny. In defiance of the ice outside, her insides thrum fervently, sending heat through her body, all the way until her fingertips.

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