



## MIRROR, MIRROR

BY CINDY RÆ

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*All song lyrics quoted below are from “The Other Side of the Mirror”  
by Stevie Nicks. The album was released in May, 1989.*

## CHAPTER 1

### THE SPIRIT OF THE MIRROR

*"Turn to the blue crystal mirror. Well as always, it is truthful..."*

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*"You're just a little bit like her, a little bit like Juliet."*

Juliet - by Stevie Nicks

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"Mirror, Mirror, on the wall..."

"Not you," the lion-faced spirit of the mirror told the stunningly beautiful woman in front of it.

*At least, not yet,* he amended, mentally.

She looked displeased, for all her loveliness. Quite a bit, actually.

"Still?!" she snapped, disappointed. Her father's money had bought her a change to her hairstyle, and a risqué gown had brought her a departure from her usual look. The dressmaker had assured her that there was magic in the barely-there black lace cloth.

The look of appreciation she'd received from her list of usual admirers all but confirmed the truth of the old woman's claim. Lord Elliot had cast his wandering eyes hungrily down her lovely form. Sir Tom Gunther had all but drooled.

"There is more to beauty than an outer reflection," the Immortal spirit of the looking glass advised her. "You know it's true."

She did. But she was in no mood to be lectured to. "I am not discussing anything else," Princess Catherine sniffed, turning to inspect the train of the lace gown. The entire confection was a call to sin.

Though the cut was conservative, the sheer quality of the lace was anything but.

“I ... understand that,” the mirror said sadly, allowing her reflection to appear overtop of his own, in the glass.

She was indeed lovely. And... empty, in a way. A way neither of them could really define.

“Then answer my question. Mirror, mirror, on the wall, *who’s* the fairest—“

The deep voice rumbled, as it interrupted her. “You ask for an answer to something I cannot give, Beauty. No woman exists as just a face and a form.”

Her tone turned sarcastic. “They do where the wealthy and powerful rule,” she replied shortly, positive that the exotic dress would ensure not just the affection of Elliot Burch and Tom Gunther, but of Stephen Bass, as well. Other eligible bachelors would be at court, also.

The men were competing with each other for the marriageable noblewomen, and though Catherine’s status assured her a goodly share of their attention, she knew what her rank demanded of her. That she must not simply be “pretty,” but be *exceptionally* so. That she must not simply be “lovely” but flawless.

Catherine’s position demanded that she must be all but without peer, in a room full of other beautiful women.

“The daughter of a king must always be the fairest, in her own right.” Catherine insisted. It was a fact she was intimately acquainted with, as she turned to inspect the drape of the magical new gown.

“The gown is... striking,” the mirror conceded, sensing the shimmer of enchantment which imbued the thread even from the other side of the

mirror. It was meant to be alluring. But then, he reasoned, all ladies' gowns were that, even the non-magical ones.

"To be striking is expected. It is... demanded, even." Catherine maintained, liking the way the dress moved, as she did.

*By whatever means possible*, she thought.

"You are striking, then," his low voice simply parroted her words back to her. She could sense his subtle disapproval, at her daring choice.

"Fine," the princess retorted. "I don't *need* you to tell me I look lovely. I'll have Lady Nancy's brother, Buddy, nipping at my heels, before dessert," she opined, liking how the lace at her throat emphasized the length of her neck.

The mirror was not inclined to argue, so he faded farther away, meaning to leave her to preen in front of unclouded glass.

"There's a party, the day after tomorrow." Her voice called him back. "Tom Gunther will reveal plans for a new castle." He knew she meant him to understand that there were certain... implications, in that plan.

The Spirit of the Mirror sighed, knowing he was her servant, as long as she willed to speak with him.

"Then a castle will be built," the leonine face in the mirror replied.

"It's an important project. And a very expensive one." She turned again, and admired the dress from its left side, then its right one.

"When he's done building it, he'll need a wife, to sit on the throne with him, there."

*Yes. Yes, he would*, the mirror thought. *Is it time? Time for you to go and claim the life that's yours?*

The Spirit watched her as she ran a critical, if not criticizing eye over her own form. Though she was still young, age was hardening her somehow, and he found that beyond tragic. He knew her heart was a good one, and that she was better than this... this expensive farce.

"Then Tom Gunther will build a building. And find a wife." His voice was steady. And just a bit... sad?

"You disapprove." Her eye moved away from her own reflection and caught his blue one, in the silvery oval.

"I have no opinion on such—"

"Tell me why."

*Oh, no. She was about to compel—*

"Mirror, Mirror, on the wall... Why do you disapprove of Tom Gunther?" she asked.

*Damn.* The spirit swore, internally. He could avoid speaking directly about much of what she said, even withhold what he felt, or knew, from her. But it was not so easy to do that when she asked him a question, directly. Any question.

"His heart is cold," the Spirit of the Mirror replied simply.

Catherine lifted a negligent, nearly bare shoulder. "He's a driven man, in his way. He is wealthy, ambitious, and successful. My father approves."

"Yes, he does." It wasn't a lie, so there was no sense disagreeing with her on the merits of Charles Chandler's opinion of Tom Gunther.

She raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow. "Mirror, why does my father's approval mean nothing to you? He is the king. Would you not wish to see him happy?"

How to begin to answer so complicated a question? How to tell her that the king's approval and her happiness were two different things, things that somehow, had become almost disastrously combined, over the last few years? That they were leading her to men like Tom Gunther, a thing that was a calamity, in and of itself? And for all Gunther's cold heart, that they'd led her to men that were even worse, over the last few years, if that was possible. Petty men. Demanding, yet weak ones. Ones who did not treasure her. Ones who treasured... objects, or status or fame. How to tell her that? How to begin to, especially when part of her knew it all, yet did not want to know?

For all her inappropriate attire, the Spirit knew that King Charles' contentment was a large part of what was driving his daughter onward. What would appear to the world as shallow vanity was actually a desperate desire to please, to not be thought "less," in spite of the terrible losses both she and the king had suffered when she was a child.

And then there was the responsibility she bore, now, as a woman of wealth. She loved her father, deeply. And she couldn't avoid being his only heir.

Her title came with a great many privileges. But it also came with certain burdens, for her. She was no common maid or lady. The fact of that impacted her in many ways, both subtle and gross.

If a reflection in a mirror could seem to give a slow, measured exhale, this one did so. "Your father approves of Tom Gunther because he fears you will be alone, and he sees in the builder a man whose drive and ambition match his own. He does not see the flaws in Tom Gunther's heart because it is not Tom Gunther's heart which interests him. It is his ability to create great and lasting things."

"My father loves me." She said it with princessly certainty.

The Spirit gentled his deep voice. "Yes. Yes, he does. Very much, Princess." *He is not alone in that feeling.*

"He wants only the best for me." She knew she was right about that, too. They both did, though they sometimes disagreed about the particulars.

"That is also true," he allowed. *Have we always played such word games with each other?* He wondered. He knew there was a time when they were... closer. Different with each other. Years ago, in her childhood. *Back when--*

"Yet, you disapprove," she observed, interrupting his train of thought.

He maintained his steady tone. "It is not for me to approve or disapprove. I am but bound to the mirror."

The princess looked at the waist-accentuating cut of the gown. She had grown used to her mirror's laconic, sometimes evasive replies, over the years. They'd known each other for too long for her not to be accustomed to them. She also sensed he was avoiding a more complete reply to her comments.

*Have we always been so... careful with each other?* she thought, unaware that her musings echoed his own.

"This dress guarantees me a groom. The woman who sold me the fabric guaranteed it."

*It does. But what kind?* "You will be a bride, then," the mirror said softly. So softly Catherine barely heard him.

She dropped her shoulders, the gesture no longer one of posturing, but of defeat.

In the change of pose, the Spirit of the Mirror saw some of the fight go out of her. She was worried. Frightened, even. He could see it in her perfect face, now that she allowed it.

“I’m not sure if I’m ready for this,” she confessed, wishing for her childhood, just a little. Though the sorrows of those days were sharp, there was much good in them, as well. And she wanted the mirror, her old confidante, back again. *Or at least some measure of confidence, now,* she thought.

*I miss you. This was simpler when I was younger. Life was simpler when I was younger. Even when it was so very hard,* she realized.

The Spirit beheld her, knowing there was next to nothing he could do. The path of her life was leading her onward. They were from two different worlds. Worlds which were, by nature, separate, and apart.

He told her the only thing he could. “Try not to struggle, so, Princess.” There was sorrow in his tone, again. And a little... wistfulness? “We always knew this day would come.”

She looked down at a dress that was designed to both conceal as it revealed. *Is this what I’m reduced to?* she thought. *A black dress and a party I don’t even want to go to? Is this all I’m worth?*

His sad words about “struggle” rang in her ears. Ears that sported gems worth a fortune. “I suppose we did,” she answered, aware she liked the notion of leaving him no better than he did. “Will you miss me, at least? When I leave?”

This time, he had no trouble answering.

“More than I can say,” he replied.

She beheld her great and secret companion. “Things were easier when I was little,” she reminisced, knowing it wasn’t true, even as it was.



He knew the same thing. "Sadder, perhaps, but simpler, yes," he agreed. "When the Queen brought me into your rooms, I have to believe she knew what she was doing."

The Princess nodded, and looked down. She didn't see the look of deep compassion, in his azure eyes, but she didn't need to. She knew it was there. She had known it since childhood.

Catherine relaxed, a little, feeling he was actually talking to her again, rather than just forcing answers out.

"I miss her, Mirror." A tear escaped her storm-colored eyes. "I miss her, so much."

It wasn't a question, so he was not compelled to answer. He did, anyway.

The soft, rumbling baritone that had always soothed her, did so again. "I know that you do. I know that, Princess. The Queen loved you more than anything. Always. I think... I think all she wanted for you, really, was a happy life." He tried to comfort her, knowing that sometimes, he could. Sometimes, words could do that. He depended on it, since they could not touch.

She looked back up, catching only a little of her image in the huge glass. It was filled with his familiar, leonine face, and he seemed very... pressed against the glass, for lack of a better description.

"A Happy Life," she echoed, saying the words as if they were a title, rather than a doomed mother's keenest wish.

"One you can find love in, and build upon. One you can be proud of," he said, stepping back just a bit so she could see her reflection, again.

*Is this the way I achieve that?* she wondered, knowing only that the path before was taking her to places she had very little control over, and less love for.

Again, he attempted to ease her disquiet, even though it caused him pain. “There are children... waiting to be born,” he said, hating that he had to say it, yet also knowing it was true.

She nodded again. *Yes. Yes, there were. Great children. My father’s grandchildren. Royal children. My children.* There was no sense denying it.

The princess took what comfort from that she could.

He watched as she gathered her strength, and squared her shoulders again, for the tasks that loomed before her. She was not a weak woman, and she never had been, either mentally or physically. Though indifferent to some of her tutors, she had a sharp mind, and loved the magic of books. Mentally, she was bright. Physically, she was active.

As a child, she’d loved to climb trees, even over the worried king’s objections.

The Spirit could see the royal park through the room’s only window. He even remembered her favorite tree, a spreading beech with a slender trunk but a wide canopy.

“Children,” she mulled the word over, allowing herself to say it aloud in an attempt to make it more real. “I suppose there are,” she answered, knowing what that meant for her, both good and bad.

He watched her accept her fate, even as he knew that part of her railed against it.

He knew the feeling well.

She turned again, checking the back of the dress, one more time. She looked stunning, and not just because the dress held an enchantment.

With what passed for a satisfied nod, she exited the room.

He stared after her, trapped where he was, by what he was.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### THE SPIRIT OF THE FATHER

*"You're my great temptation."*

*Two Kinds of Love* - by Stevie Nicks

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"You've been looking at the Princess again," the Spirit of the Father accused the Spirit of the Mirror, without heat. It's not like it was the first time. Or the fortieth.

Father watched as his son paced. His special child was restless, and pensive, bound as they both were, by the World On The Other Side Of The Mirror.

"Father, she's... struggling. I can sense it from her."

Father was quick with a retort. "This is not like it was, when she was a little girl. You *know* this. When you... reached out to her before... that was childhood. She could half-pretend you were her imaginary friend, a thing she'd conjured to help her get through her grief. When she left for higher studies, that should have been the end of it."

Father was succinct in his appraisal of when he should have stopped appearing to her.

It was an old argument, and in the Mirror's mind, not a welcome one.

“It’s dangerous to have anything to do with her,” Father continued. “You know it as well as I do. Our *world* is at risk,” he stated, holding up his hands to encompass their secret domain. Few knew there was an entire world, on the other side of the reflecting glass.

“She knows nothing of us. Nothing of our world, here. We’re safe,” the lion-faced being replied.

“There *is* no safety, out there.” Father replied. “Nor will there be in here, if we are revealed.”

“She knows only about me, and nothing of the passageways,” the Mirror replied tersely. “We are safe,” he repeated.

*Perhaps we are. But are you?* Father wondered.

Father ameliorated his tone. “It isn’t that I don’t understand, you know,” he sounded sympathetic. “There’s a world of possibilities, where she’s from. I understand how... tempting that must be, for you.”

The realm behind the mirror was large, in scope. But it was limited, as well. As refuges went, it held much. But it also lacked much. Father had crossed into it voluntarily. But his adopted son was a particularly special being. He’d been born here, on this side of the glass. His title could be uttered, anywhere. He was the spirit of the mirror. But his name, the name of a conqueror, could only be spoken here.

“Do you? Do you understand?” Vincent didn’t mean the reply to come out as brusquely as it did.

“Her world is *full* of frightened people. People who would—“

“I know. *I do*, Father,” he interrupted. “Her world is a world apart from mine. I understand it.” Vincent’s tone was bitter, and tinged with more than a little frustration.

Father sighed. "Vincent," he called his son by his name, rather than his title. "We depend on you. Depend on you to keep the secrets of our concealment; to not reveal us to others, and to protect us if anything goes awry."

"The magic of the mirror binds me to answer her questions," Vincent replied. "There is a bond, between us."

*Your heart binds you more*, Jacob thought, though he didn't say it. He lifted a cup of tea and considered its contents, not wanting to seem argumentative.

Nothing said between them was untrue. But there was more. Magic mirrors often showed themselves to children, but seldom to adults. Magic words used in one part of a life had no power, in the other, without either strong enchantment or compulsion. And Jacob knew the nature of the compulsion which drove his special, impulsive son. He was in love. There was no sense arguing about that, or about the wisdom of it.

Mirror inhabitants were, almost by definition, immortal. While any spirit who chose life behind the mirror could leave it for a mortal life on the other side of the reflection, Father was well aware that his unique, adopted offspring had no such option, not really. His visage as a fairy-tale creature posed no peril to him, on *this* side of the silver. But on the other one...

Father took a slow sip of lukewarm tea, before he considered what he was about to say, next.

"Vincent, the princess is--"

"Catherine. Her name is Catherine."

Father was aware he was going to have to get used to being interrupted.

*"Princess Catherine,"* Father emphasized the title, "has been a source of... interest for you since she was a young girl. You watched her grow up. You've watched her... become the woman she is. It's understandable that you're... fascinated."

Vincent paced the narrow room. It was crowded with books, all of which he'd read until he had most of them committed to memory. The stony room served as Father's chamber, on this side of the mirror.

"She came to me. First started speaking to me in mourning. Could I turn away from her?" Vincent asked, raising his hand, in a beseeching gesture. The hand was talon-tipped. Pointed nails glinted, in the candlelight.

Father shook his head. "You appeared as a youth, and answered a child's plea for comfort. But that was a long time ago. She is no longer a child. She's grown, Vincent. Grown into a woman. The woman she was always meant to be. *You must let her choose her own path.* It is not in here. And for your sake... I very much regret that it is not with you." Jacob sighed, and settled the cup.

"Letting her own her own fate is not an... evil thing," Jacob prompted, knowing it was time for this. Past time for it. Vincent and Catherine were all but destined to part, at some point. It was part of why magic mirrors rarely appeared to their adults, thus re-setting the charm of summoning.

Vincent grew frustrated. Which was to say, he grew more frustrated. He snatched a book from the top of the nearest stack and slammed it down on the table. The chess pieces jumped.

"Those are only words, Father." Vincent all but bit out the reply.  
"Shadows of feelings. They bring no... comfort." He paced away from the only father he'd ever known.

*"Mirror, mirror, on the wall..."*

They both heard it.

"Don't. Don't go, Vincent. You can resist. You can ... sever the connection between you. You're strong. You must at least try."

"No."

*"Who's the fairest..."*

"Vincent..." Father pressed.

"No, Father. She needs me. I *know* that she needs me."

Jacob tried again. "Vincent, I beg you. This act of kindness. Don't let it... destroy you."

*"...of them all?"*

"A question. She's calling for me, and asking me a question."

"A vain one. A vain girl's vain question. Vincent, you're better than this." Father's tone was insistent, though his expression was a pleading one.

Vincent felt a tug on his consciousness, as he felt the compulsion to appear in the glass before Catherine.

"I must go."

*"Mirror, mirror!"* A royal voice rose.

"You wish to go. There is a difference," Father replied.

"Not for me. Not with her."

“There was a time when she stopped calling for you. For years.” Jacob knew he was trying to stall his special son. Also to remind him of the loneliness he’d endured, not because Catherine was an evil woman, but simply because she was who she was.

*“...Who’s the fairest of them all?!”*

Vincent heard the urgency in her voice.

“There was a time when she thought I was a dream. Something she’d imagined, to get her through the pain of her mother’s passing.”

He scooped up the book. It had a white cover. Great Expectations. He slid it into his cape, for no reason he could name, and Jacob knew he was about to leave.

“I’ll pray for both of you,” Father replied helplessly.

In a swirl of black cape and magic, Vincent was gone down the passageway.

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### CHAPTER THREE

#### PROVIDENCE AND PROMISES

*“Long nets of white cloud my memory... There is magic ... all around you, every time you walk in the room.”*

Rooms on Fire - by Stevie Nicks

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“You don’t really want to know the answer to that question. Why do you keep asking it?” the mirror asked, watching her pace the chamber.

She shot him a look that was part annoyance, and part relief.



“They’re the summoning words,” she said shortly. “Where were you?”

Vincent-of-the-Mirror knew he could never fully answer that question.

“I thought to not see you again, this day. You seemed... very occupied when we spoke last,” he evaded, taking in her soft form. She’d rid herself of the ridiculous enchanted dress, for the time being. She was now wrapped in white silk, a nightgown and matching robe. It was the outfit he most often associated her with, after the sun went down.

“Well... I don’t like it when you don’t come right away. Sometimes I... sometimes I need you,” she said, managing to sound more vulnerable than petulant, as she wore a pathway across her Aubusson carpet.

“I don’t think you need me to prepare for a party,” he said, checking her hand to see if an engagement ring engulfed her finger, as yet. None did.

“If I... If I told you I was leaving this place. Leaving, and might never return... what would you do, Mirror?” she asked.

It was an absurd question. She knew he was bound to the mirror, and that like all enchanted artifacts, this one could not be moved. It wasn’t simply “hung on the wall.” It was a part of the castle.

*Do? Nothing. What could I do?*

But it was a question, and a question required an answer of some sort.

“I would tell you... that the world is full of possibilities, and wonders. That you must... go. Do all you were meant to do. See all you were meant to see.”

She blinked, and tears threatened to spill from her green eyes. Free of cosmetics and clear of the ridiculous gown, she looked almost impossibly young, and like “his Catherine,” again.

“Is that how you truly feel?” she asked.

The magic of the mirror bound him to the truth. He could avoid her question, if possible. But he couldn’t lie to her. But he could deflect, somewhat.

“You asked what I would do,” he said, choosing to answer the former question, rather than the more dangerous, latter one. “In truth, I could ‘do’ nothing. Your life is your own, and it must be lived. Nothing I am will change that. And you don’t need to ask the same question twice, in two different ways. How I feel or don’t feel changes none of our circumstances. And you know I will tell you no falsehoods.”

Perhaps. But the woman Catherine had become knew there was a difference between telling a lie and avoiding the truth. She’d lived much of the last few years, with that distinction. When her father had asked her whether or not she enjoyed being a great princess, her reply had been obfuscatory. “I am not a great princess. But I am the daughter of a great king.”

Well-manicured fingers rubbed at her forehead. She was getting a headache. He could feel it.

“Stephen Bass and Elliot Burch have both asked my father for permission to marry me.”

The reality of that was devastating, for Vincent, even though it wasn’t unexpected. It was the difference between expecting a blow, and receiving one. He tried not to let her see that, as he watched her massage her temples. He purposely let her emotions rush to him, within the bond that kept them together. She felt... unsure. Confused. Reluctant, even?

Her obvious distress gave him cause to hope.

“You loved them both... once,” he said carefully, trying to see if those feelings still existed.

The reminder didn’t seem to help. If anything, it seemed to cause her to struggle, more. “I did,” she recalled. “Stephen, when I was much younger. Back when I went away to school.”

*Yes. Back when you left me, because you had a life to lead. You didn’t speak to me for years. I remember.*

“But now...” he prompted, gently.

He could see the uncertainty in her eyes. Such beautiful eyes. They were the color of the Great Falls, right after a storm. She had ocean eyes.

“Now... you are not so certain?” he asked, observing her as she continued to pace the room.

She dropped her hands and folded them across her waist in a protective gesture. “Now I... I don’t really know.” Her green eyes looked almost lost. “I don’t have to... to love them, do I?” she asked, swishing white silk as she walked.

“Only you can answer that. I only know that if it were for me to say, I would tell you...” he hesitated, just as she had.

“Tell me what?” she asked, clearly wanting his counsel.

He offered her the only advice he could. “I would tell you to find someone, Princess. Someone to love. Someone to be a part of.”

The answer clearly gave her no comfort. “Someone to be a part of. But Stephen is obsessed with antiques. Old treasures. Beautiful things which have lasted many years.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Vincent asked, again catching the fluttering shift in her uncertain mood.

“An antique stays the same. That’s what makes it rare. That it looks like it did long ago.”

Vincent nodded his understanding of this truth.

“A woman is not beautiful forever,” she said, acknowledging it.

*You will be.* He thought it, but didn’t dare utter it aloud. *You will be. Inside.*

“When the first grey hair comes... when the first line touches my face... Stephen will be difficult to live with. Perhaps impossible.” It was a measure of her nervousness that she lifted her ringless hand and began chewing on a selected fingernail.

*At least she’s planning for the future,* he thought, knowing full well that Stephen Bass was indeed that way. *At least she isn’t stumbling blindly into Gods-knew-what.*

“And Elliot?” he prompted, watching her chew the nail, as she paced.

When she realized she was ruining a particularly expensive manicure, she dropped her hand in disgust, and willed herself to stop moving.

“Elliot wants to build things. Even more than Tom does. Towers. Dynasties.” She looked to the side. “He’ll keep me as long as I help serve both purposes.”

*She is no fool,* he’d give her that.

“There are other... choices to consider.” He knew he wasn’t one of them. Even as some part of him prayed he could be.

She pulled the ends of her belt tight. It was a nervous gesture. One that made her waist look impossibly small.

“There are. Tom Gunther wants to move up in rank. Others want... I don’t know. The king’s daughter.”

*An hour ago, you were content to be that, he mused, watching her. Does the idea of wearing a magic dress tomorrow not bring you all that you want?*

“I don’t know what I want,” she said, as if she’d read his mind. “Part of me doesn’t even want to be a princess. Part of me just wants to be ... I don’t know. Someone else. Someone who helps. Someone who... *means* something, to other people. Not just royals. Not just... the wealthy, or the powerful. Other people. Common people. All people.”

*But you do mean something. You’ve always meant something. You do mean something, to me.*

“I’m tired, and it’s late. And I don’t suppose we have much time left, with each other,” she mused, touching the frame. A mermaid flipped her wooden tail in it, forever trapped in the enchanted wood. A carved dolphin was the mermaid’s constant companion.

“I don’t suppose we do,” he said, feeling his heart bleed a little, from her pronouncement.

“You’re trapped here. While I’m... everywhere,” she said, indicating the room around her and all that lay beyond it.

“You are. Your life is meant to be lived, Princess.” He was positive it was true.

“I remember the one time you called me Catherine. I don’t think I ever thanked you enough, for that day,” she said, her eyes growing sad, with memory.

“You were grief struck from the funeral. I could do no less.” He remembered the day she spoke of. She’d been sobbing, after they’d

laid her mother to rest. She'd been no more than ten years old. Thanks to the magic, he had appeared to her as someone closer to her age. A gangly youth, though still oddly featured. A friend, when she'd needed one.

"You said you would be here for me. Always," she said.

"And so I have been. Always."

Her tone was wistful. "You never called me 'Catherine,' again," she observed.

It wasn't a question, but his reply was a considered one. "Nor should I. You've been beyond just 'royalty,' since that day. You are the king's only child, the heir to his fortune. Not 'just' a princess, but the Crown Princess of Charles' kingdom, and his heir apparent."

He did not need to tell her what she already knew. Everyone in the palace had begun treating her differently, after that day. They were kind, of course. But there was an air of deference about them which hadn't really been there, before. An air of deference which had only increased, as she'd aged. Rank had its many privileges. But it also built its chasms.

So, yes. Even he'd been aware that he'd stopped calling her "Catherine," and called her "Princess" or "Princess Catherine" or "My Lady," or "Beauty" to her face. There were reasons for that, as well. "Catherine," sounded intimate, like someone who could belong to him. The others... well. With the other names, he knew better. No "Beauty" would have him. No Princess would, either.

"And besides... there is power in a name. Any name." His words remained carefully given. "Your title is for the world. Your name... that is for your husband, Princess. Whoever he turns out to be."

She looked at the glass, and wondered if he had a name. And if he would tell it to her, if he did. She could perhaps compel it from him, but she hated to force from him anything he did not give willingly. Theirs was a tenuous relationship, sometimes, even as it was a deep one.

“Since that day, you’ve been a different kind of royalty: A future queen,” he reminded her.

Catherine drew herself up to her full height. Though not tall, she was always a regal presence.

“Yes. Yes, I have been.”

The weight of all her choices, and some she’d never made, bore down on her lovely shoulders.

“It set me apart. It made me unhappy, sometimes. It made people treat me differently, and tread carefully around me. Even avoid me, sometimes. I used to wonder what I’d done wrong. Why I always felt... lonely, sometimes.”

He was surprised at her revelation. If there was anyone who always seemed surrounded by humanity, it was the princess. This room was one of the few places she could go to escape that. Perhaps the only place, anymore.

“Did it?” he asked, very familiar with the notion of being “set apart” thanks to what he was. The notion that they shared that in common was just a bit jarring, to him.

She simply nodded, and worried a fold into her robe, with her fingers. “If I told you I don’t love ... any of them... that it doesn’t matter which one of them I choose, because they don’t really love me either... What would you tell me to do, Mirror?”

Her fingers stayed where they were, pleating the fabric of the expensive robe. She did not raise her head to meet his eyes.

*I'd tell you to run to me. I'd tell you to come where you would always be loved. I'd tell you to...*

But he couldn't confess it, not like that. And he couldn't lie.

"I would tell you to flee such an arrangement, and go where you are loved," he said honestly, knowing he hadn't breached the truth, in his pronouncement. "Someplace where beauty, warmth and courage are valued," he added, again knowing he hadn't broken the concealment of his true feelings to her, nor told her of the world on the other side of the mirror.

"If only there was such a place," the princess, sighed. Her expression became rueful. "And if only I was such a person."

*You are. I know you are. I sense it, inside you.*

And though that was true, he could tell that the Princess was struggling to sense it inside herself.

Her shoulders slumped, and the newly raised eyes which met his were shadowed. Exhaustion was threatening to claim her. She was beyond tired, and the nervous energy she'd been burning through was about to leave her flat.

"Sleep, Lady," he prodded gently. "It's after midnight. Tomorrow will come soon enough," Vincent advised.

"Tomorrow... is April 12<sup>th</sup>. Tom's gala will happen. There is so much to take care of. He'll unveil the details of his new palace, invite other nobles to see it, and be impressed. I *should* go to sleep." She smoothed out the folds of the silk with an unsteady hand. "I suppose I have to



look my best. For him. For the moneylenders he's courting, even as he courts me. For all of them."

Before Vincent-of-the-Mirror could even respond one way or the other to that, she blew out the candle and went to bed.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE PATH THAT LEADS AWAY CAN ALSO LEAD HOME

*"It's just the ghost of the future that you're so frightened of, and so you look to your Guardian."*

Ghosts - by Stevie Nicks

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Castle galas often lasted long into the night. Since the Spirit of the Mirror lived inside the Princess' private chamber, he saw nothing of the ballroom, and only a little of the world beyond the wall he was confined to.

His view of the world was a narrow one, therefore, and he was constrained both by his appearance, and his tie to the enchanted glass which was both his home and his prison.

"You must let her choose her own path, Vincent," Father repeated, for what must have been the third time.

"The path that leads her away from me. I know," Vincent all but growled it. "But such a path... It can also return us home."

Jacob raised a familiar eyebrow, then glanced back at the book he was pretending to read.

“Besides, I heard you the first time.” Vincent sulked, not liking any part of his life, at the moment.

Father knew his son, and knew he was considering a risk beyond all reasonable measures of that word.

“Vincent... “ He kept his tone very neutral. “To step out into her world... You’d be mortal. You’d be in danger. Danger beyond imagining. Do you know what they’d do to you, if they caught you out there?”

The Spirit of the Mirror hoped it was a rhetorical question. It wasn’t.

“They’d kill you,” Father answered himself. “Or ... throw you in a cage, and make you wish you were dead.”

It was a truth Vincent had always lived with. And one he seemed destined to die with. Alone. “What would you like me to do? Just... let her go? Is that the best I can hope for, Father? To forget her?”

The older spirit sighed. “There are other people to think about.”

Vincent’s reply was particularly terse. “For me, there is only Catherine.”

“A name you don’t use, and you can’t let her know yours,” Jacob prompted. “Vincent, the moment you step through the glass, you’ll begin to age, really age, just as she does. You’ll grow old. You’ll die. You’re *safe* here. That is no small thing.”

It wasn’t. He knew it wasn’t. But it was chafing him, nonetheless.

“Sometimes... sometimes we must leave our safe places, Father, and-“

“Don’t.” Jacob cut him off with a swipe of his gloved hand. “Don’t quote peace activists or Irish poets to me, Vincent. There *is* no safety for you, out there. Or with her. None. *There simply isn’t.*”

“You loved, once,” Vincent tried not to say it as if it were an accusation.

“Yes. And we all know how well that turned out. If I hadn’t found my way here, hadn’t... become what I am now... well. I don’t know what would have happened.”

The old story was having no effect on the restless spirit that strode aimlessly back and forth across the chamber. He was pacing the room, much as Catherine had done in her room, the night before.

“I’m going to go,” he said, pulling his dark cape close around himself.

“You’re going back to the edge of the glass,” Father all but accused it.

“If I am... it’s because my heart compels me to,” Vincent answered.

Just as he reached the hallway, a ...tearing sensation happened along Vincent’s awareness. It was sudden, and... painful. Very.

And he knew it wasn’t “him” who was in pain.

*Catherine!!* His mind screamed her name as he felt a bolt of lightning lash down his cheek. But for the fact that he was an immortal, he’d swear the left side of his face was now bloody. He put his clawed fingertips there, on reflex.

There was no blood. But he had a feeling he knew who had just gotten injured. Badly.

He ran to the mirror, dreading what he might find there, and praying that he would find it, all at the same time. Jacob was right behind him.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MIRROR

*“Well, all right’ said Alice. ‘I’m going back... to the other side of the Mirror...”*

Alice - by Stevie Nicks

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She stumbled through the doorway, turned, and bolted it. The heavy lock slid home.

As if the locking the door was the important thing, and not the blood running down her cheek.

"Mirror? Please! Mirror!" She looked in the glass and she saw what was there, on her face. A bloody, rivening mark sliced its way down one cheek. A life-changing one, for she would never be the same, again.

"My God, what have they done to her?" Vincent and Jacob could both see her face, as she touched the glass, beseeching her Spirit to come forth.

Vincent ran to her, as Father's spirit tried to restrain him. "You can't. You know you can't. She has to choose her own path!"

"Perhaps it's time we both did that," Vincent said, pulling away.

"Vincent... you can't. If you go through the glass, you'll be mortal. You'll age, just as she does. From this day, forward."

"Then *we* will age. Together. Perhaps there is more than one way to become immortal."

It was the last thing he ever said, as the Spirit of the Mirror.

Vincent pressed himself against the glass, just as he pressed himself against the magic. He felt the restraining bands of the geis, and he felt it tingle, and try to bar his passage. He was part of the enchantment,

and it was part of him. He could feel it ripping its way through him as he both pressed and willed himself through the glass barrier.

Catherine's horrified hands covered her marred face. "Mirror... Mirror..." She began the words, but had no heart to finish them. For what could she ask, now? The summoning words turned to ash, in her mouth.

"Please." She crumpled to her knees, knowing she was beaten.

Before she could continue her fall to the floor, he had her in his arms.

"Mirror?" she asked, but she knew it was him. That face had been with her since her girlhood. Longer, perhaps. He cradled her as gently as a lover. His dear, beloved face loomed large, over hers.

"What happened?!" he asked, taking her handkerchief from her hand so he could staunch the flow of blood.

"I don't know. A mistake. Someone Tom Gunther knew... they said she was me." Catherine grew more agitated. Vincent could hear the running feet of the guards.

"Shhhhh," Vincent soothed, inspecting the damage. She would carry a scar. A deep one.

"You're safe. You're safe, now," he said.

A heavy fist pounded on the door.

"Princess?"

Catherine dropped her voice low. "I can't. I can't let them see me. Please! Not until it's healed, at least a little. You have no idea how this changes things. How much... different it makes me. How...pitied. Again."

“No one will pity you,” he said, knowing the misery such an emotion could bring. He wrapped her in the cape that contained just the barest trace of whatever remained of his magic. He would use it to help her. He would use everything he had, to help her. He knew that, now.

He scooped her up in arms mighty enough to lift the beam on the palace door.

Relief flooded her, at being in his strong embrace.

And then, it flooded him. Completely, and more strongly than it had ever done.

He sensed their bond, being born. The tie he’d always had to her was nothing, compared to this.

*What?*

He felt what she was feeling. Distinctly.

The confusion, the pain, the fear, the relief... all of it, coursing through her like a spring-swollen stream, tumbling down a mountainside. And more... he knew that she could sense him, as well.

*We make our own magic. Together, we make it,* he realized.

She locked her arms around his neck, as he approached the mirror, the gateway back to his domain. Without asking what they were about to do, she knew.

“It’s a safe place?” she asked, about the Other Side of the Mirror.

He nodded. “Safe. Warm. We tend each other. And live as best we can.”

She gave a small smile that he felt as well as saw. “Oh, good. You’re not alone, then? I always worried that you might be. But that didn’t seem right.”

“Princess!” A male voice on the other side of the door shouted. Then...  
“Get the battering ram. I want this door down. Now!”

She glanced at the door, then back up at him. Doubt clouded her grey-green eyes.

“I’m not a Beauty, anymore. Will they want me?”

*I want you. I will always want you. Always. We’ll find a way.*

“We all help each other,” he answered, as if her door wasn’t about to burst in on the two of them. “It’s our world, in there.” He nodded to the glass, knowing she was utterly unaware of what he’d given up, for her sake. It was all right. It was a gift freely given. “I’ll take you in. Read to you,” he said, feeling the gentle weight of the book shift, inside his pocket.

She tightened her arm around his neck, ready to go.

“Before we leave, one thing,” she said, as the pounding on the door started in earnest.

“Just one?” he asked as if they had all the time in the world.

*Well. Maybe not all the time. But the next fifty or sixty years, at least. And after that... who can say?* he amended mentally, as the wood around the frame began to splinter.

“Mirror... do you have a name?” she asked.

He smiled as he stepped forward, and moved from her world back into his.

As they stood on the other side of the mirror, safe from hate and harm, he gave her the one thing she wanted.

“My name... Vincent.”

He felt her incredible pleasure, at the sound.

“Vincent,” she repeated, holding it to her as a treasure. “Your name is Vincent.” She smiled at that, in spite of the pain in her cheek.

He swore he would love her until her last breath.

And that here, there were no titles between them.

His next words were a deep sounding bell, with a bond-sealing reverberation along every syllable. “And your name... is Catherine.”

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No matter where you are when you go through the looking glass, I wish  
you love. ~ Cindy

*“Mirror, Mirror” was wholly inspired by Judith Nolan’s picture, above. If there’s one thing I’ve come to learn and appreciate, it’s that inspiration can come to you from a great many sources in this fandom, and in most cases, it is delightedly and freely given. Thank you, Judi. You give constantly, and without restraint.*

*At stated above, all song lyrics quoted are from the Stevie Nicks Album “The Other Side of the Mirror.” (Released in May of 1989, when our special little show was still part of the landscape.) There is no rhyme or reason for my choice to have songs from it frame the chapters, other than the line “Well, all right said Alice, I’m going back to the other side of the mirror,” became stuck in my head as I was writing this, so I decided to let it come out and play.*