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"The Thereafter"

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## *The Thereafter*

*She awoke to the sound of birdsong, even if she didn't remember that's what it was.*

*Blinking groggily, the girl lifted herself up from the ground, unsure how she had gotten there, or where she was... or even who she was...*

*All around her were trees. Tall, green trees, the sort that never faded in the autumn and still held strong in the winter. She knew about trees, if nothing else. Scanning her surroundings, she tried to find something else familiar: between the trees were a mix of blues and whites, and she realized that she was seeing sky and clouds interspersed between the trees.*

*Sky. It was beautiful. And there was something else in the sky, too.*

*The sun. Bright and round, it floated in the sky like... she didn't know what, couldn't recall a word for it. It was just there, part of the sky, part of everything.*

*Trees. Sky. Sun.*

*Next, she became aware that she was touching something underneath her, something she recognized as earth. But it was not brown earth, not barren. Like the trees, it was green, but much shorter and so soft she felt herself lean back onto it once more...*

*"Grass," she murmured in a hoarse whisper, and she jolted; she had just said a word.*

*Slowly, she began to remember the world around her, the way it worked: she was on the earth, only able to stare up at the sky that hung freely above, squinting from the sun's light because it was too powerful to try to look at. She knew she must be in a forest of some sorts and that she was hearing the bright chirrups of a... squirrel?*

*No, that couldn't be right.*

*Still in a state of delirium and confusion, she barely registered the sound of rustling that began to emerge, along with the person who accompanied the noise. It wasn't until she was right in front of her that she knew he was there.*

*Flashing silver eyes bore into her own. The eyes scared her, their gaze as piercing as if they were suns themselves. Quickly averting her own eyes, yet trying to get a better look at the person before her, she noticed that his face blocked the sun, giving the appearance that his head was crowned with its rays like an angel.*

*And like an angel, some sort of savior, he lifted her up and began to talk to her, though she couldn't quite make out what he was saying...*

\* \* \* \* \*

She awoke to the sound of birdsong, fully aware that's what it was. However, that was where the similarities to her dream and her reality ended: every morning since that fateful day the King Jean had found her, instead of being in the forest, she was in the palace of Fraymere, where she had been delegated to the position of servant nearly as soon as she had arrived.

She hated being awake, being reminded that she was no longer in the forest, unaware of anything but trees, sky, sun, and grass. Every night she dreamed the same dream, and every morning, she would be hopeful that she would be able to recall more from that day, the first day of her life she could remember. But every morning, she was sorely disappointed: she never had a moment of realization, a chance to remember who she was or anything about her past, or even what the King had been trying to tell her. With a huff, she rose from the kitchen hearth she had slept upon, knowing full well she would be covered in cinders like she was every morning; a long time ago she was lucky enough to be able to sleep in the servants' quarters, but that was

before Cecile arrived at the palace seven years ago. As the young woman Cecile despised more than all the rest, she knew there was no chance of her ever having a comfortable place to sleep.

She tried to block out the thought of Cecile as she prepared for the upcoming day of duties, donning her burgundy overdress that signified her status as palace staff, her apron, and her cap to cover her mop of unruly hair that she had once heard one of her fellow servants describe as the color of dirty dishwater. Last of all were her shoes, light brown and wearing away to the point that her left big toe was visible. When she felt somewhat presentable, she began to attend to her tasks, expecting another day of cooking, cleaning, and inevitably screwing something up.

This time she'd mopped the kitchen floors earlier than she should have, causing a calamity of other fellow servants to lose their footing and fall, the grimy dishes they were holding in their hands crashing with them. Before she was even able to react and help clean up, Cecile had grabbed her arm and had led her into the hallway for a scolding.

“What am I going to do with you, Dette? If it were up to me, you would've been out of this palace a long time ago.” Cecile glared down at her and she couldn't help but look away. “You know why you're called 'Dette,' right?”

Dette nodded, still avoiding her eyes and instead focusing on a portrait behind her, a state portrait of King Jean of Fraymere. He was decorated in such an outfit that he looked like a King out of a storybook, golden sceptre in hand and jeweled crown included. Though it was only a painting, his dignified yet disgruntled expression made her feel even more ashamed and frustrated. *What did you say to me that day? Why did you bring me here if I was just going to be*

*treated like an ugly Cinderella?* She wanted to scream, but instead replied, “That’s what he told you to call me after he found me in the woods.”

In a moment of confusion, Cecile turned to see what Dette was looking at and then nodded. “Exactly. Do you know what it means?”

“Something owed to someone else.”

“And who do you owe?”

Dette risked a glance at the woman in charge of her, her face lined with wrinkles from age and the general wear that working as a servant causes. Her mouth was contorted into the cruel grin reserved only for Dette herself, and her pale blue eyes flashed, beckoning her to continue. And so Dette gave her the answer she knew she wanted, the one she gave her every day: “Everyone, because I’m a liability. No one wants me here. No one wants *me*,” she finished.

“After all these years, I’m glad that’s finally settled into your thick skull,” Cecile said as her grin cracked even wider. “Now, let’s go to the room so you can think about it some more,” she commanded, grabbing Dette’s arm again and dragging her down the remainder of the hallway. Dette could feel the eyes of other palace staff on her back, could hear their sniggers as she tripped over her own feet from failing to keep in stride with the Head of the Kitchens. Their judgment only stopped when Cecile began to take her up the spiral staircase that led to the room. While climbing each creaking stair, Dette feigned resistance and tears, pulling away from Cecile’s tight grip but ultimately resigning as they finally made it to the door at the top.

“I’m going to give you ample time to reflect on your most recent case of mayhem,” she said sternly before pushing Dette through the door and locking it behind her. False tears still streaming down her face, Dette cocked her head to the door’s wooden surface and listened as she

heard Cecile's footsteps fall away. There was no way she could risk Cecile finding out that she didn't mind being left alone to think, even if it meant she'd have to forgo food for a couple hours. Once she couldn't hear Cecile anymore, she wiped her eyes so she could take in her familiar surroundings.

It was a room in the oldest part of the palace, one that had been converted into a storage space of sorts and filled with a wide variety of objects most likely as old as the palace itself. Cobwebs adorned the corners of the ceiling, and though the dust that covered most of the ancient items made her nose itchy, Dette didn't mind. She knew that the room was supposed to be retribution for her mistake, but she felt safer here than anywhere else in the palace. The crates and broken furniture were friendlier than her fellow servants, and the light that emanated from the single window was warm, as if it knew of her troubles and wanted to comfort her. On the side of a warped wooden crate, her fingers traced the indents of marks she had created on its surface, one for each time she had been sent here. There were so many now that the crate was more marked than not, the vertical lines etched so close together they nearly collided with each other. Dette sat down to look at them all, and the frustration she was always holding within her threatened to boil over. To alleviate it, she grabbed the small knife she kept between the crate and the wall and scratched in another.

"There," she said, satisfied. "I think I have a record now. What do you think, Lisa?" she asked a doll that sat atop the crate. When she received no answer, she nodded. "I take your silence to mean that you're impressed. And that you're still only a doll." Gingerly, she lifted Lisa and cradled her, stroking her stained cloth face. Her hair had since all come off, if she had had any to begin with, and her green linen dress was nearly torn to shreds; she had been in this room ever since Dette could remember, and she was her most trusted confidante. "I know you

can't hear me, but I don't really have anyone else to talk to. Unless you count... well, you know..." Her eyes drifted to a portrait that was hanging on the wall opposite her, one of a stoic King King Jean with a smiling Queen Isabelle, so beautiful there could be no doubt she was a Princess. It was such a lovely portrait she knew it would have been proudly displayed in the halls, if not for the fact that it had small lacerations on its surface. "I still don't understand why you brought me here," she told the King's image, "but I won't have to worry about it for much longer. I don't have much of a plan, but I'm leaving this miserable place and not even you can stop me, Your Majesty."

Tearing her eyes away from the portrait, she lifted the lid of the crate and pulled out a faded sack that she had begun to fill with things that she thought would be of use for running away, including rations she had snuck up over time as well as a map of Fraymere she had found a few months ago during one of her rummages through the room. She smoothed it out and stared at the circles she had made over the different places she thought she could try to escape to. Most of them were nearby towns, but there were a couple of patches of woods that she was willing to explore. She was even considering trying to make a journey to one of the neighboring Kingdoms if it meant that she could possibly have a better life.

"If life was like a fairy tale, my family wouldn't have abandoned me or there might be someone coming to my rescue, but they're not," she told Lisa. "And anyway, what's the harm in trying to rescue myself? Even if I die trying—" she cut herself off, surprised at her own statement, yet realizing she meant it. "Even if I die trying," she repeated, feeling her face get hot as a mixture of emotions filled within her and her fingers began to twitch like they always did when she tried to suppress them. "It's not like anyone would care anyway."

"What makes you say that?"

Dette was so startled at hearing another voice that she couldn't help but let out a shriek. Her first instinct was to stare at Lisa. Had she actually *talked*?

Or was she going crazy?

"Hello?" she managed to croak at the doll, and the voice chuckled softly.

"Don't worry, Lisa isn't talking. Actually, I'm your fairy godmother."

"I have a fairy godmother?" she asked, looking around the room to see if she could spot anyone or anything. To her confusion and dismay, she couldn't.

"You do."

For some reason, Dette couldn't help but laugh. "Of *course* I have a Fairy Godmother who only shows up when it's almost too late." She shook her head. "This is ridiculous. *I'm* ridiculous. I've been so lonely that I'm hearing things that I want to hear. Like, that there's someone looking out for me in all of this mess."

"I've been looking out for you as much as I have been able to, considering the circumstances," the voice continued, and Dette laughed even harder.

"Why come to me now, then? I've been in a pretty *Cinderella*-like situation for quite a few years now."

"Dette—"

"Where were you when I was abandoned in the forest, *Fairy Godmother*?" Dette demanded, crossing her arms. "Where were you when the King gave me the name 'Dette' and forced me to be a servant? Or when Cecile—" Anger, along with all the other emotions leaked out of her and tears, real ones this time, fell from her eyes and onto her ruddy cheeks. She held Lisa close to her chest, just wanting some semblance of comfort. It wasn't fair, it had never been fair.



What had she done to deserve this? What had she done *wrong*?

“I’m sorry I’ve never been able to do more until this point,” her supposed fairy godmother said softly, “but there are so many rules and stipulations about visits that you wouldn’t even believe it. I could only talk to you when the time was right, and even then, I can’t let you see me.”

“Why?”

“It’s a confidentiality thing,” she explained. “Anyway, I’m here now because you’re about to run away, and while I understand why you want to, you can’t. At least, not until I give you a message.”

“What message?”

The fairy godmother took a deep breath. “Follow the stones that appear in the palace after midnight, and they will lead you to the person who needs you.”

Dette was silent for a moment as she let the words sink in.

*Someone in the palace needed her?*

“With all due respect, Fairy Godmother, why would anyone here need me? If you’ve really been watching over me, you know I’m a liability. A *debt*.”

“Words are cruel, aren’t they?”

Dette nodded, and then realized her fairy godmother might not be able to see her. “Yes,” she stammered.

“You must remember that they aren’t all-powerful. And that just because some people say that about you doesn’t mean that they’re right.”

“Then why should I trust your opinion of me over theirs?”

“As I’ve told you, I’ve been watching over you. I’ve seen how others have treated you, and how you have persevered in spite of everything. You have a good heart, even if you have a bit of a rebellious streak you like to keep hidden. All of that is exactly why this person needs you. And you need him.”

*Him?*

Before Dette could ask another question, she heard footsteps approaching— Cecile was coming back to fetch her.

“I must go,” the Fairy Godmother said.

“But—”

“Take care, Dette. I hope I can talk to you again soon.” And Dette knew she was gone. Frantically, she tucked the map back inside the sack and the sack inside the crate, replacing the lid and Lisa to her rightful spot on top just as Cecile unlocked the door.

If Cecile had been in a bad mood before, she was certainly in a worse one now. Her grip on Dette was even harder, and Dette tried not to cry out from the pain. She wanted to ask if something was wrong, but knew better than to speak unless she was directly spoken to.

“I would’ve let you stay in there all night if I could,” Cecile muttered, “but the King and Queen are coming back earlier than expected and the Prince is with them for one of his visits. He’s going to be here for a few days and everything must be perfect.” She whipped around to face Dette, grabbing her chin and forcing her to meet her eyes. Her fingernails dug into Dette’s skin and a yelp escaped from her throat. “You’ve already ruined enough for one day, but I need all hands on deck for the preparations. However, if you so much as forget to scald a pot, I swear I’ll make your life more miserable than it already is. You got that?”

Dette didn’t need to be told twice. “Yes, ma’am.”

Cecile released her, but not without giving her one of her signature evil smiles. “And just to be clear, you stay away from the Royal family, and on the off-chance you end up running into them, you just smile and curtsy like a good little wench.” Dette nodded, following behind Cecile as servants’ excited chatter wafted through the palace halls.

“Did you hear the news?” Dette overheard one, Mara, ask her sister Portia. “Prince Jean is making a visit and maybe we’ll finally get to see him!”

“Do you think the King and Queen will finally stop being so secretive about him? I mean, he just turned eighteen, didn’t he?”

“They’re taking precautions because of his health, girls,” Cecile said sternly, startling them both. “Now enough talk about him! We never question the King and Queen’s decisions, and no one is to try to see the Prince. Understood?”

“Yes, mother,” Portia grumbled, flipping a lock of dark brown hair. Meanwhile, Mara was glaring at Dette with eyes that were just like Cecile’s, both in color and how much they were filled with hatred. “What are you still doing here, Dette? Don’t you have floors to re-mop?” Knowing better than to argue with Cecile’s daughter, Dette made her way to the kitchen to get back to work.

And that’s when it hit her: her fairy godmother had said that someone needed her. And she needed *him*... If her fairy godmother was just coming to her now, could the person who needed her be the Prince?

*I can’t believe I’m doing this*, Dette thought to herself as she tiptoed out of the kitchen with a candle in hand. She prayed that she’d be able to slip past any guards she knew were active tonight, or that she would be able to come up with an excuse for why she was wandering

about if they did catch her. She had never understood why there were so few guards on duty, but she was thankful for it now. Taking a deep breath and knowing she'd have her work cut out for her, she began to search in the parts of the castle that were open to the public, passing through the great hall and a couple of drawing rooms. Each room was filled with furniture and relics worth more than her own life, but no stones. She looked in the music room and the library and the ballroom and down who knows how many hallways... As the minutes ticked on without any stones in sight, Dette wondered if she had truly just conjured up the whole thing in her mind.

She blew a piece of dull, uncooperative hair out of her line of vision, disheartened. *It had just been wishful thinking, hadn't it? A hope that had manifested itself in the form of nothing more than a daydream...* Eyes closed, she admonished herself for being so stupid, so trusting in a voice that hadn't even been there in the first place. But with the devastating realization dawned a new one: there was nothing holding her back now. She was going to get as far away from the palace of Fraymere as possible, no matter the cost.

With a nod to herself, she began the trek up to the room to retrieve her sack when she felt something hit her left big toe and she nearly tumbled onto the floor. She caught herself just in time and shone the candle on the floor, not believing what she saw: a light gray stone, one that looked as if it had been taken from the woods, followed by another. And another and another and another. They were everywhere, creating a path of sorts, a path that seemed to lead directly to the private apartments of the Royal family. Dette felt her stomach drop. If she got caught, who knew what Cecile would do to her... but someone, most likely the Prince, needed her. Wasn't that worth the risk?

Before her mind could register what she was doing, she was heading down the corridor, the stones shining from the candlelight and guiding her toward a handsome door she could only

assume led to the Prince's room. She stared at the door, her mind and heart conflicted yet again. If she did this, there was no turning back. But then again, the worst thing that could happen would be that she would be kicked out, so there wasn't anything to lose. Taking a deep breath, she reached out to grab the door handle when she heard the soft thud of footsteps behind her. She looked around the dark space, trying not to let panic take over, and was thankful that her flickering candlelight revealed a window covered with drapes right beside her. Tucking herself behind them, she peeked out, shielding the candle from the drapes with her hand.

A figure, completely obscured in a dark cloak, came into view as it leaned down and one of the stones vanished. Dette watched as it continued picking up stones, eventually reaching the Prince's door. She gasped and the figure looked around the hall; when it turned its head, she could've sworn it was staring straight at her.

Or it would've been if she could have seen its face.

She blew out the candle, hoping she had just been imagining it, but something was clearly after the Prince. And after her strange fairy godmother encounter, she couldn't be sure it was human. She was the only thing standing between his Royal Highness' fate and this malevolent being, and so she did what she assumed any person would do in this situation:

She ran blindly and knocked the creature to the ground.

"Wha—" it started, attempting to wriggle out from underneath her, but Dette refused to budge; she had placed her entire body weight onto the being, digging her elbow into their back, and it cried out from the pain.

"Who are you?" she demanded, praying that her voice wouldn't betray her fear. "And what are you doing near the Prince's room? No one is allowed to be here!"

"Then what are you doing here?"

Dette gasped; She didn't know someone— or something— could sound like that, so low and distorted... it almost sounded painful for whatever this being was to even speak. "If no one is allowed to be here, what are *you* doing here?" it asked again. In that moment, Dette was thankful that it was dark because she could feel heat rise in her cheeks from the creature's comment. She dug her elbow even deeper into its back, and it grunted again, as guttural as an animal.

"If you must know, I work here, and I will not hesitate to call the guards."

"Please don't," it grumbled as quietly as she assumed it could. Once again, it tried to free itself from her but failed. "I'm begging you, please don't—my parents would kill me!"

*Parents?*

"I don't understand," Dette said, taking some of her body weight off it. As she did, it began to sit up, clutching its covered head.

"I don't understand either," it admitted, voice shaking. "You're not supposed to see me."

"I'm not?"

Before it could answer her question, they heard the creak of a door from across the hall, and the creature stiffened.

"Jean?"

Panic flooded through Dette at the new voice, and she could tell it had startled her strange companion as well. "You have to hide," it said, rising from its place on the ground so that they loomed over Dette.

"I have to hide?" Dette whispered as the being rushed back over to the door while picking up the final few stones.

“I’ll explain everything when it’s safe,” it tried to reassure her, opening the door and gently nudging her inside. It was even darker in the room than it had been in the hallway, but the creature seemed to know where it was going. “Please stay here for now,” it commanded so kindly it caught her off guard, especially considering its raspy tone. “And please, as much as you can, don’t freak out.”

Dette was about to demand for more answers, but before she could, she heard the crash of the stones and a faint rustling as she assumed the creature was trying to hide as well. “Jean?” the same new voice continued. A light broke through the darkness and Dette found herself, once again, hidden by a curtain. She tried to peek out from behind it and was shocked to see the Queen standing in the doorway, even more beautiful than she was in her portrait with the King. Her black hair flowed in waves down to the middle of her back, greatly contrasting against her white nightgown, and her brown eyes glimmered with concern. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.”

*Wait.*

Dette’s gaze drifted over to the source of the voice, the same voice of the creature she had just encountered. She covered her mouth, stifling a gasp as her eyes landed on it.

Or, as she knew now, the Prince.

His cloak was gone, and with a pain in her stomach, she realized that she may have been right to have called him a creature. Though he was modestly dressed in an indigo-sleeved tunic and brown trousers, his body was covered in dark russet fur, and his face resembled a wolf’s more than a human’s. He even had a tail that was swaying, and he grabbed it with what appeared to be paws instead of hands.

“Did you leave your room, by any chance? I thought I heard you in the hall.”

“I’ve been here this whole time, Mother,” he said, his head down and pointed ears pinned back. “I know that I’m not safe out there. And I know to get Hester if I need anything.”

A pained expression passed over the Queen’s face as she wished him a good night, and as soon as the door closed behind her, Dette emerged from behind the curtain, staring at the Prince whom she had unknowingly attacked in the hallway.

“Prince Jean?” she managed to stammer, taking a step toward him and offering a shaky curtsy. When she looked back up, his eyes were filled with fear and he backed away from her ever so slightly.

“Please don’t scream,” he begged, trembling and holding up his paws before her. “I won’t hurt you.” She noticed that his fur was darker under his eyes from tears that were falling down his face. “I know I look like this, but—”

“I know you won’t hurt me,” she said softly, afraid of scaring him despite being somewhat scared herself. “I apologize for earlier,” she told him, curtsying again. “I thought you were an intruder who was going to try to hurt... well, you.”

“But how did you *see* me?” he asked, still clutching his tail in his paws. “And what are you even doing on this side of the palace?”

“You wouldn’t even believe me if I told you, Your Highness.”

The Prince laughed, a harsh rumbling sound that made Dette jump. “Look at me. I’m a monster. I’ll believe just about anything.”

Dette hesitated for a moment, unsure how to explain everything. “Well... earlier today, I heard the voice of my fairy godmother.”

“You have a fairy godmother?” The Prince asked, incredulous, and she nodded.



“She told me to follow the stones that appeared in the palace after midnight because they’d lead me to the person who needs me.” As she spoke, she couldn’t help but notice how the Prince’s black eyes seemed to be filled with wonder.

“You really have a fairy godmother,” he repeated.

“As of today, I guess so.”

“Can you take me to where you heard her?” The Prince asked. “Please? Maybe I could talk to her and ask her how to break my curse.”

“Curse?”

It was the Prince’s turn to nod, and he ran past a beautifully carved wooden desk and over to what seemed to be a personal library of sorts on one of the walls of the room. Every shelf was completely filled with books, and the Prince reached up with both of his paws to grab one.

“Do you believe in fairy tales?” He asked, showing her a book filled with illustrations of beautiful women and creatures that somewhat resembled him. She shrugged. “They’re all true—*Cinderella*, *Rapunzel*... for me, I fall under the animal bridegroom category, like *The Frog King*, *The Fairy Serpent*, and *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*.”

“Doesn’t true love break this sort of thing?” Dette asked. “I mean, when I heard some stories in the servants’ quarters, that always seemed to break curses.”

Jean shook his head, the fur on his face also shaking with the motion. “It depends on which version of the story you’ve read. True love only works in some stories, and it may not even exist.”

“But what about *Snow White*? Or *Sleeping Beauty*?”

“First of all, different kinds of curses. Second of all, that’s what they *want* you to believe. That’s why there *are* so many versions. In actuality, Snow White woke up when the

poisoned apple was dislodged from her throat. And *Sleeping Beauty*... all I'll say about the issue is that she didn't awaken from true love." He slammed the book shut and set it on the desk, promptly ending the conversation. "But anyway, could you take me to the place where you heard your fairy godmother? Please? I promise I'll be careful. I promise not to hurt you. You're the first person not to run away from me, so maybe I *am* the one who needs your help."

Dette pondered over the Prince's words, and she couldn't help but wonder if he truly was the one who needed her after all. With that thought, other questions flooded her mind: *what had happened to this poor Prince? Had he done something to deserve this curse? How had he been hidden from the kingdom and the world so well for so long?*

*Was he just as lonely as she was?*

Looking into his pleading eyes, seeing his paws clasped together as best as he could manage, she knew he truly was just as desperate as she was to find a way out of the life in which he had found himself. And if there was a chance she could help him find that escape, she would do her best to assist him with it. At least then someone might have a chance at a happy ending.

"Okay."

"Oh, thank you!" he cried, and, to Dette's surprise, he wrapped his arms around her. *What was this? Was it some kind of friendly gesture? Whatever it was, she decided, it didn't hurt; in fact, it was actually kind of nice.*

"We're going to have to be very careful, Your Highness," she told him. "I'm not supposed to be sneaking around like this, either."

"You can just call me 'Jean' if you like," he told her as he began to put the cloak back on himself. "This is supposed to be an invisibility cloak, but I guess it doesn't work since you could see me."

“So if magic is real,” Dette marvelled, “why doesn’t everyone know about it?”

“I don’t know for sure, but Hester told me that a long time ago, some kind of conflict broke out between the people with magic and people without that led someone to attempt to erase all traces of magic from our world,” Jean replied. When Dette gave him a questioning look, he added, “Hester’s taken care of me ever since I can remember. She doesn’t tell me everything, so maybe your fairy godmother has some other kind of insight, uh... I’m sorry, what’s your name?”

“I’m Dette,” she blurted, embarrassed she hadn’t introduced herself earlier.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Jean said, “and thank you again for this.”

The trip to the room was, to Dette’s relief, relatively quick and guard-free. Jean had kept his promise and had stayed close, and he was so quiet she had almost forgotten that she wasn’t alone as she maneuvered down the long hallways that seemed to twist and turn in the dark. As soon as she opened and shut the door behind her, Jean took off the cloak and began looking behind the old discarded junk Dette was so familiar with while she started to quietly call out for her fairy godmother.

“Fairy godmother?” she asked the air for the eleventh time. “Are you here?”

“Maybe she won’t show up while I’m here,” Jean sighed. “Maybe my theory was correct.”

“Theory?”

“I call it the ‘Fairy Godmother Theorem,’” he explained, raising his paws for emphasis. “A fairy godmother will appear to one of unroyal blood who has faced adversity from someone or something in her life, and who has found herself in a situation that has the potential to change her future.”

“Oh.” Dette didn’t want to admit to Jean that she had barely understood a word he had just said, so she went to sit down by the crate and Lisa. “I’m sorry, Your Highness.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Jean told her. “It was worth a try, though.” He began to walk toward her, then thought better of it, afraid such a course of action might scare her.

“You can sit down if you want, Jean. I don’t mind.” The Prince thanked her and sat down beside her, watching as her fingers trailed over the marks on the side of the crate.

“What are those?” he asked her, and Dette immediately put her hand down.

“How many times Cecile has sent me here.”

“Cecile?”

“She’s in charge of me, and she locks me in here when I do something wrong.”

“She what?” Jean’s eyes went wide as he stared at her. “You realize that’s not okay, right?” Dette shrugged. “Dette. It’s not. That’s *Cinderella* and archetypal Evil Stepmother territory in general.”

“I’m a liability.”

“No, you’re not. I could tell my parents that this is happening and they could do something to stop it.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“But they could help,” he insisted while Dette shook her head.

“Thank you, but I don’t want to stir up more trouble than I’m worth.”

“You’re a *person*, Dette. That makes you worth something.” He was looking at her so intently, so worriedly that she had to turn away. “But I kind of understand why you may feel that way.”

“You do?” She looked back up at him to see him nod, his silhouette outlined by the few tendrils of moonlight that had managed to break through the dusty window.

“I’m a liability to my parents and the entire kingdom because of how I look. I scare people, and usually they scream and run away at the sight of me. That’s why I don’t visit very often, and when I do, everyone takes every precaution they can.”

Dette stared down at her hands, questions once again bubbling up from within her. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

Very quietly, she asked, “Have you always looked this way?”

Jean took in a sharp breath before he gave her an answer. “I was born like this.”

“You were?”

“Yeah,” he said, voice cracking. “I figured out that I wasn’t like everyone else when I was seven, the day they ‘Rapunzeled’ me and sent me away to live in a tower in the middle of nowhere. They said it was for my protection. I would still make the visits, and they would visit me, but one day, I overheard them talking. My mother said that they needed to tell me the truth.” He paused for a moment, sniffing, and Dette assumed the emotion of the memory made it difficult for him to continue.

“What truth?” she asked softly.

His voice was so low that Dette could barely hear it. “My father had been cursed to look like this when he was younger. My parents are Beauty and the Beast from the fairy tale, and somehow the curse had been passed onto me. His curse broke when my mother promised to marry him, but because I was *born* with it, they don’t even know if it can break the same way. Besides, I’m barely old enough to marry, and a promise to marry someone is different from true

love, so that's why I was hoping that your fairy godmother..." He trailed off once more, unable to complete the thought.

"My fairy godmother would know how to help you," Dette finished for him. She had absolutely no clue what else to say, so she wrapped her arms around him the way he had earlier, hoping he would know how sorry she was. "I'm so sorry. You don't deserve any of this."

"Neither do you."

They were both silent for a minute, and Dette couldn't help but turn to the portrait of Jean's parents.

"You know, your father found me in the woods years ago. That's why I'm here."

"How long ago was that?" Jean asked.

"About fifteen years ago, I think? I dream about it every night, but I can never figure out what he was trying to tell me."

"The offer still stands for me to take you to them to tell them about what's been going on. If you take it, maybe you can ask him that, too."

"Then how about this?" Dette asked, holding out her hand while he looked at her with an expression she guessed was confusion. "I promise that I will accept your offer to tell your parents about Cecile if you promise to tell your parents that you know why you're cursed. Something tells me that you haven't told them that piece of information," she said as she looked at him, and judging by the way he couldn't meet her gaze she knew she was right. She gestured to her hand. "If you agree, we shake on it. And even if you don't, I promise that I will try to help you find a way to break your curse regardless."

For a second, Jean was speechless. "You'd do that?"

"Of course. We've just met, and you're already the kindest person I've ever met."

“Don’t you mean ‘monster?’”

“No, I don’t mean ‘monster,’” Dette protested, alarmed. “If you say I’m a person, then you must be one, too.”

“If we’re both people, then does that mean we can be friends?” Jean asked.

Dette nodded, her hand still extended toward him. He lifted his paw, about to shake hers, when he hesitated.

“I’ll shake on it, but I don’t want to hurt you,” he rumbled softly.

“You won’t hurt me,” Dette reassured him, and, very gently, she took his paw right as the door opened.

“I thought I’d find you here.”

Jean jumped up at the sound of the menacing voice, looking around frantically as if he couldn’t see the figure in the doorway wearing a dark, shimmering cloak similar to his own. Carefully closing the door, it made its way toward them and removed the cloak, revealing itself to be an old woman with a shock of dark hair streaked with hints of gray and wearing something that resembled more of a brown sack than a dress.

“Hester?” Jean stammered.

“Thought you could get past me, Jeanny?” The woman Dette presumed to be Hester asked in a very different voice than the one she had just used before; instead of sounding threatening, she had a sweet lilt that made Dette calmer just by listening to her talk. Hester chuckled, smiling in such a way it appeared to be more of a grimace, though her brown eyes sparkled with mischief. Dette could only glance between the two of them, more confused by the second. Jean noticed her expression and exhaled, looking extremely embarrassed.

“Did I mention that Hester’s a witch?”

“You kind of failed to mention that.”

The quip made Hester chuckle even harder as she turned to Jean. “Hon, you’d be in so much trouble if your parents found out about this.”

“Please don’t tell them,” Jean begged, hunching over to look Hester in the eyes and clasping his paws together the same way he had earlier. “*Please*, Hester.”

“You really think I’d tell them? After you’ve made your first friend besides me?” Hester then turned to Dette, holding out a hand. When Dette took it, Hester helped her to her feet and gave her hand a firm shake. “You already know my name’s Hester, but it’s still nice to meet you, Dette.”

“How do you know my name?” Dette questioned, wincing a little at Hester’s grip. “And how did you know we were here?”

“You were scrying on me, weren’t you?” Jean demanded, crossing his arms.

“You know your parents told me to keep a close watch on you,” Hester retorted, reaching up on tiptoe to ruffle his head and creating a cowlick in his fur. “But what I really want to know is how Dette could see me in my invisibility cloak. And you in yours, for that matter.”

“What do you mean?” Dette asked. “They’re black cloaks.”

“My dear girl,” Hester started, gently placing a hand on her shoulder. “These cloaks were charmed by a very special friend of mine so that no one wearing one can be seen, which either means that she has lost her touch, or you have a bit of magic of your own.”

“Magic?”

Hester nodded. “Stronger than mine, even. I’m only human, so my ability to use magic is limited. But if you can truly see these cloaks when people are wearing them, you’re not. At least, not completely.”



Dette shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I think there's been a misunderstanding." She took a step back from Hester and nearly fell against Jean, who held out his arm to steady her. "This has to be a joke, right?" she continued, looking from Jean to Hester and back again, pointing at the cloak that Hester had left on the dusty floor. "Please tell me you can see that, Jean. It's right there!"

"I can only see the cloak if I'm wearing it or if no one is," Jean admitted. "I couldn't see it on Hester when she was wearing it."

"I don't understand." Dette's head was spinning, and she took the arm Jean was still holding up to help keep her balance. She was surprised at how strong he was, how calm he seemed to be right now when it felt like everything she ever thought she knew was falling apart. "There *must* be a mistake! I'm not magical! I'm just an orphan girl who's been working here as long as I can remember. I don't even know how old I am or what my real name is. I'm nothing special."

"I know this must be confusing right now," Hester said softly, "but everyone is special. You just happen to be special in a very unique way."

"What are you talking about?" Dette asked, and Hester turned to Jean, whose eyes were, not for the first time that night, filled with wonder. He very gently moved away from Dette and began pacing around the room, talking to himself so softly it was almost as if he were purring. Perplexed, Dette watched him walk in a circle, one ear sticking straight up while the other stayed curled.

"I believe the literature and history expert is formulating a new theory," Hester explained. "This might take a few minutes, so we might as well get comfortable." She took a seat where Dette and Jean had been sitting earlier and Dette nervously joined her, waiting for Jean to

complete his thought process. Without thinking, Dette grabbed Lisa from the crate and began stroking her tattered dress, completely unaware that Hester was watching her with a slight grin on her face.

Finally, Jean took a deep breath and faced them both. “Okay, I think I have it,” he announced. “Dette,” he began, pausing for dramatic effect. “You’re a protagonist.”

Everyone was silent for a moment, Hester letting the theory sink in, while Dette stared at Jean, more puzzled than ever. “I don’t even know what that is,” she finally managed to squeak.

“A protagonist is a main character in a story or other kind of narrative. In a way, everyone is a protagonist in their own lives, but you? You have almost all of the classic signs of a certain type of literary protagonist: a Chosen One.” Dette gave him a look that said, *I have absolutely no idea what in the world you’re talking about*, and he stopped for a moment, trying to figure out how to explain it better. “It’s like everything you’ve already told me: you’re an orphan, as far as you know. My father found you in the woods when you were a child, but you don’t know how old you are. You’ve been working as a servant in this palace for about fifteen years, and Cecile has created adversity for you by treating you the way she has for seven of those years. You were visited by a fairy godmother today, and to top it all off, you yourself might have magic.”

“Just because I can see something you two can’t doesn’t mean I have magic,” Dette countered. “It could just be a fluke.”

“But it *could* be that you’re a Chosen One,” Jean insisted. “You could be a part of some kind of prophecy and have a secret destiny to destroy a villain or some other force of evil—”

“Stop!” Dette cut him off. She was shaking, clutching Lisa as she squeezed her eyes shut. “I’m not a Chosen One, or a protagonist of any kind! I’m just a person who got stuck in an unfortunate, eerily similar situation to some literary characters you’ve read about!”

“Another classic sign!” Jean cried, gesturing toward her with his paw as if he were pointing at her. “You’re in denial. You don’t believe that you could be anything more than a servant.”

“Because that’s all I’ve ever been!” For some reason, Dette felt herself on the edge of hysteria as her breathing became more rapid and anxiety took over her mind.

“Just because you’ve been a servant for so long doesn’t mean that you can’t be anything else, Dette,” Hester said. “Haven’t you ever wondered who you were before you were found in the woods?”

“That was a long time ago.”

“A long time ago, I wasn’t a witch,” Hester informed her. “I learned magic in order to help protect people like Jean, even though it was scary at first. And I made a choice to do so because I believed in myself, and I believed that I had the potential to be more than who I had been before.” Dette was trembling, and Hester gently wrapped her in a hug. “I believe that you can be more than a servant because you already are. You’re the first person I’ve ever met to give Jean the benefit of the doubt just because he looks different than most. You have a good heart, Dette.”

“That’s what my fairy godmother told me today,” Dette murmured, and pulled away from Hester as something clicked in her mind. “Hester, you’re my fairy godmother, aren’t you? You told me to follow the stones that led to Jean!”

“Hester, is this true?” Jean asked, and Hester sighed.

“Alright, you’ve got me,” she said, hands raised in surrender. “But you’ll meet the actual fairy godmother soon enough.”

“But *why*?” both Jean and Dette asked in unison, and Hester chuckled.

“I knew you were going to do your *Hansel and Gretel* stone routine, Jean, and I’d been watching over Dette for a long time, as well.” She turned to Dette once more. “I’m sorry I couldn’t do more to protect you from Cecile. I’ve tried to tell the King multiple times about what’s been going on, but it always falls on deaf ears.”

“He’s very much like Cinderella’s father,” Jean admitted. “He likes to ignore the painful truth about certain situations because he doesn’t want to face his mistakes.”

“Wait... are you saying that Cinderella’s father was alive in the story?” Dette cried out, and Jean nodded.

“Alive and present in some ways, but absent in others,” he said. “Dette, I’ve been afraid of my father my entire life, and because of that fear, he’s continued to hurt me without even realizing it. And he’s been doing the same thing to you.” Taking her hand, he leaned down to meet her eyes. “We can confront him together. Please?”

Dette stared at Jean, noticing the swirls of fur on the bridge of his nose, and his gentle, human eyes that seemed a bit out of place with the rest of his face, though she would never tell him that. It was then that she realized how much alike they really were, with fates that neither had wanted nor deserved, and now they had a chance to do something about it.

*Together.*

“I believe it’s time for me to tell him, then,” Dette said slowly. “Whether I’m a Chosen One or not, Jean’s right; I still don’t deserve to be treated like this, and neither does he.”

“I agree,” Hester conceded. “Lead the way, Dette.”

And with a nod and Lisa still in tow, Dette began to open the door to the room, only to find it was locked. Looking at Jean, it was clear that he was beginning to panic, and even Hester seemed a little shaken.

“Are you sure it’s locked?” Hester came over to the door and tried as she jiggled the knob. “*Ye, solid locks, unlock!*” she commanded with a flick of her wrist, and the door swung wide open. Or, it would have if someone hadn’t caught it mid-swing.

“Well, what do we have here? A witch, a cursed Prince, and an ugly orphan!”

Dette felt blood drain from her face. She knew that voice. She knew the sound of those footfalls as they stepped out from the shadows of the hallway. She knew if she looked up, she would be facing the woman who had done everything in her power to hurt her.

“After all these years, the little Cinder wench has finally been good for something!” Cecile cackled, glaring at Dette. “Trying to be tricky now, were you? I noticed you weren’t sleeping on your hearth, and sure enough, here you are with these disgraces to humanity.” As Cecile passed through the threshold of the door, Dette, Jean, and Hester could all see something dully shining in her hand, which she unveiled to be a dagger with indecipherable markings. “I knew there was magic here!” she hissed, slashing the dagger before Hester with a speed that seemed to be way too fast for her age. Unable to think up a spell in time, Hester managed to match Cecile’s speed and dodge her right as she was about to strike, which seemed to make Cecile laugh even harder as she turned to face Jean. “Oh, it’s even worse than I ever could have imagined.” The dagger still extended before her, she shifted so that it was aimed toward him. “I knew something was wrong with you, but you’re a downright monster, a *beast!*”

“Don’t call him that!” Dette protested, dashing to place herself between Cecile and her new friend. “If anyone’s a monster here, it’s *you*, Cecile!”

Something must have struck a chord in Cecile, because she brought down the dagger so that it lay limp by her side. “How dare you call me that!” she spat, regaining enough resolve to grab Dette’s chin with her free hand to force her to meet her eyes. “You don’t know what their kind have done!”

“But I know what you’ve done to me!” With a strength she never knew she possessed, Dette tore Cecile’s hand away, wincing a little as Cecile’s nails scratched across her face. “Why did you do it? Why have you hurt me for all these years, and why do you want to hurt them? What do you have to gain from any of this?”

“You really want to know now, do you?” Cecile looked a little shaken as she began to pace around Dette, but her eyes flashed as cold as ever. “It’s not what *I* have to gain; sure, that’s a part of it, but it’s what ONCE has to gain.”

“ONCE?” Dette asked.

““Omnipresent Nefarious Creature Exterminators,”” Cecile declared, holding up the dagger for all to see. In the moonlight, the symbols seemed much more prominent and Jean let out what sounded like a yip in surprise. “An ancient, noble organization dedicated to the extermination of any and all beings with magic.” She allowed herself another laugh, and with the distraction, Dette met Jean’s eyes. *Get out of here!* she wanted to scream at him, but he seemed to be frozen to the spot, whether it be from terror or fascination. Hester also hadn’t moved; instead, she kept looking at Dette and nodding toward Lisa, who was tucked in the crook of Dette’s arm. Before Dette could try to give her a questioning look, Cecile had stopped laughing.

“When ONCE comes upon you, it means you’re finished. You, and your place in history. You become nothing more than a myth, a *story*, right where you all belong. Serves you right for what your kind did to my sister,” Cecile said, glaring at Hester.

“Not all witches are evil,” Hester said soothingly, her hands in the air as she backed away from Cecile. “I’m sorry for whatever happened to your sister, ma’am, but I’m no Baba Yaga. And Jean is no monster. He’s human, just like you.”

“No *thing* like that could ever be human,” Cecile seethed. “So now I’m in a dilemma: which nefarious creature do I kill first?”

“You’re not killing anybody,” Dette said through gritted teeth. “Unless you can kill *me* first.”

“Oh, how sweet,” Cecile hummed, stepping toward Dette. “So sweet, yet so cliché.” In one quick motion, Cecile aimed the dagger directly at Dette’s chest—

But it didn’t land.

“What in the world?” Cecile tried again, but it was as if some invisible force threw off her aim every time she got too close. She kept trying, jabbing the dagger toward Dette until her arm was exhausted, and that’s when Dette made a break for it, standing before Jean and Hester.

“Stay back, you Evil Stepmother Archetype!” Dette growled, holding out Lisa as if she were a weapon. “You’ve done enough for one night.”

“The doll is a talisman, isn’t it? One of those little things that bring good luck?” Cecile laughed. “Clever. But if you want to save those freaks, you’re going to have to fight me, and fight me fairly.”

“Fine,” Dette huffed, handing Lisa to Jean. “If I don’t make it, she’s yours,” she told him, and when he was about to protest, she shook her head. “I don’t know what I’m doing, but this isn’t your fight. Besides, it’s time to see if I can be more than who I’ve been.” Giving him and Hester one last look and hoping they didn’t notice her trembling hands, she turned back around to

face Cecile. *Be brave*, she thought to herself. *I know you're scared, but you have to be brave. This isn't just about you anymore. There are people counting on you.*

And then new thoughts entered her mind, ones that seemed to be hers yet not at the same time: *trust yourself, and don't let the dagger touch you; it's made of iron and it could burn—*

The thoughts were disrupted by Cecile, the dagger once again before her. “One thing I don't understand,” she began as she crept closer to Dette, “is why you would go to all this trouble to try and help these aberrations when you've only known them for a couple of hours.”

“Because they're good people,” Dette answered slowly, trying to keep her voice even. “They've shown me more kindness in those couple of hours than I've ever been shown in my lifetime.” She took a shaky step to the side, and as she did, she felt something within her spirit stir: a sense of peace, a bit of panic, all fluttering amongst other emotions that she had kept within her for so long, and some she had only ever barely experienced. “Jean was the first one to treat me like a person. And Hester told me that I was special.” With every pace around Cecile, with every maneuver she made to evade her dagger, she began to steady herself as the feelings, a power within, grew and kept growing. “Everyone is special, and everyone is a protagonist in their own life's story.” Though fear threatened to reign over the whirlwind inside of her heart, she used her words to keep herself steady. Every time Cecile slashed, Dette eluded the blade's touch, almost as if they were partners in a fatal dance. “If I'm truly the protagonist in my story, I get to *choose*, and I choose to be more than a servant, and to not be afraid of you anymore. I choose not to let you hurt me, or anyone else, ever again.”

“Foolish girl,” Cecile sneered, but her voice had a quake to it as she missed her once again. “How can you be so confident, after everything I've put you through? How is it that you've



bounced back from everything I've ever tried to do to hurt you? What makes you believe that you could be anything more than a debt?"

"I..." for a minute, Dette faltered, doubt creeping into her mind, and Cecile took it to her advantage. She charged Dette, the dagger aimed for her stomach, but Dette stopped Cecile before it could completely land with reflexes she had never known she had; however, though the blade had left nothing more than a scratch, a searing pain flooded her stomach.

"Because that's what I've chosen to do, even before now," she panted, pushing Cecile away with all her might, despite feeling herself begin to waver. "I will always fight you, and others like you, for as long as I can!" With those words, Dette felt another pain radiate through her entire body, an energy that cast a light all over the dingy room. Cecile flew backwards and landed hard against one of the walls, falling unconscious.

As did Dette.

\* \* \* \* \*

*"Bernadette?" The name echoed throughout the darkness Dette had found herself in, bouncing around her so that it was difficult to locate the source. "Bernadette?" Dette tried to walk toward the voice, though she had no idea if she was going in the right direction. I wish I had a candle, she thought to herself as she continued the trek and suddenly the palm of her left hand began to tingle. When she brought it before her, she saw that a small source of light glimmered there. She gasped, and as she did, the light glowed even brighter until she realized that her entire body was glowing as well. It wasn't until she looked down at herself that she noticed that she was covered with what appeared to be a labyrinth of cracks that were glowing with the same sort of luminescent substance that had shaped itself into an orb in her palm.*

*“Bernadette, is that you?” Now that she could see, Dette saw that a woman stood before her, so beautiful that she couldn’t possibly be human. Her hair was such a bright red it flickered like a flame in Dette’s light, and the bridge of her nose and cheeks were painted with freckles that seemed to sparkle as Dette got closer to her. The woman’s breath hitched in her throat, and she began to cry. “It is you. How could it not be? You look so much like him! You have his wild hair, his kind eyes...” the woman trailed off as she got up on tiptoe to stroke Dette’s face. Dette flinched at the action, though no nails had dug into her skin, and the woman pulled her hand back. “What has happened to you? Did ONCE come upon you?” she demanded frantically, her eyes beginning to fill with more tears.*

*“It almost did, but it didn’t. At least, I don’t think it did.”*

*“Oh, thank heaven!” The woman clutched her chest, staring at Dette as her relief gave way to consternation. “I don’t understand. He promised he would help me protect you!”*

*“Who would protect me?” Dette asked. “And from what?”*

*“King Jean owed me a debt.” The woman clenched her hands into fists, where a dark substance emitted from them that made Dette’s light glow even brighter against it. “He was to repay it by protecting you from ONCE, from me, and from yourself.”*

*“Who are you?”*

*“It would be better if you didn’t know, but guess I have no choice now, do I?” The woman took a deep breath and looked up at Dette with a pained smile and eyes that were blacker than a starless night. “I’m your mother, Bernadette. But you can call me Eglantine if you don’t feel comfortable calling me that.”*

*“My mother?” Dette whispered, feeling anger rush through her that was immediately abated when Eglantine reached up to touch her shoulder.*

*“You have every right to be upset with me, and I’m so sorry for whatever you’ve been through without me. I had to give you up until it was safe for us to be reunited, or....”*

*“Or what?”*

*“Your magic reawakened,” Eglantine finally finished. “It was dormant for years, but something must have happened to trigger it. That’s why you’re here now, why we’re even speaking.”*

*“I really do have magic,” Dette breathed, glancing from herself to Eglantine, who nodded.*

*“You must come to me, to Aliander; I was hoping there’d be more time, but your magic will draw attention in Olim—more, dare I say, than it already has.”*

*“I don’t understand. What’s Aliander? What’s Olim? None of this is making any sense!”*

*“Olim is the world you are living in now, but Aliander is the world where the Fey live.” When Eglantine noticed Dette’s bemused expression, she sighed. “Hester and Jean can explain it to you better than I ever could.”*

*“You know about them?”*

*“I do,” Eglantine said as a shadow of guilt crossed her face. Very quietly, she added, “Jean’s curse is my fault.”*

*“Wait, you cursed his dad?” Not for the first time that night, Dette’s head was spinning as Eglantine nodded. “So you’re saying you cursed the only friend I’ve ever had?” Eglantine nodded again. “But why did you do it? Why did you curse his dad in the first place?”*

*“That’s something I want to explain, but I can’t right now.” Eglantine looked around the void they had found themselves in, locking eyes with something Dette couldn’t see. “I can’t stay*

*much longer, but Bernadette, if you can get his parents' blessing, he should come with you. I need to talk to you both. I do want to explain, but I want to do it properly, and in person."*

*"How do I find you?"*

*"If your magic has truly awakened, then you will know what to do. Trust yourself, and your heart will lead you to me. Because I need you, Bernadette." As she spoke, she gently wrapped Dette in an embrace. "All of Aliander needs you."*

\* \* \* \* \*

When Dette came to, the first thing she heard was someone crying her name. Or, as she now knew, a nickname. It took her a few seconds to register that it was Jean. His fur was matted where tears had fallen down his face, and as soon as he realized she was awake, he rushed to her side.

"Dette! Oh my goodness, we thought you might be dead! Hester said that Cecile hurt you pretty bad, and your scars—" he choked on a sob, unable to continue as Dette just stared at him, dazed and confused.

"Scars?" she asked hoarsely, and as soon as the question left her lips, a pain flooded her entire body, from the tips of her fingers all the way down to her toes. She glanced down at herself and her eyes widened when she saw that she was covered with scars that were shimmering ever so slightly, scars that resembled the glowing cracks in her unconscious state. Just looking at them made her wince.

"When someone with Fey magic doesn't use it for a long period of time, it tends to build up in the body," Hester said softly. "Based on the reaction you've had, I would guess it's been building up for a very long time, and you're only half-Fey."

“What happened?” Dette asked, attempting to sit up, but Hester gently nudged her back down on what she realized was a bed. Looking around, she noticed that she was in a grand room, surrounded by gilded furniture, a wall of bookshelves, and ornate tapestries that covered the windows. “Where am I?” She stuttered. “Where’s Cecile?”

“You basically conquered a minor villain and got her to spill the secret of ONCE when you got her to monologue,” Jean told her, though Dette didn’t feel like that completely answered her question. “That means that you got her to open up about the Omnipresent Nefarious Creature organization, which proves that my theories, or at least some of my theories were correct,” Jean said triumphantly. “You were amazing, using magic the way you did! And to think you had no idea what you were doing makes it even more amazing; that’s certainly beginner’s luck, but I mean that in the best possible way,” he added, and Hester couldn’t help but roll her eyes.

“What Jean is trying to say is that you used your magic to fight against Cecile and defeated her, Dette. She’s currently in the dungeon being interrogated by the King and Queen,” Hester said, a soft smile on her face as she rubbed some kind of salve on her stomach. “You saved Jean and me, but you got injured in the process when her dagger came into contact with your skin. We brought you to his room, and you’re free to stay here until you’re recovered.”

“So the King and Queen know?” Dette asked, and Hester nodded. “Does everyone know?”

“Of course they do. The entire castle would’ve known, except for the fact that—”

“I erased everyone’s memories so that they wouldn’t remember anything about last night!” someone proclaimed, and before Dette’s eyes appeared a woman clad in black with short, spiky turquoise hair, tourmaline eyes, and a lopsided grin that seemed to exude happiness.

“This is Tansy,” Hester said, gesturing toward the new person in the room. “She’s the one who charmed the cloaks, and apparently erased everyone’s memories in the castle.” As she said this, Tansy ran over to Hester and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“I didn’t erase *everyone*’s memories, Star! I just erased the memories of people who don’t need to know what happened last night. Didn’t I do a splendid job?”

“Of course, dear,” Hester replied with another roll of eyes, and Tansy hugged her even tighter. “Tansy’s also the actual fairy godmother, in case you were wondering.”

“What do you mean ‘the actual fairy godmother?’ I’ve always been an actual fairy godmother!” Tansy proclaimed, hands on her hips while Hester looked away, embarrassed.

“Star, what did you do?”

Still unable to make eye contact with Tansy, Hester said, “I *may* have used a spell to project my voice in the room where Dette heard me. And I may or may not have made it sound like you and used it to tell her that I was her fairy godmother.”

“You *stole* my identity?” Tansy screeched, and Hester’s face flushed.

“I didn’t steal your identity, but I *did* temporarily adopt your persona.”

“Why would you do that?”

“If you heard a disembodied voice, would you trust it if it was a witch or a fairy godmother?”

Tansy sighed. “You do have a point, there. Though to be honest, I wouldn’t have trusted either.”

“I saw two lonely people, both of whom just needed a friend,” Hester declared as she faced Dette. “I’m sorry for deceiving you, but I didn’t know what else to do.”

“It’s okay,” Dette told her. “Really. I’m starting to understand everything, and I know we need each other.” She looked back to Jean, who was kneeling in front of her by the bed, one of his paws just on the edge of the mattress. Dette gently took it in her hand and met his eyes.

“Jean. There’s something I need to tell you.”

“You’re in love with me, aren’t you?”

“What? No!” Dette protested. “You’re the only friend I’ve ever had, but I barely know you!” She could feel her cheeks get hot as Jean laughed.

“I know, I’m just messing with you,” he teased. “What is it?”

And Dette told him everything she remembered from her vision, everything that Eglantine had told her while Jean just stared at her and made facial expressions she couldn’t quite read.

“So you really are a Chosen One?” Dette nodded, and she couldn’t help but laugh as Jean broke out in a smile and his tail started wagging in his victory. “Sorry!” he stammered, grabbing it to attempt to make it stop, but to no avail. “Anyway,” he continued, trying his best to keep his excitement at bay, “your mother really wants to talk to both of us?”

“Mmhm. She wants to apologize to you and explain why she cursed your father in person. Will you come with me?”

“Of course I will,” Jean reassured her. “So far, my life has been nothing but exposition, and now with you, I think I’m finally starting to reach a rising action.” Dette stared at him blankly, and he sighed. “I just confused you, didn’t I?”

“You’re really good at doing that.”

Jean seemed like he was about to say something else, but before he could get another word out, two people entered the room. Both were ornately dressed and wore crowns on their heads, and Dette stared at them, wide-eyed.

“Your Majesties?” she said, just as Jean said, “Mother? Father?”

“Jean!” the Queen cried, rushing over to her son and giving him a hug. “We’re so glad you’re safe!” While she began to sob with relief, the King began to make his way toward Dette, his gray eyes brimmed with tears.

“I want to thank you for everything you have done to protect my son and Hester. And I want to apologize,” he said, and to her shock, gave her a bow. “I wasn’t keeping a close enough eye on you, and I know I don’t deserve forgiveness. But Cecile can’t hurt you anymore; she’s being exiled from Fraymere, and Tansy erased her memories. I wish I could do more, but I—” As if by some invisible force, the King’s mouth clamped shut, and he turned away for a moment. “Can you tell her, Hester?” he asked, and Hester nodded.

“Your mother, Eglantine, spelled King Jean so that he can’t talk or write about the incident that led him to be cursed, or about you. Because of this, I will speak for him,” Hester said. She stood before Dette and then knelt close to Jean as she began to tell Dette things she never thought she would know. “The King owed your mother a favor, and that favor was to keep watch over you. She instructed him to take you in, but to give you no special treatment as it might attract attention that would expose who you truly are. However, I think even he can admit he probably took the whole ‘no special treatment’ thing too far.” She glanced at the King, who nodded. “Your mother tried to protect you as long as she could by hiding you in the human world, Olim. But there is another world called ‘Aliander,’ where people with magic live. The



problem is that a threat who calls herself the ‘Nefarious Fey’ is looking for you, and she wants you dead.”

“Dead? Why?”

“Because she wants to keep the two peoples separated and in their own worlds,” Hester explained. “The war between the Fey and humans began when the Nefarious Fey cursed a young princess so that she would die on her sixteenth birthday.”

“Wait,” Jean interrupted. “Are you saying that this all started with *Sleeping Beauty*?”

“I am,” Hester conceded. “That’s what started the rift between Fey and humans: humans no longer trusted the Fey, leading to the creation of Aliander.”

“So Aliander is an Otherworld,” Jean muttered, and his mother stared at him, looking just as confused as Dette felt. “Sorry! I’m talking in literary terms again,” he explained, and Hester chuckled. “It all makes sense now, though: ONCE is an organization trying to keep the worlds separate because of the war that the Nefarious Fey started when she cursed Princess Talia. And they’re trying to erase all traces of magic in Olim in order to keep humans from knowing that Fey and magic in general exists!” As he spoke, he ran over to a corner of his room where a bag rested and pulled out what appeared to be some kind of parchment. “I always wondered why so many stories begin with ‘Once upon a time,’ but it must be some kind of code,” he explained, showing it to Hester, his father, and his mother.

“Jean... have you really been keeping track of how many stories begin with ‘Once upon a time?’” his mother asked him.

“I’ve been stuck in a tower for most of my life, mother. What else was I supposed to do with that time?” Jean turned to show Dette the marked-up piece of parchment. “Stories that begin with ‘Once upon a time’ must be history that ONCE the *organization* has rewritten,” he

said. “And they have created so many different versions that it’s difficult to tell which one is the true historical account, if any are. In fact, most versions have been romanticized to the point that they seem too good to be true.”

“If that’s the case and ONCE is truly behind all of this,” Dette asked, “what does that mean for the people in the stories?”

“What do you mean?”

“If the people in the stories were real people, what happened to them? Did they truly live ‘happily ever after?’”

Jean was silent for a moment before he gave his answer. “I don’t know.”

“Then where does that leave us?” Dette wondered.

“I guess we’re in the time after ‘happily ever after,’ but since we don’t know if ‘happily ever after’ even exists, then maybe we’re just in the ‘thereafter,’” Jean finished. “I think the best course of action is to find your mother and hear her side of the story, as my father can’t tell his because of the spell.”

“You are not going to Aliander, Jean. It’s too dangerous,” the Queen protested. She took her son’s paws in her hands. “I won’t allow it; I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“What do you want me to do then, Mother? Rot away in a tower formulating theories on parchment for the rest of my life?” Jean demanded, rolling up the parchment and standing at his full height to glare down at his parents. “You want to know what else I have a theory about, Mother? *Father?*”

“Well, this is getting awkward,” Tansy interjected, grabbing Hester’s hand, “so we’re just going to leave now.” And without further ado, the two left the premises as Jean’s parents stayed silent.

“I have a theory,” Jean continued once they were gone, “that you both have been keeping the cause for my curse a secret because you’re too ashamed to admit it: you’re Beauty and the Beast, aren’t you? Or at least one version of them.”

For a minute, Jean’s parents were speechless, and both of their faces were stricken with guilt. “How long have you known, Jean?” his father finally managed to ask.

“I mean, most children don’t look like a fox-bear hybrid, so I had a pretty good idea something was up early on. But I overheard you two talking about how you needed to tell me about eleven years ago.”

“I didn’t know how to tell you,” his mother cried, tears streaming down her face. “Why didn’t you tell us that you knew?”

“Because I didn’t know how to do that, either,” Jean admitted, walking over to his mother and giving her an embrace. “I know you didn’t mean to hurt me, but it still hurts.”

“I’m so sorry,” his mother sobbed, and his father was starting to get emotional as well, though only Dette noticed. Very carefully, she rose from the bed, expecting excruciating pain, but to her surprise, she only felt a throbbing sensation as she limped over to King Jean.

“Dette?” he whispered, wrapping an arm around her to support her. “Please, you need your rest—”

“I forgive you, Your Majesty,” she told him, and the King hugged her, his tears falling onto Dette’s shoulders. After a while, she gently pulled away from him, and finally asked him the question she had been dying to ask ever since she could remember.

“What did you say to me the day you found me in the forest? I dream about it almost every night, but I can never hear what you were saying.”

The King took a deep breath. “What I was saying that day was that I was sorry, and I still am. I’m sorry that you had to be separated from your mother. I’m sorry you grew up ignorant of who you were. And I’m sorry that I didn’t know how best to protect you. I thought keeping my distance was the answer, but now I know I was wrong.” He turned back to his son, still hugging his mother. “I was wrong in that regard for both of you.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to know what to do,” Dette said slowly, “but thank you for your apology.”

“Thank you,” he said quietly, and she nodded as he walked her over to Jean and the Queen. “Jean’s right, Belle,” he began and Jean let his mother go. “He’s old enough to choose. And if I can’t tell him the truth about everything, he deserves to hear it from someone who was there when it happened.”

“I know,” she relented, “but they should at least wait until Bernadette has recovered. As I understand it, she took quite a hit to her stomach.”

“I’m actually doing better than I thought I would be at the moment,” Dette told them. “But a few days of resting wouldn’t hurt.”

“Okay,” Jean said, and Dette gave his paw a squeeze as she leaned into him, and he supported her as best he could.

“I’m proud of you, Jean,” Dette told him as his parents began to give the two friends privacy. “For finally telling your parents that you knew, for standing up to them.”

“It’s nothing compared to how you stood your ground against Cecile,” Jean replied, “but thank you.”

“Of course. And can I ask you one more question?” When Jean nodded, Dette said, “I know that we’re in ‘the thereafter’ right now, and who knows what’s going to happen next, with

finding my mother and me being a Chosen One. But for now, can we pretend that ‘happily ever after’ still exists?”

And Jean smiled. “What do you have in mind?” he asked softly.

“Will you dance with me?” she said so quietly Jean had to strain to hear her request.

“Are you sure you can right now?” In answer to his question, Dette gently rested one of her hands on his arm and took his paw in her other one. Slowly, she began swaying to music that only she could hear, and Jean held her as he gradually began to hear it too. “I didn’t know you could dance,” he told her. “To be honest, I didn’t take you for the dancing type at all.”

“I didn’t either, but after all that’s happened, who knows how many more moments I’ll have left to try to dance? Besides, I’ve never had a friend to dance with before, and I think my Cinderella days are coming to a close, anyway.”

“I think so too,” Jean agreed. “Is that a good thing?”

“It is. It’s just different. I feel freer, but I still don’t know a lot about myself,” she said with a yawn, and Jean held her even tighter. “Like I still don’t know how old I am, which I would really like to know because it would make everything less awkward. And there’s something else that’s been bothering me too.”

“What’s that?”

Dette exhaled. “When I saw Eglantine in my vision, she told me that I looked like ‘him.’ She said that I had his hair and his eyes. Do you think she could have been talking about my father?”

“It’s definitely a possibility,” he conceded, trying not to move too suddenly when Dette began to rest her head on his chest.

“I hope I can meet him when we get to Aliander,” Dette slurred as she put more of her weight on Jean as exhaustion overtook her. Very gently so as not to scratch her with his claws, Jean picked her up and began to carry her back to his bed.

“I hope you can too, Dette. Or should I call you ‘Bernadette’ now that we know that’s your real name?”

“‘Bernadette’ works, I guess.”

“You guess?” Jean chuckled. “At least you now know that that’s your real name instead of ‘Dette.’ I have to admit, though, that it’ll take a while to get used to.”

“It will for me too,” Dette replied, “and that I’m more than just a servant.”

“Well, get used to it,” Jean told her as he gently laid her down and pulled the covers over her, “because you’re a Chosen One, and you have a great destiny ahead of you.”

And for the first time since she could ever remember, Dette, or Bernadette, as she now knew, fell into a peaceful, dreamless sleep.