

Beauty and the Beast Revisited

by Sharon Reynolds

For a time, let me take you to a place where Fairy Tales are real. Where the magic of love holds reign. To the wonder of an ancient story retold. A visitation to friends long forgotten in childhood memories.

1---VISIONS

The small cart jogged along the rock strewn dirt road. The merchant took comfort in the steady clop of his field horse's hooves against the ground, trying to forget the jostling his poor old bones and teeth were taking. The wagon was empty. Not even a crate of chickens to bring home this trip.

His scowl deepened as he thought of it. Life had not been kind to him. At first, he had made a good living and raised a family well, but, in his later years a single wrong twist of fate had left him almost destitute.

His wife, whom he had loved more than himself, had fallen ill and died. Without her help at home and in the business they shared, he was left with four children alone. He had done the best he could for them, yet his long trips abroad would return him to his estate and a family who were almost strangers to him.

All that was, except Beauty. Her sisters had become fickle and vain, her brother was into all manner of carousing. Only Beauty, his youngest, never seemed to change.

This after gambling on what an associate had thought was sure to bring them both a greater wealth. It was Beauty alone who had consoled them all. His ships had been lost far out to sea and all their goods were gone. His lifetime savings vanished.

He had no idea how to pay his creditors. All he had left was a small cottage in the country, a few cattle and fowl, and a small staff of servants. It was not until he'd had to send the servants away that things began to get worse.

Not used to doing work of any sort, Beauty's sisters were as infants, refusing to help in any fashion. Although her brother was strong and could work well, his work was inconsistent. What he did manage to earn, he quickly gambled away.

The merchant rubbed the graying beard at his chin, shaking his head as the cart bumped over another cobble in the road.

The only thing that kept the family going it seemed, was Beauty. She had been fond of watching her mother and had been no stranger to the kitchen. She had taken it upon herself to become her sisters' handmaid and servant. Even her request at the start of this ill-fated trip had been a simple one.

Word had come that one of the ships had been found and would be coming into port within the month. The merchant had left for the coast as soon as he was able, but, the news had come late. To pay his heavy debts his creditors had taken nearly all of the cargo, leaving him but the small purse he now carried with him.

He wondered silently how he would tell his elder daughters; they had been so excited about fancy lace and fabrics. His son had asked for a fine horse. Beauty had asked only for a simple rose.

The old man rubbed his gloved hands together and pulled his great cloak closer around his bent

shoulders. The air had become quite cold. Night had fallen around him as he had passed through the last town. It had begun to snow. Large delicate white flakes that drifted down slowly. Much like large feathers.

Beauty, he mused. Such as things went. He could not even grant her simple request.

Hoofbeats pounded in the distance behind him. At first he thought it perhaps another traveler on this lonely road, but, as they drew closer, louder, he could hear that there were three of them. Closing on him and his poor empty cart at a swift pace.

2---WONDERS

The gray blue eyes opened slowly, squinting at the dim light. The pain. The merchant reached up to his pounding head and found it wrapped around with cloth. He chuckled softly to himself. Thinking that at least, he was safe. They had been highwaymen after all.

Yet, if that were true, then where was he? Brigands were notorious for not allowing those they victimized to live. Yet, he was alive. He groaned at both the nausea and dizziness that assailed his senses as he tried to sit up, painfully aware at just how alive he was.

Peering around, he found a tray of rolls, several fruits and a large silver carafe of some hot beverage. It sat on the table nearest the bed. The aroma of the sweet rolls laced with cinnamon would normally had added to the hunger he had been traveling with. But, whatever the injury to his poor head, the inviting scent was, at least at present, quite repulsive.

On the other side of the bed, his other clothes were piled on a strange looking chair. They looked as if they had been freshly laundered. He was clad in only a long white night shirt and his long leggings.

He pulled the silk sheets and heavy down-filled quilt off his lap and turned. Setting his bare feet on the side rug, his long toes sank into the lush feel of the fibers. For once, he was glad the bottom of his leggings had long since worn out.

"Hello! Is anyone there?" His own voice reverberated in the room and banged against his ears. He grimaced, recanting the idea to try to call out again.

Quietly, he eased himself back up into the bed, pulling the blankets up around his chin. Silently, he hoped he would not be sick all over his benefactor's finery.

Warm again after a few moments, his tired eyes closed in sleep. He did not see the tall darkly-clad figure that paused at the archway to his chamber.

The cry of a bird woke him with a start. How long had he been sleeping? the merchant wondered, worried. It took him several minutes to remember where he was and what had happened to him. He checked the bandage around his head. Finding it new and less wrapped this time, he paused at the thought. Had he slept through the ministrations of his host's servants?

Surely a person of such obvious wealth would have had servants. Yet, again, no one came at his call.

The calling of his body forced the merchant to rise and search for the necessities room. It was just off what had temporarily become his chamber. The furnishings here were just as elegant.

When he had finished and washed in the basin, he returned to find a fresh tray of eggs, sweet rolls and tea. This time, his appetite was not put off by his stomach, and sitting down he began to fill its emptiness with unmannered abandon.

It had not taken him long to devour the breakfast spread. Then, wiping his hands and face on the clean cloth napkin, he draped it across the remnants that were left and turned his attention to his clothes.

Despite the fire in the fireplace, the room was chill. Getting into his clothes was much more comfortable. Once dressed he turned his curiosity to the rest of the structure and walked out into the hall.

A soft breeze fluttered the drapes of the long arched hall. A breeze filled with the subtle scents of spring flowers. He frowned, thinking of it. He had heard of injuries such as this before - of men who, by some strange fatality, had slept for months while their bodies healed. But never had he thought that that would befall him.

His pace quickened. What would his family have done without him? he worried. Would they have thought him long lost? Or dead? How would they have managed through the long winter?

He stopped by a draped archway to catch back his breath. His heart was beating madly in his ears. Taking hold of the red velvet, he pulled it carefully aside and stepped onto the top of a stairwell.

The tall flight of marble stone steps led down and around into darkness. Apprehension touched his brow with perspiration. What if by some strange turn he should go the wrong way?

He fought down the cold that had settled in his stomach and continued down. One step at a time. The stairway curled to the left, was illuminated there by a stone candelabrum attached to the wall. His eyes widened at seeing it up close, for it resembled so closely a true human arm and hand that he expected to see the rest of this person emerge from the wall at any moment.

The stairs flared at the bottom, emptying into a large dining hall. It had two exiting arches and a shorter one leading to what he supposed was a kitchen or storage area. The shorter hall was barred with a gilded iron gate. The other led off behind the stairs. The third was still in shadow, but led off in the opposite direction.

A long table sat in the center of the room. Close by, in one wall, stood a fireplace of huge proportions. It too carried pillars of remarkably life-like statuary. He shivered, it was a little too real for his liking.

A strange fruity smell caught his attention as he passed by the table. The merchant stopped briefly to see where it could be coming from, for there was no fruit on the cloth covered table, only a gold candelabrum, similar to the one on the stairwell. This one however had a base. The candles nestled in the seven tines were a peach color.

His boots clacked against the hall's white marble floor. A slight breeze and a sliver of light from outside peeped through the door frame. He hurried to it, pushed it open, surprised that it opened almost as if by itself. The light from outside fell upon the massive carvings. How ponderous they truly were! He trembled inside anew. Perhaps the Master of this place was a Sorcerer.

The merchant stepped out onto the wide stone terrace. It seemed to stretch out as far as he could see, with a walkway that he thought might encircle the entire building. Walking across the width of it, he found himself at the top of a double wide staircase. The sides were lined with stonework - bowls of fruit, dogs at ready for the hunt, and flowers. The end posts were each topped by single sitting lion.

"Hello!" he called. "Is anyone there!"

His voice only frightened some birds who took flight from the trees near by. The forest that surrounded the castle on two sides was dark, thick. He had seen it from atop the stairs. A sure barrier to keep anyone out. Or, he thought, as a dark look crossed his face, to keep something in.

He hurried down the last two steps and into a wondrous courtyard, his mouth agape. It was indeed

spring here.

The grass was lush and green. Large floral blooms bobbed heavily in the warm breeze. The hedges closest had been trimmed to contrast the taller plants. Everything seemed alive with fragrance and beauty. Flowers were much larger than those he had ever seen, or bloomed on a bush in such profusion that the entire thing appeared a solid bright color.

Song birds flew overhead at his advance. A length of wood fence led him past the entrance of a stable and out into a small lane. A hand to his beard, the merchant could hardly believe the place before him. Surely his eyes were deceiving him. A grassy plain had been trimmed down. A path made of tiny red and white stone chips glistened like jewels in the sun. The pond to which it led was lined with shallow stone wall. Flowers cascaded down from stone urns all around it, their soft leaves and colorful petals barely touching the silvery blue water within.

A stone chair loomed before him. It was of large proportions, reminding him of a type of throne someone had once spoken to him about. There were roaring lions' heads adorning the crown at the back and one each at the ends of the armrests. This was flanked by two large urns, like those that circled the pond. One was full of bright yellow flowers of a kind the merchant did not recognize. The one closest to him harbored a rose bush.

A single bud, the size of a large man's fist, had just begun to unwind its petals to the warming sun. Yet, it was so deep a scarlet, that the sight of it took his breath away. Perhaps Beauty would have her rose after all. With all this other loveliness, surely no one would miss this single rose bud.

Without thinking, the merchant bent and pulled the bloom from its branch.

Suddenly, from the high foliage behind the throne chair appeared a hideous figure. Tall and broad, anger flared in its flat nose and eyes slitted and so deeply in shadow that they seemed to have disappeared beneath the heavy, hair tufted brows.

"This... is how you repay my kindness?" it shouted at him. A half growl in the gravel-filled voice. The merchant found himself riveted with fright, unable to move as the thing stood in front of him, casting him in its long shadow.

"Please... awful creature. I...I thought no harm would come of it."

"No Harm?" the Beast roared. The old man fell to his knees trembling. Surely this thing would kill him. The rose he still clutched tightly in one hand. "I should kill you where you are! Feast upon your flesh!" it cried.

"But..." The merchant sputtered. "It is only....a rose, my Lord."

"Do Not Call Me That!" the creature shouted, pain underlying the anger.

For a brief terrible moment, the merchant looked into the glittering eyes, aware that at a heartbeat his life might be over. Yet, the creature before him had not moved in his direction and seemed to be struggling with himself inside.

"Only a rose," it began again, in a sad-edged tone. "How like someone such as you, to not appreciate its wonder. Its majesty. Its beauty. Of all that is here. I have nurtured it... tended it... cared for it as if it were my own child. You. You could have taken anything and I would have let you freely, anything but... my rose." His hand made a sweeping gesture to the damaged bush. The end of the stem where it had been broken glistening with a white milky sap at its end.

"Look at it, old man," the creature warned and directed. "You have plucked it from its life-giving branch as if it were a trifle..."

"Please, dreadful Beast. Have mercy... I... I have a family. Fallen on hard times. I cannot even provide

them with the meagerest of their wants. Please, do not kill me!"

The Beast stepped back at the man's groveling on the grass. Its arms crossed over its chest. The hidden yet glittering eyes did not waver.

"To that end... you must repay me... in kind."

"Anything I have is yours. I was a merchant once. Just... please, let me live."

"You have a family... you say," the Beast continued in a different tone.

"Yes."

"How go they?"

"I have three daughters and a son." The merchant replied worried.

The old man looked up, fearing the thing's gaze, yet with hope in his eyes. He was too frightened to think about why such a creature would be wearing the clothing of a courtly gentleman.

"Then there is a way I will spare your life."

"How?" Renewed fear trembled through his body. His face paled as the thought crossed his mind.

"No... You cannot ask that!"

"Then... I will... kill you!" It took a step forward, growling and baring its long sharp canine teeth.

"No!" The old man cringed, throwing up his hands in a vain effort to protect himself. "Please!" he sobbed.

"Then," the Beast stood still. "it is for you to decide. Exchange a child... for a child, or die for your crime where you stand."

"Very well....," the merchant sobbed. "I will send you one of my children."

"Not just one of them, merchant." The Beast warned. "But... the one most like my rose. The one... most trusted. Most beloved."

"No! You cannot ask that! Not Beauty!"

The leonine face looked down at him in contempt. "You made your decision when you stooped to pull my rose." It stated flatly. "Beauty... She will be much like it, I think."

"And you will kill her."

The creature glowered at him in renewed anger. "You think Me so heartless?... No. She will stay with me. Bring to me that which was lost in your thoughtlessness. No harm shall come to her."

The merchant lowered his head.

"Go then," the Beast commanded. From a gloved hand he pulled off a gold ring and gripping the merchant's wrist, set it gently in the open palm of his hand. "This you will give to her. It will lead her and her mount back to this place. I... will expect her in five days' time. If at the end of this time, she has not appeared, I will come for you. No matter where you are."

The old man closed his other hand around the ring. Stumbling to stand up, the odd cllop of his horse's hooves had caught his hearing.

"Your horse has been tended," it told him. The shaggy head held high. "You will find him quite well. He waits for you beyond the stable at the gates to the courtyard."

"But Beast, how will I find my way? I do not remember how I came to be here."

"Your horse will know the way. Now go."

The merchant turned, dropping the ring into one pocket of his great coat. The horse and his cart were indeed where the monster had said. It was filled with boxes and crates of various sizes. All nearly bursting with precious commodities.

Unsure, the merchant turned to look behind him, thinking that perhaps the creature had followed. It had not.

"Remember," it's disembodied voice called. "Five days!"

The old man climbed up onto the cart's wood seat and urged the plow horse forward. Out past the forest, the weather had soured into winter again. White foam flecked the horse's mouth. The merchant had not seen the monster watching him go from a balcony that overlooked the odd garden.

3---**HOMECOMING**

The merchant sighed with relief at seeing the landmarks of home. His cottage. His children would be pleased at the things he had brought and perhaps it would be enough. His face darkened as he reined the horse to a stop. Enough to see them happy before he would return to the monster's castle, to die.

He had not gotten halfway home when he had made the decision. He had lived a full life, and what better way to die than in defense of one's family. Soft light shown through the windows of the two story cottage. Smoke reached into the night sky from the high chimney. He imagined them, all sitting in front of the fire, warmed by its light. The faces of his family set aglow by it.

He sighed. To never see them again. To know with certainty that his death would be a violent one. All for the want of a flower, and his own stupidity.

He pulled the small box out from under the dust blanket. Where he had kept it since the first day back at the castle. Tucking it under his arm, he led the horse into the stable and tied his reins to a wooden post.

Snow crunched underfoot as he went to his front door. It was cold, but the cold emptiness that filled his heart was far worse than the weather. He tapped on the door. His fingers stiff, even through the leather gloves.

"Nathaniel!" he called. "Come tend the horse."

The wooden barrier swung inward. His family had indeed been sitting around the fireplace. But it was not his son who opened the door for him. It was Elias, Beauty's suitor.

"Welcome home, Sir," he said. His blue eyes smiling down at the tired face.

"Elias. There are trunks and crates to be brought in from the stable. Where is Nathaniel?"

"He had an errand in town," Amelia giggled.

"Some local girl if you ask me," Priscilla said snidely.

Beauty entered the room from the kitchen, carrying a tray of sweets for her sisters. Her face brightened at seeing her father, tired and rumpled though he was. She set the tray down on the table and quickly went to him, throwing her arms around him in a warm heartfelt embrace.

Elias smiled at them. "I had better tend the horse," he said. "Sir, shall I bring in your wares?"

The merchant smiled. "Yes... please." All at once, the other two girls became atwitter with wants and questions. Their father was glad when Elias had begun to bring in the merchandise, just to be rid of them for a time. Nathaniel returned from town in a stranger's coach. He was shocked to find his father home, but elated at all the things he had brought.

Some time later Elias excused himself and left them to their family concerns. The merchant glanced at Beauty whenever he had the chance. The way the firelight caught her face, the strong jaw and full lips so like her mother's.

He had no appetite for dinner, which worried Beauty. Her father was usually the first at the table. She noticed his intense interest. Quietly, she managed to get him into her bedroom, just off the living room downstairs, away from the noise of her siblings.

"Father," she questioned. Her voice was melodic, soft. "What is it?"

"What do you mean, child?" he hedged.

"You have been watching me all evening. Almost as though you had never seen me before. There is something wrong."

"No," he forced a smile. "There is nothing." His lip trembled, the smile broke. With a hand that shook, he took his youngest daughter's chin. Cupping it gently in his palm. His youngest. His most precious gift. His downfall.

"What....have I done." he sighed heavily, lamenting his promise.

Beauty took him by the hand and bid him sit on the chair by her bed. She knelt on the polished wood floor, her voluminous skirts all around her. The merchant slumped into the chair, as if all the world rested on his sagging shoulders.

He had been several hours at home, yet he had not take supper, nor had he removed his great coat. It as not like him in the least. Add to that the odd looks he had given her and Beauty was worried considerably.

"Father, tell me. What is it? What have you done?"

"I cannot. It is horrible."

Beauty stood up, her long brown hair in soft waves across her back. She looked back at her siblings through the doorway. They had not seen the hurt in their father's eyes, nor the resignation.

She turned to look back at him, but he would not meet her eyes. "Father, I have never known you to lie to me," she began the conversation. Her heart trembled at the thought of a misdeed so vile that her father would be in such a state. "And so... I ask you. What have you done?"

His head down, the merchant carefully drew out the box he still carried under one arm. It had been several days. He expected the contents to have withered with the cold and lack of water. The petals to have fallen and browned. Silently, he handed it to Beauty.

She took it and looked at it, a mixture of emotions crossing her face. Quietly, she opened the lid. As she touched it, the scent of summer roses filled the austere room. The bud he had so carelessly picked was now fully open. It was near the size of both his open hands held together. It seemed to glow with an inner radiance that was all its own. Neither of them had ever seen the like.

The stem was firm and moist. The leaves as green as they were in the garden, and the thorns glistened as if they were dipped in silver.

"Father... where did you get such an exquisite rose? And in the middle of such a harsh winter?"

Her father fell to his knees, hanging onto Beauty's skirts as if his heart were breaking, the huge rose, now in her delicate hands. Sobbing, he told her the whole story, of how the surviving ship had been taken by their creditors, how with only a pittance he had started home, only to be cast down by brigands who had left him for dead. How he had awaken in the strange castle and all the marvels it contained. The magic. He reached for her hand, still holding the rose between them. He told her of

the monster.

Catching his composure, he stood, wiping the tears from his face. "Tomorrow, I shall take the ring and return to the castle. The things he has given me will get you through the winter. Selling some will provide enough for your brother and sisters. You will not want."

"No, Father." Beauty stood firm, her strong jaw line set in determination. "You have the business sense. My brother knows nothing of this. Priscilla and Amelia do not want responsibility. They will only fretter away all the wealth you have brought, leaving us as poor as before. Or worse. No... You are needed here."

"Beauty, child," he cried aghast. "Do you know what you are saying? You have not an idea of what it is that he wants of you!"

"Father," she tried to reason. Casting her eyes from those that were blue-gray and so full of sorrow. "No, Father," she said. "I shall go. He said he would not harm me. Is that not so?"

"Yes," the merchant argued. "But child, the word of a Beast? An animal?"

Beauty's brow furrowed. "He released you and sent those things with you, so that our family might be of benefit, did he not?"

"Yes, Beauty. But at what cost?"

Her green eyes narrowed. "Father, if you order me not to go, I will stay as you say. But, know that your blood will be on my hands for the rest of my life."

"And if you go," his voice cracked. "Then, my life is over."

She held him closely. The scent of the rose mingling with those of leather, pressed lace and tears. Gently she pulled back.

"I will go," her voice was soft. She took the ring from the hand he had drawn from his pocket and slipped it down over the third finger of her left hand. Strangely it fit, as if it had always meant to have been there. Sadly she smiled at him. "Come now. Tonight we will celebrate our being together, of this wonderful windfall. Tomorrow will be time enough for tears."

4---IN THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS

Beauty pulled the hood of her cloak up close about her face. Soon the smells of the fine breakfast she had fixed would be wafting through the house. Her pace quickened. The morning was dreary, as it has been of late, made more so by the decision she had made. Without gloves, the stable door was icy cold to her touch.

Out of a good stable of ten horses, all her father had left was the one plow horse and a mule. Beauty hurried up to the old gray mule and pulled his tether loose from its post.

She had no idea how far she would have to travel or how long it would take. The horse would have been the best choice, but, her family would need him home for planting season again. The old fawn colored horse turned around in his stall and sauntered up to the gate. He whinnied and shook his head.

"Sunny, you do your best," Beauty told him, as she opened the door to the outside once more. Mounting the mule from a stool she had led him to. She turned back. "Take care of the others, old friend."

The sun had come out. Its brightness on the snow nearly blinded Beauty and her mount. Beauty twisted the ring on her finger. Closing her eyes, she whispered to the wind. "I am ready. Show me the way."

The mule's ears perked up. It danced nervously, though Beauty could see nothing unusual in the barnyard. Gently, she nudged him in the sides and he carried her out of the farm's gate and onto the roadway beyond.

The temperature had steadily gone up as Beauty and her mule had continued on their journey. The oncoming night had brought a drop to it, but not to what Beauty had been used to.

The mule carried her far beyond home. Beyond the towns and places that she knew. She was hungry, cold and bone weary. She thanked her own common sense for having thrown a heavy blanket over the mule's back instead of a saddle. If she had not, she imagined her legs would have been blistered and quite raw by now, even through her skirts.

Beauty looked around her again. Ever since leaving the farm, she had had the feeling that someone was close by, watching, following. But when she had looked, there had been no one.

The forest road to which they had been traveling narrowed further in. It was like the trees themselves would stop the road from winding through them. Darkness, of an intensity she had not known, closed in on them.

At first, her mount had not wanted to go into the forest anymore and it sat down in the middle of the road. Beauty had to coax him up again with the carrot she had tucked in her belt for just such an emergency, but then wished she had brought along another for herself.

The smells of the forest were thick, its darkness almost complete. The moon she had seen earlier overhead, was obscured by the great branches of the trees. The small eyes of nocturnal animals watched her. Soon she knew, others might, and she pulled the mule quickly.

She sighed heavily at what seemed like a dead end. The thicket was so heavily covered with bramble that nothing could penetrate it. She sat down on the dirt of the road and rubbed her aching feet. The way had been too narrow for her to ride, and the poor mule was about to give out. She let go of his tether to better work on her feet.

There was no snow here. In fact, it seemed more like autumn. Beauty thought about it when she stood to look for the mule, but he was gone. Frightened, she put her hands to her mouth and called his name again. But, he did not come. It was pitch black and she was alone.

Beauty moaned out loud, tears welling in her eyes. Was this the fate the Beast had intended for her poor father? She sat again on the road, sobbing into her dust-covered hands.

"Do... not be frightened," came a soft, half-whispered voice from the dark. Beauty started, her heart almost in her throat with fright.

"Who... who are you?" she asked. "Where... are you?" She stood up. "I cannot see you."

"I... am but a servant, mistress. Are you ill?"

With the wetness from her hands, Beauty wiped upon her top skirts and looked around, still not seeing anyone. Her face was streaked with dirt and tear tracks.

"No. I am lost. My mule has run off and I... I..."

"Please... do not fear," he spoke again.

Beauty could hardly believe her eyes when a lantern's light appeared not far from her. A man, she guessed, leading a magnificent white horse. The man was cloaked all in black, and hunched over as if by some ailment of the back.

"Oh... He's beautiful!" she cried, at seeing the horse up close. His saddle was set for a man's riding and inlaid with precious stones. His Keeper stayed within his shadow.

"Perhaps," offered the Keeper. "I can take you to where you are going."

Beauty strained to see him better. But, the horse's shadow was as deep as the woods. "That is... the problem, Sir. I... I do not know where I am going." Beauty frowned. The statement made her sound so silly to a stranger. Perhaps he would think her demented, or might be one to try to take advantage of her.

"Perhaps a good evening's rest would help you," the Keeper said. "What is your name?"

"Beauty," she answered, immediately angered with herself.

"Have no fear... Beauty," the strangely whispered voice intoned. She could tell he had set down the lantern from the way the light shined differently. "I shall help you into the saddle. I am sure my... master will let you spend the night."

Beauty was still frowning when the cloaked figure came around to help her up. She was amazed at the man's strength as he lifted her into the saddle. Yet the gentleness contained in the black-gloved touch was equally amazing. The leather seemed warm, as she slipped into the saddle. Below, the Keeper took up the lantern again, and taking the horse's reins, he turned him into a new direction.

"Where is your master?" Beauty asked, holding onto the hilt of the saddle.

The Keeper hesitated. When he spoke, there was an undercurrent in the voice that was almost a moan. "He is... out hunting."

Beauty could not tell where they had come from, or how long it had been. It seemed they had traveled for days, although her only memory was of night. Several times, the gentle gait of the horse had her dozing in the saddle. The sky was beginning to lighten as they passed through a curtain of trees. Once by them, she noticed the courtyard in the dimness ahead. The huge gate that led to it had been flung wide open and left as a welcome to any who would come upon it.

Exhaustion muddled her senses as the Keeper tethered the horse on a stone post inside the courtyard. Quietly, he helped her down and led her into the dimly lit passage beyond a great wooden door.

"Where are we?" she asked, half-asleep.

"In my master's castle, Beauty. Come. I will show you to your room."

"My room?"

The shadows were deep in the chamber to which he led her. As she stood uncertainly in the threshold, he slipped inside, becoming one with them.

"Are you... hungry?" he asked from the dark. "Shall I prepare a dinner for you?"

"No," Beauty replied, yawning. The soft scent of growing things caught her attention. The floral smell making her more alert. She listened as he shuffled about in the darkness, until the first candelabrum

was lit. Soon there were many lit and Beauty was astounded at the lushness of it all, the elegance.

The bed was made of polished mahogany, carved into the shape of a great swan. Its wing tips were draped with the same sheer fabric she had noticed covering the arches in the long hall that they had just come from. A many diamond-paned set of double doors led off onto a balcony.

The closet doors were open, as were several drawers in the large bureaus, all filled to brimming with courtly fashions and rare jewelry.

The white marble fireplace came to life, glowing an inviting peach, as the cowed man lit the fire within it. Beauty wondered at why, on such a cool night, he would withdraw from its heat and light so quickly.

A vanity table made of that same white marble sat close by the foot of the bed, its surface covered with carefully arranged brushes, combs and ladies' hair accessories. The mirror sat on a heavy wooden frame. Its square edges were richly carved in a floral pattern and glided with gold leaf. The stone bench that was its seat was padded with a cushion of the finest red velvet and richly embroidered in gold.

"You must be mistaken," Beauty protested. Her eyes had grown wide with the wonder of it all. The multitude of live growing flowers and trees in urns placed about the spacious room. The statuary that was so breathtakingly real.

"No... My Lady," the Keeper continued. "This is... your chamber."

"But... that cannot be," Beauty continued, "unless..."

"I must go now... My Lady," the Keeper said softly.

"Wait! How will I find my way?" Beauty asked, genuinely afraid to be left alone in the strange room.

The cowed head lowered, as if somehow he could feel her unease.

"The corridor leads to the steps that we came up, My Lady. They empty into the main hall. Dinner will be served at seven there each night. He will join you then."

Beauty put her hands on her hips, fully awake.

"Then... you have brought me to the castle of the Beast."

Was it a flinch she saw, or was the slight jerk in the cowed man's bent shoulders. Just a part of whatever ailed him. No matter, it left her to wonder.

"And tonight?" she questioned.

"Tonight, you will rest. It has been a long journey. I shall bring up a tray to you in the morning." Beauty could not help but notice the tremor in the Keeper's voice. For that is how she thought of him. He seemed to want to help her, yet at the same time wished with all his heart to be away from her. Like a reluctant jailer.

Her voice softened. "Are you the only servant?"

"Yes," the cowl raised slightly. "I have taken the liberty of preparing you a bath. The room is beyond, at the left of the fireplace. I hope you will find it to your liking."

Beauty stood surprised. "How did you know I would come tonight? And what am I to call you?"

The voice deepened. "The... Beast ... knew, My Lady, and I am simply... the Keeper. Good-night."

Beauty had to strain to see him as he left the room. Even in the golden glow of the candlelight that now illuminated the chamber, he was like a quicksilver shadow.

Beauty watched the door close almost silently, as he pulled it shut behind him. She shook her head puzzled, then stepped over to the velvet-draped arch and into the room with a bath beyond. Her mouth stood agape at the opulence of the basic room interior. Surely, even a queen could not have had better.

The bath container was also in the shape of a swan in the soft candlelight here. She could still see steam swirling atop the water.

A neatly folded set of bed clothes lay on a chair within arms' reach of the bath, as well as several large deeply plush towels. Beauty had never seen the like, wondering where on earth they had come from.

She shrugged. The ache in her legs and the tiredness of her body returned, making the decision for her. The whole journey seemed like a bad dream, as she disrobed and eased herself into the warm perfumed water of the bath.

5---*FIRST ENCOUNTER*

Morning's light brought a cool breeze with it, rippling the sheer drapes on the open double doors to the balcony. The scent of flowers from the strange garden mingled with those inside her room. Beauty woke and stretched.

Morning. At first, she thought to get up and hurry to her morning chores, then she remembered. The fur-topped blanket and the down quilt were soft and warm at her touch, the bed cushions so comfortable that she was loath to leave them. Her toe toyed with the ends of the silken and heavily-embroidered night dress she had worn to bed.

Glancing around the sun-washed room, she noticed the tray, silver, shining brightly on the vanity table. It held several covered dishes and a pitcher with steam circling gently into the air from the spout.

Quietly, she got up and slipped into the flowing dressing gown that matched her night dress. Putting feet into soft doe-skin slippers, she padded over to the vanity table to better view her breakfast.

Lifting the lid on the first dish brought the aroma of sweet cinnamon rolls, three of them. Each dotted with butter that had melted through into the soft centers. The second dish was a variety of prepared fruit, the third scrambled eggs mixed with bits of pepper and onion. The pitcher contained a coffee flavored with hazelnuts, and she found small bowls of milk and sugar and utensils. Whomever the Keeper was, he knew how to make someone feel welcome.

She sat down and began to fill her plate with the meal. Not until the first mouthful did she realize just how very hungry she was.

The day was passed exploring the closer rooms in the castle. The hall led off her room to the steps, but also into another room, one filled with all manner of string and keyboard musical instruments. In a corner of the room, an easel was set up and boxes of pigments, brushes and the like sat on the polished black stone floor near it.

This room was bright with sunlight from a wall of arches leading to another balcony. Or perhaps it was the same one, she thought. Whatever it was, she opened the glass-paned window that was the door to the middle arch. The other four arches were the same, each made with glass panes in wooden frames that opened on a hinge when the gold handles were pulled into the room. She stepped out

into the warmer air of mid-afternoon on the balcony.

Looking down, she found the garden a delight to the eyes and nose. Quickly, she hurried back inside, hoping to find her way into the beautiful garden to explore it further.

Following the Keeper's instructions, she found the dining hall and the front way. The doors were massive, and at first, she thought much too heavy for her to move. Yet as she reached up and gave the center a moderate push, the double front doors opened, as if by themselves. There was no hesitation in the hinges and they were set so squarely that they need not have been pushed hard. She smiled at the revelation.

Beauty was struck by how well kept everything was, as she stepped carefully down the wide staircase and into the courtyard. The garden began to her left. There did not seem to be a single weed anywhere. The grass was very green and trimmed to a comfortable length. The plants bloomed in a profusion of variety, color and texture.

She returned to her room some time later, to find a luncheon tray, complete with a vase of freshly cut flowers. A note lay against the vase. Nerves made her hand tremble as she picked it up to look closer at it. With all the wonders around her, she had forgotten about the more sinister aspects of this place.

The handwriting was done in a left-handed script. Meticulously spaced and embellished, no animal could have written it. Even if such an animal could speak and write, she knew of none but for sorcery. The note was a simple reminder, an invitation to dinner and was signed by one word. *Beast*.

Evening's shadows were drifting across her room by the time Beauty put down the book of poetry she had found in the library beyond the dining hall. The study was set up as for a royal personage. Though it too was quite elegant in its own right, it was clear that this must have been the Beast's study. Beauty had no wish to run into him at any time, before she absolutely was forced to by decorum.

She had dressed in one of the gowns she had found in the closet. Amazed at how close the fit matched, she had piled her hair loosely atop her head and used some of the jewelry pieces to adorn it. She looked into the mirror on her vanity with worried eyes.

She had traded her life for her family. Perhaps it had been a hard life, one of constant insecurity. But, it had been here and there were simple pleasures that had made the problems seem easier to bear.

She set her skirts straight and checked the low cut neckline of her dress. Satisfied, she stood up and smiled sadly into the mirror.

"If he does not like me," she said to it, "perhaps he will forget the promise and send me home... If not, then I hope Father's description was not very true."

The main hall was lit by many candelabrum, some along the walls, one in the center of the long table, and candles set in metal worked holders along the stone mantelpiece. A warm inviting fire had been laid in the fireplace. It cast the room into a ruddy glow that was almost calming. If it were not for the purpose of this first meeting, Beauty could have found herself much at ease.

Instead, her nerves twisted her stomach so that she doubted seriously that she would be able to eat anything. Even if this Beast was not all that ugly, she braced herself mentally as she descended the steps and walked into the dining hall.

The table had been set with the finest of dishes and utensils. Their silver and gold glistened in the candle's glow. The cloth was of a fine embroidery that Beauty had marveled at before, the same type found in her room, and adorning some of the opulent gowns in her closet. Its white softness a great

contrast to the dark polished ebony of the table and the chairs that surrounded it.

There was only one place setting, on her side of the table. The other side held only a wine carafe and silver goblet. Despite this, bowls of food had been set about, and were close to spilling out onto the tablecloth, as if the Keeper, whom she supposed did all of the cooking, had wanted both she and the Beast to eat at the same time.

She thought of him sadly. The poor hunched man. To have to do everything, and get only his lodging and having to deal with such a master for his trouble.

Thinking of the Beast again, her expression darkened. She took in a long breath, letting it out slowly, trying to calm her turbulent stomach and mind. It would soon be over. She had to believe that, had to hope that her father's description of the monster was added to by his fear. Still, her hands were cold and shook.

Beauty sat down, her back against the high back of the red velvet-lined chair. Her mind drifted as she glanced at the candle flames before her, to the beggar's child that had come up to their carriage when they had had money and how the footman had shouted at the poor thing and nearly attacked him with the horse's whip. All for a few coins and a dirty face.

Beauty glanced at the mantle clock for the third time before daring to take another look around her. Every nerve tensed as she heard the sound of boot clacks coming down a hall. They echoed down the one closed to her by a filigree iron gridwork. Quickly, she turned around in the chair and forced her eyes to look directly forward.

Her breathing increased as fright filled her anew. It was happening, he was coming. What would she do? What would she say? Would she run from him like some frightened school girl? Or would she be as gracious as she could.

She waited, not seeing the darkly-clad shape come to the ironwork grates, or open them. Though she heard them screech, she did not see the black gloves trimmed with gold, that allowed them to swing open, as if setting them up for a quick escape.

He entered the room at a slow pace. Beauty's heart beat madly in her ears. It threatened to take her breath away. Somewhere in the whirlwind, she wondered if he were feeling the same.

The figure walked passed her. From behind she could see that he was quite tall. Muscular from the broad shoulders to the slim waist. The black leggings showing the strong outline of powerful legs. The doublet-tunic slimmed at his waist and widened at the hip. The shoulders were made even wider by the puffed upper arms and the drapes of a long half cloak that hung down from each arm at the shoulders.

His head was hidden by the white starched collar trimmed with triangular lace at the very top, a black sunburst at the neck where it joined to the collar. He wore two gold chains, but their faces were hidden by his body. Her gaze rose from his boots up and across to the starched gauntlets, as he reached for his end of the table, as if to steady himself. She felt strangely giddy and realized with chagrin that she had been looking for some kind of tail; was glad that there had been none.

The gauntlet was stitched with gold embroidery and more of the exquisite white lace. Each finger trimmed with gold down a line to the fingertip. The hair that was slightly above the white of the collar was a tawny blonde. A blonde that caught and held the strawberry highlights, as the candles and the fire caught it in their light.

"Have you... been comfortable?" Her host asked without turning around.

Beauty started at the voice. It was gruff, like gravel, yet there was a soft glide in it, like silk.

"I... have been well treated, Sir," Beauty said formally. "I have had no want."

"But one," he countered.

Beauty's face paled. Had he the power to read her mind also? She had not thought of this before. She frowned briefly. Deciding that in all things, she must be honest with this, whatever he was.

"But one, My Lord."

The fingers leaning against the other end of the table clenched into a fist. But whether it was from anger, or something else, Beauty could not tell. The voice, when he spoke again, was tempered by annoyance.

"Do not... address me... in that fashion."

As he turned, Beauty could scarcely hold the gasp that threatened to escape her open lips. The scream that raged behind it. Quickly, she stuffed one fist into her mouth, covering it with her other hand.

Her father had been more than correct. This man-creature was a Beast. Only the strange bright eyes belied his bestial countenance, and these he dropped from her sight as he turned around again. Facing the fire, it took several minutes for him to begin again.

Beauty had time to regain a small measure of her composure. She swallowed hard and reached for the filled wine glass in front of her. He waited until the sips she had taken burned down her throat, until her breathing had calmed enough that she could look at his back again and not quiver like a captured bird.

His head bent low, concealed by the collar. He began again. "You see... I am no Lord. I am... a Beast. Make note of it well, Beauty. Remember it."

"I... shall," her voice trembled.

"I will... leave you now. My appearance is offensive, I know. I would not have you die of starvation and make the word I have given to your father a falsity."

Beauty swallowed hard, unsure of how she felt. There was a sadness in the gravel-filled baritone. The half-growled words were edged in a pain she could almost feel. Feeling ashamed, but being unsure as to why, she stood, moved to call him back. But, he was gone. The iron grates slammed shut behind him.

She sat, staring at the wonderfully displayed repast. Unable to feel the hunger she knew she must be having. Tears welled in her soft green eyes, tipping out and marking her cheeks with their tracks.

Beauty started awake, the half-heard sound fading, even as her vision focused on the darkened room around her. A cool evening breeze brought up the scent of flowers through her open balcony doors. The wind touched the sheer drapes there softly.

Beauty pulled the furred blanket up closer about herself and tried to lay back and relax. She couldn't. The visage of him haunted her whenever she closed her eyes. The great long mane of hair, the cleft upper lip, the hair on his flattened nose and the sharp teeth just barely visible in the candlelight. The thought of what they would look like if fully exposed made her shudder, for he looked for all instents and purposes to have been a lion standing erect. She jerked as a soft voice spoke to her from the darkness.

"My Lady," it said reassuringly, worried. "You are troubled?"

"Keeper? Is that you?"

"Yes." The 's' slurred softly again. "Can I... get you something? You have not eaten."

Beauty shook her head. "I doubt it will help."

"And yet...," the Keeper suggested. "Perhaps, tea?"

She strained her eyes in the darkness to see his now familiar hunched form. Yet as always, he seemed to be a shadow himself, invisible.

"Rest then," he said softly. Beauty imagined that he might have even smiled. "I shall bring you some hot tea and a few biscuits."

"Thank you," she said to the darkness. Still not sure into which shadow he stood. She snuggled down into the blankets, not sure if she had heard him leave or not. Perhaps the master of this place was a Beast, she decided, but she had at least one ally. The stable Keeper.

6---*THE GARDEN PATH*

Beauty breathed in the glory that was the morning, the daylight. She had eaten her fill from the tray the Keeper had brought. Feeling much better, with the sunlight had come the hope that the night before had been but a bad dream, its fears dispelled by the warmth of the sun and the wonders that filled the garden.

Never before had there been such a place, even in her most fanciful imaginings. Flowers and plants of every description burst into a riot of colors. Every plant seemed heavily laden with blooms, from the tiniest, to the largest of red lilies she came upon.

The grasses here were cut short and all was as if tended by many loving hands. No weed pushed itself up among the flowers. No vine threatened to strangle its neighbor for want of sun or ground. Ornate stone benches were set along the pathways, where one could become tired enough to sit. And all around them, great urns of more perfumed blossoms.

The garden reached off and away to a tall stone wall, breached by high graceful arches. Beyond it was the forest, too thick and deep for her to see further into.

The paths wound their way along the castle until a low wooden fence stopped them. Beauty looked at the fence. It was high enough that she could not see over it. Quietly, she walked along its vine and ivy covered lane. The sparkling red and white stone chips of the path, glittered like jewels beneath her feet.

As she drew on, it curved, leading her to a pond. The pond sat in a clearing all its own, its low stone wall draped with ivy and stone urns filled heavily with flowers that cascaded from their perches around its rim and down into the silvery blue that was the water. Calm, tranquil.

She caught her reflection in it as she walked close by the wall, curious about the large stone chair that sat there.

It could have been some sort of throne by the look and size of it, she thought, the carved lion heads roared in silence at the ends of its arms. It was flanked by two large stone urns. The farthest from her was full of bright colored blossoms. The one closer, a sturdy but oddly-shaped rose bush. She studied it closer and realized sadly why the rose bush looked so odd. It had no blooms. Of all that stood out around her, it had no flower.

The base was thick. The thorns large and shimmered in the sun as if they were dipped in silver. Deep green leaves rested easily around the stalk. Yet, where it should have continued into a single huge

beautiful bloom, there was naught but a bent and broken end. Turning black and brown in the daylight's warmth.

Beauty felt her heart sink as she looked down at the torn and twisted stem. Ashamed she turned away and began the long trek back to the courtyard and inside.

Evening seemed to take forever to fall and when it did, there still was no end to her solitude. Beauty dressed for dinner, steeling herself against another encounter with the Beast. Yet her preparations went for nothing.

The table was set as before, this time another vase of fresh flowers had been added. The empty place where his place setting would have been, seemed to stare at her accusingly. She waited until well after his appointed time of arrival. Still he had not come.

Tired, Beauty ate in silence. With only the crackling of the evening fire and the ticking of the clock on the mantle for company, time weighed heavily on her.

In her room later, Beauty lingered over her nightly routine. But, even the warmth of the perfumed bath could not ease away the tension. She tried to shut out the thoughts that swept across her mind's eye, but found to her dismay, that she could not. He had not come because she would not have eaten had he done so. He was thinking of her.

She slept later in the day than was her wont. Her sleeping and waking patterns mingling and overlapping, so that within a month's time, Beauty was spending more time awake at night than during the day.

She had taken to exploring the castle, its many halls and chambers making each an adventure, giving delight at each new find.

The library was crammed with books of every size, age and description. Some were leather-bound and written by hand. Others were printed on fine papers or linens. A long ebony table stretched a quarter of the room's length, two golden candelabrum on its polished surface. The two tall arched windows were shielded with beautifully-wrought stained glass panels, their frames festooned with red velvet drapes with golden swags.

The music room's floor had been laid of dark polished stone, the walls a light gray. Tall rounded arches led out to a part of the terrace that she had explored before. She had also discovered that the balcony walkway encircled the keep, coming to rest at the courtyard where its wide stone steps emptied gracefully into the garden.

A harpsicord rested near a statue of Diana in mid-room. Around it, spaced evenly and comfortable, were a harp, a flute on a table with a pillow all its own, and an instrument much like a mandolin. It leaned against an overstuffed chair and floor sconce. An easel with artistic supplies lay in a corner ready for use.

A set of carved wooden shelving held sheet music and iron grills for setting up to play. Small curios also decorated its many nooks. Ancient fur covered toys; horses, dogs and rabbits, and a marble chess set sat in one corner, a game long forgotten, yet still somehow in progress.

Beauty let her hands drift along the polished keys of the harpsicord and came to a stop at the music stand. On it sat sheet music and a few blank pages. Those that were used had been written fairly recently, by hand.

Curiously, she made her way around the bench and sat down. Tilting the papers up to right them, she lay her fingers upon the keys and very slowly, began to play.

The Beast stood in the shadow-filled garden. Head to one side, he listened as the strains of music drifted out onto the night's breeze. When it had ceased, he held his breath. Looking at the forest, he released it, a glint of wetness touching his golden lashes. This woman. This merchant's daughter, was aptly named.

Beauty paced the floor of the dining hall. Several times she had rechecked the time with the clock on the mantle. It was quite late, and still neither the Beast nor his servant had made an appearance.

Music, books and occasional soft words from the Keeper had been her only companions. Frustration colored her expression; she had idled in them, yet now, she needed more. A look, a gesture, a friendly conversation, even the face of a demon would have been welcome.

She almost jumped from the high-backed chair at the sound of the iron grillwork being pulled back. Standing quickly, she turned to see the face of whomever it might be. So hidden was she in the long shadows, that her action brought her suddenly abreast the Beast.

The gasp that escaped her lips was not of revulsion, but of fear, for him. She put a hand over her mouth, the other reached for him, as he almost staggered backward. Fright written clearly across his face.

"Beast!" she cried. "Beast, what happened to you?" The Beast stood wide-eyed in the dim light. His long tawny hair was in disarray. The white shirt he wore open almost to his waist, it and the hair on his chest were splashed with the dark crimson of blood. He wore no gloves, he turned quickly away, gathering in his arms, as if in pain. He had not seen her there, until she had appeared so swiftly in front of him.

His movement continued forward, and for a moment she thought he would faint. Instead he hissed air through his long teeth and hunched over. His shoulders bent low and he hurried away into the shadows.

"Do not... look at me," he said softly, with less gruffness that she was used to. "I did not... ever... want you to see me this way."

Cold fire burned through Beauty. She had seen that shape before. The voice was somewhere between the Beast's norm and ...

"You are hurt," she entreated, pushing back the thoughts that threatened to waver her resolve to help. "Has someone hurt you? Please... let me help."

"I am... uninjured," his voice was low, threaded with a stilted hesitation. He felt the concern that she had clearly. It warmed him, yet he remained in the shadows. He forced his nerves to calm.

"It is late," he said quietly. "You should have been in your bed."

Beauty's lip curled into a soft pout. "I cannot sleep, Beast. I am so alone. Please, speak to me sometime, for I fear if you do not, I will go mad."

"Have you been so alone, Beauty?" he asked concerned. "Our first meeting was..."

"I know what it was," she snapped. Her voice softened. "Please, I am sorry. I did not wish to offend you. I am here at your request and I know I must make the best of it."

"You are not... happy here?"

Beauty's gaze dropped to her shoes. "No, Beast. I am not... Your home contains so many wonderful things. Anyone would be a fool not to appreciate them. You have been nothing if not patient and kind to me."

"It is my appearance then," he sighed.

"No, Beast." She paused, watching his head come up in the shadows, his silhouette. "It is my father, my family."

"They are... well," his whispery voice tried to reassure.

"Beast... if only I could believe you."

"I must go now," he said quietly. Beauty stood as if someone had pushed her. Her hand reached out to the white clad shoulder but withdrew when he did not turn. "Good night, Beauty."

"Good night," she swallowed, "Beast." She stood, watching him go until the grillwork closed behind him. Fighting back the tears she wondered if she would ever see her home and family again.

A week had passed. Soft moonlight caressed the terrace before Beauty had awakened. The nocturnal wanderings were becoming her common routine. Dressing quickly, she stood outside on her balcony gazing down into the moon swept garden. A breeze touched her soft brown hair. For tonight she had left it unfettered. Wild.

Later, music drifted out onto the evening air once more. The Beast sat by his pond in the tall stone throne, his head cocked to one side, not looking at his reflection in the pool. Clad again all in black, his long mane draped across his broad shoulders. The long, formal lace collar he had left in his own chambers.

He had tried to dress for her as best he could, perhaps to minimize his ugliness. It had been almost two months since her arrival. The coldness between them was slowly mellowing. Beauty was no longer afraid to take his gloved hand, to walk with him along the terrace or in the garden. They had spent long hours reading poetry by the fireplace in his study.

Somehow, she had surmised his ruse, that he was indeed also the Keeper. Somehow, that knowledge had opened a strange affinity that he had not expected. The harpsicord's tinkling music drifted down again.

He sighed as he slipped off the stone chair and started back toward the courtyard. The sound of the animals in the thick wood stopped him. His head up, his eyes wide, the musky scent of a deer crossed his acute senses.

He turned to see from what direction it had come, when a soft voice called down to him.

"Beast!" Beauty called happily. "Is that you? Please, come hear what I have learned to play!"

The scent of the deer and the wild forest so close, made his pulse race. Yet, so did the voice of Beauty. He turned to the forest only once, before continuing again toward the castle.

Beauty watched in anticipation, as his dark form moved like a ghost along the moonlit walk. She stood until she could no longer see him for the stonework. Smiling, she turned back to the music room.

When her family had been wealthy, Beauty's father had insisted that all of his children learn a skill of one type or another. For Beauty, her passion for music had led her to tutors for harpsicord and harp. As a child, she went about their house humming and singing and being quite silly.

She had been heartbroken when they had had to sell her beloved instruments. But, unlike her

sibliings, Beauty knew that the sacrifices were needed and bore them stolidly. She had not lost her endearment to music, however.

The Beast entered the room, dressed splendidly in scarlet, white and gold. How he had changed so quickly was a mystery. Excited about her feat, Beauty did not look at him directly, but the glance of his clothing was enough to make her smile.

Her skirts about her on the polished wooden bench, her fingers began to move again along the keys. The Beast sat down in one of the cushioned chairs, an elbow on its arm. A gloved hand against his down-covered cheek.

He leaned into the cushions, closing his eyes as music filled the room. She played the softly sad melody as if it were her heart's essence. When it was done, he opened his clear blue eyes to see her turned around looking at him expectantly.

"Did you like it?" she asked, anxious to please.

"It was... lovely."

"Thank you." Standing, she came toward him. "Beast," she continued, "What do you do during the day? In all of our conversations, you have never mentioned it. I know that you are the one who makes our meals and I have seen you in the study with thread and hoop, when you thought me absent. Please, I am full of curiosity."

The frown that crossed the leonine face deepened the crease between his heavy brows. "Some things, Beauty," he began cautiously, "are best left unknown. I cannot tell you. The time is not yet right."

Beauty stood up and touched his elbow. She felt him flinch beneath her touch and quickly withdrew her hand.

"What is it?" she worried.

"Your touch... Beauty."

"Have I hurt you?" she lamented, worried that his condition was still somehow caused by sorcery. Unsure as to what to do. "I am forever doing or saying the wrong thing to you. I do not wish to hurt you."

The Beast turned to look at her, hope filling the deep set eyes. "Then, have you considered my question, Beauty? Can you give me an answer now?"

A frown marred her heart-shaped face. "Please, Beast. Do not ask that of me now. I do not want to anger you, nor do I want you to run from me as you did before."

"Then... it will be the same," he said sadly.

"Beast, I cannot lie to you. You have been too kind to me. Can we not be as we are, friends?"

"Do you... love another?" his voice cracked with the words. Beauty lowered her head, wishing she had never begun the subject. That she had never tried to give him a name as if he were a fond pet, and most of all, that she had never asked her father for a rose.

"Yes, Beast," she said truthfully. "I do."

His head went back as if he had been struck by an arrow from behind. He moaned, baring his sharp teeth as if in pain. Beauty started. He turned swiftly on her, his dark eyes full of infinite sadness. Pain etched into the corners of his eyes.

"Is he... handsome?"

Beauty lowered her eyes. "Yes."

"Then...," the Beast continued, "why... did you come to me?"

"I could not let my father be killed," she said, looking up into his face, her jaw set. "He is a good man, he has gone through so much to keep our family from the streets. I could not bear the thought of him being killed for a request of my doing."

"Your doing?" He looked at her in surprise. A thought winked across his mind. Something the old man had said.

"Yes," Beauty continued. "If not for me, Father would not have destroyed your rose. For you see, of all the requests my brother and sisters asked of him, I thought mine the most simple. He left for the coast in the spring. I could not know his journey would keep him till well after winter had come. It was I... who asked him for a rose."

Beauty blinked awake. The bright daylight stabbing at her eyes. Unsure of the time, she sat up and looked around. She could not be sure that she had heard voices or hoofbeats, with her sleep-muddled senses, until they drifted up from the courtyard once more.

That of the Beast she recognized at once. But, by the time she had slipped into her dressing gown, all had gone quiet outside, except for the usual song birds. Boot clacks rang out against the stone floors, the graceful quick stride she had come to know as belonging to the castle master's. It came up the steps and through the long hall toward her door.

"Beauty," the Beast called from beyond the wooden barrier. "Are you awake?"

"Yes, Beast," she said hurriedly. "I heard a horseman. Am I right?" Tying her dressing gown securely she opened the door.

Beauty had never seem him in the daylight before. The contrast was sobering. He wore a white shirt, as on the night that they had frightened each other so. It was open to the plain wide leather belt at his slim waist. His trousers were tight, black against his well muscled thighs, tucked into warm brown, scuffed and well worn jackboots.

His mane had been tied at the nape of his slender neck in a horse tail fashion. That which escaped the binding laying wispy along his angular face. There were wool chips scattered all along its length and sawdust laced his shirt. The sleeves had caught some of the debris, where he had rolled them up to his elbows, exposing his arms, fingers on up.

He moved to the browned shadows in the hall. But not before Beauty had caught the bright gold and amber of sunlight in his hair.

A better glimpse of that hair was shorter, silkier, spread across his wide chest and the hand that rested on the door frame. His arm and the long elegant fingers covered with a soft thick tract of blonde to ginger-colored hair, the fingernails, dangerously pointed as claws, their color a translucent peach.

Without capelets or cloak, his form had been visible. Beauty had marveled at the musculature of it. Her own state of dress and the rider at the moment, almost forgotten.

"Beauty," he began uncertainly. "I... have had word." The Beast hesitated, "of... your father."

Beauty's face paled at the tone to which he had addressed her. Without protest, she hurried back into

her chamber, retrieving a cloak from one of the closets.

"I must go to him," she insisted, tying the cloak's strings about her neck. The Beast moved slightly. He stood fully in the doorway, his head down.

"Let me by!" she insisted. "I must go to him."

"I... cannot allow it," he said tightly. Beauty stared up at him in disbelief. Anger flushing her face, smoldering in her jade colored eyes.

"Beast, you tell me my father is ill and yet you will not let me go to him. Why?"

"I cannot."

"But... why?" she shouted.

The Beast withdrew quietly from the doorway, closing it behind himself. Beauty ran to it, fright pulling her to it.

"Beast!" she shouted. "Why are you doing this? Beast!" She beat her hands against the door until the skin on her raised fists were bruised and the knuckles bleeding. "Let me out..... Beast! Let me go!"

Evening had again fallen, by the time Beauty awoke. She found herself in her bed. A tray of food and wine had been set on her vanity. A twinge caused her to look down at her battered hands. They had been carefully bandaged.

Her eyes were red and puffy from crying. She frowned, sniffing into the wine she had poured for herself. How could he be so cruel? All this time he had done all he could to please her. She had even begun to look forward to seeing him, as one might an unusual pet. She grimaced. The vision of him in the doorway, in the sunshine would not go away. His body was not that of an animal, despite his face.

Softly, she downed the wine, letting its sweet warmth burn down her throat. Unsure of what she was feeling, softly she set the carafe back down on the tray.

She got out of bed and dressed, but still feeling fatigued again, she lay down to take a short nap. Perhaps at dinner, she thought, she would try again.

Just as she had finished dressing for dinner, Beauty heard a click at the lock on her door. She had been released from the prison of her bed chamber.

Dinner was set as always before. The Beast would sit across from her, but no food would touch his lips in her presence. Beauty waited as the hours passed and still he had not come. There was no use in tormenting herself with the thought of racing out into the forest herself. Beauty had no idea which way to go. She realised too, that without a horse, she could not have gotten very far, even if she had tried.

She was almost ready to return to her room, when he appeared from a side door. He was dressed all in the black, white and gold, as he had been on that first night. A strange expression graced his leonine face.

"I thought... I waited so long," Beauty began. "I was not at all sure you would come."

"I am here," he said in a non-committal tone.

"Why Beast?" she asked, deciding the forward approach was the only way. "Why... did you lock me in

my chamber? Why do you forbid me to go to my father, when he needs me so?"

"Beauty....." His gravel-filled, half-whispered voice faltered. "I... cannot let you go."

"Why?" Her lip trembled.

The Beast's blue eyes were tortured by indecision. Somehow Beauty felt it.

"Beauty... if you should leave me now... I would die."

"What do you mean?" she worried, stepping back from him. "Why would you die?"

"I... It is a hard thing to explain. I feel... what you feel. Almost now as if we were one. I know the grief I am causing. It... pains me more than I can say. Yet, if I let you go, I know you will not return to me, and without you now, I would die."

Beauty stared up into the unusually handsome face she had come to know so well. Strange, she thought, that she had never, up to that point, thought of him as handsome. Her eyes narrowed.

"Beast, I would do nothing to hurt you. I would not divulge your secrets." Tears moistened her dark lashes. She clasped one of his gloved hands in hers. "But... you... you must let me go! Let me go to him, be with him. Please... he may be dying. And if you keep me here and he should die, I would hate you... for the rest of my life."

The Beast looked down at her with infinite sadness in his eyes. "Then... Beauty... I will die as surely as if you had stabbed me."

Beauty sniffed, wiping at the wetness down her cheeks. "Maybe," she thought out loud. "Maybe, there is a way."

"No," the one before her lamented. "I cannot be the bringer of so much anguish. You... shall go to your father. I have had no right to keep you here against your will. You will go, and I will die. Perhaps that... is my punishment."

"No!" Beauty exclaimed, pain tearing at her heart. "No!" her grip tightened on his hand. She forced a smile, looking up into the tear-rimmed eyes of the Beast. He was hurting far more than his words had said. "You will not die. If you let me go. I will stay only long enough to see my father through his illness. Then, I will return and I shall answer your question then. Do you trust me?"

"With my life," he said solemnly.

"Then," Beauty continued hopefully. "Know that I am telling you the truth. Send riders if you will, to watch over us while I am away from you. But, I swear, I will return."

The Beast held her hands up and gently touched them to his unique cleft upper lip. She released his hands, feeling a bit breathless. His lips had been so very soft, much warmer than they first appeared. The Beast slipped one gloved hand around one of hers and led her from the castle, out beyond the garden to the stable.

There, she slipped into the heavy cloak, gloves and hood he handed to her, allowing him to lift her gently into the saddle. The white stallion danced nervously. He handed her a leather pouch which she slipped down over her head and neck and whispered something into the horse's ear.

As her mount began to leave the safety of the courtyard for the gate, the forest and the road beyond, Beauty looked back to see the Beast's dark shape standing by the gate looking after her. Her vision caught the lower part of his arm cloaks as he turned back toward the castle. The gold disks were sewn onto them shining like bright fire flies against the black of night.

Tears still rimmed Beauty's eyes. She turned forward, looking straight ahead. The white horse was trotting, winding its way through the tangle of trees and thicket that it knew. She bowed her head.

She had to remind herself, that this was what she had wanted, had longed for for so long. Yet, Beauty's heart did not feel free; it was heavy. Worried for her father, her thoughts of him had pulled in on her consciousness. Worried too, for the creature she had left behind.

Would he truly die if she did not return as she had promised? she wondered.

At last, the trail emptied onto the single road she had remembered on her trip there. The moon was bright, a white disk overhead. The ground here and there was smattered with the remnants of snowfall. The horse's breath made little vapor clouds in the cold air. Beauty pulled the cloak up closer about herself, taking comfort in its warmth.

The streets were almost deserted as Beauty passed through towns and villages. The lights in the windows of a few small cottages and farm dwellings, a welcome sight to her travel-weary eyes.

At last, the road to her own homestead was in sight. Beauty sat straighter in the saddle. Her heart beat faster at the anticipation of being home again.

Through the field to the farm road and into the barnyard she went. The stallion came to a stop before the ramshackle stable and began stomping its hooves nervously. She held the reins and slipped off, sending a few chickens that were there squawking out of the way. No one was there to meet her. The lower level of the house was dark, only her father's window was still lit, by a single candle set in the window sill.

The horse whinnied, getting Beauty's attention. It bowed gently, pulling the reins from her gloved hand, then stomping a hoof, it turned as if to leave, looking back at her over its flank. A nod of the graceful head, the mane flying. It whinnied again and before she could move to catch it, it was gone into the night.

Beauty stood in the barnyard, looking after it as snow began to fall all around her. For several minutes, she just stood there until she could no longer see in the darkness.

Her hand on the door latch, she was both surprised and alarmed to find it unbolted. She had always made sure that it was kept locked at night. How odd it felt to come home, yet, somehow to feel a stranger.

Beauty fought down the apprehension and went inside. A small fire still burned on the hearth in the kitchen. Even such a small fire with its bright red embers had kept the kitchen warm. There were dishes left unwashed on the counter and a cup half full of mead on the table. There were pipe ash burns on her father's end of it. These she touched gingerly, treasuring the blackened scars.

Quietly, she hurried up the steps, passed her sisters' bedrooms. Beauty noted that they were unusually quiet, even for this time of night. Her brother's door surrendered his soft snoring from inside. She smiled at its comforting normalcy.

Her father's bedroom door was open. The flickering candlelight spilling out onto the wooden floor of the hall. Beauty's heart sank as she hurried to the foot of the bed. The old man lay with blankets up around his bearded chin. Somehow, he didn't resemble her father at all. He was so small and drawn.

The fingers that gripped the coverlet so tightly, were almost like claws. Her mind drifted back to the Beast. Had he known her father was so very ill?

"Beauty," a raspy half-cracked voice said hopefully. The watery blue-gray eyes were sunken almost into shadow. But their sight was clear. "Or... am I dead and you are an angel?"

"Father!" Beauty hurried to the bedside. Kneeling down she pulled one of his cool hands to her face. "Father, it is I. It is Beauty. I am here."

"Oh... Beauty," the old voice shook as he stroked the tears from her eyes. "It... it is you."

"Yes, Papa. It is me!"

"I thought you were dead," he said.

Beauty put her hand over his on her cheek. "No, Father. Not dead."

He moved to raise himself up on elbow and Beauty hurried to aid him, setting up the pillows so as to prop him up enough to look at her. "I thought... the Beast..."

Beauty pulled a stool from near her father's dresser and sat down by the bed. Her voice was soft, as she gripped the pouch that hung around her neck still.

"He has kept his word to you, Father. He has not harmed me in any way."

"Oh... Beauty... But to look at him..."

"Appearances can fool us, Father," she defended. "His heart is good. He has done nothing to injure or endanger me. He also sent me home with this." She smiled at the merchant's puzzled face. "It is a special blend of herbs. He said it would make you well again."

"Sorcery," her father rasped unconvinced.

"No, Father. He knows much about herbs and growing things."

"I am sure," he coughed, "that he does, Beauty." Her father gripped her left hand. "Child, will you...stay, here, home where you belong?"

Beauty studied the bedclothes, her gaze cast down. "Papa... I cannot. I promised him that I would stay long enough only to see you well. Then, I must return to the castle."

"Him? It is a creature, Beauty! A hideous raving animal!"

"Father," Beauty warned by the tone of her voice. "Please do not ask me not to return. He has been nothing but kind to me. If I could not return, he has said that he would die... I believe him."

"Then... you will go and I will grieve once more."

"No, Papa. No grieving," she touched a pale cheek. "I have all there I could ever have wanted."

"But he is monstrous!"

She grinned. "Perhaps at the start I thought as you, but now..."

"He has bewitched you."

"No, Papa," she smiled. "I have... gotten used to him. In some ways, he is very dear, very regal, like a royal prince on his throne. At others, it is as if he carries some great sickness that cannot be cured, a sadness that cannot be lifted."

The old man smiled, cupping her chin in one hand.

"Always... my little Beauty. You, of all, would find something good in the Devil himself, I would wager."

Beauty stood up, mock frowning down at him. A yellow twinkle lit her green eyes. "You go to sleep now. You need your rest. Come the morrow, I will make you a large breakfast and brew the medicine tea."

The merchant chuckled softly. A sound that warmed Beauty's heart. The lines around his eyes seemed to ease.

She bent, blowing out the candle in the window and walked toward the door. Only to pause in its threshold, looking back at him. His eyes were already closing with welcome sleep. Contentment filled her too. It did feel good to be home.

Morning sent patches of warm bright sunlight across the kitchen's wood floor, the shadows of the window pane above the sink like a ladder between them. Beauty sat at the kitchen table in her father's chair, quietly sipping her tea. The morning was a special one and although she thought she would have been exhausted from the journey, oddly she found the opposite was true.

She smiled, watching the old red tabby climb in the windowsill outside. He stretched and rubbed up against the glass yawning widely. Then pulled himself into a red yellow ball of fluff and went to sleep in the sun on the sill.

Beauty had done much as she sat waiting for the kettle again to boil, to make the medicine tea. She thought on what she had noticed.

Fresh eggs sat in her wicker basket on the counter by the stove. A pitcher of fresh milk close by it. She had checked the meager provisions left in the barn and wondered what had happened to their four little piglets. Their pen had been empty, unused. The calf that had come just before she had left was also missing and the old cow seemed skittish of her. Beauty had had to wash her off before she could relieve the poor animal's bulging utter.

The mule had returned, but both he and the plow horse were full of burrs in their mane and tail. Some of the hay had gone moldy and was not moved away from them. Beauty hoped silently that if they had eaten of it, that it would not make them sick. She had moved what was left to where it would not spoil the rest.

The pantry itself had been almost bare. Her promised breakfast would be a meager one. She had found just enough flour and spice to make the muffins that were baking in the oven. Their sweet scent had already begun to fill the house. Her finger tapped against the tea cup as she thought.

There were other things left uncompleted. Things missing within the house. Her frown deepened at the moan from the second floor, followed by a loud thump, as if someone just fallen out of bed. A number of curses and footsteps through the hall came later. Her brother Nathaniel was awake.

In her sisters' room, Beauty found none of the frills and fancies they so doted on. A pang of guilt swept through her at that. There were no mourning wreaths. Nothing dire had happened. Still the empty room, with its undressed beds made her wonder.

The steps creaked high at the top. A familiar sound. The frown was replaced by a small smile. Nathaniel would soon be downstairs. She grinned wider, what would he think of her? She had changed into one of the plain gowns she had kept in the kitchen closet, for indeed, all of her clothes had gone too.

His stocking feet thumped along the floor boards as he came to the kitchen's doorway. His head in his hands, he did not see her at first. Beauty stood at his entry. Nathaniel's light blue eyes widened in a mixture of surprise and terror! He blinked and wiped at them with shaking hands. He stepped backwards, almost tripping over the sock that had slipped off of one foot several inches.

"Be.. Be... Beauty?"

Beauty's smile beamed at him. Disregarding the unshaven face or the rumpled clothes that appeared as if he had slept in them, she ran to him, taking comfort and happiness in the embrace. She did not wonder that he still smelled thickly of drink and the smoke of the Inn. He drew back from her frowning, holding her at arms' length still quite unsteady.

"H... How can it be you?" he said incredulous. "We thought you were long dead!" Her brother's honey colored hair had grown long around his shoulders and was as unkempt as ever.

Beauty stepped back, her hands placed on her hips. The look on her face was of disapproval. But light danced in her eyes. "You go out and wash this minute!" she demanded. "What if Father saw you at the table in such a state!"

Nathaniel chuckled, his lopsided grin wide across the angular face. "It really is you."

"Certainly it is," she said teasingly. "Now go!"

He hurried to the door, just as she swung the kitchen towel she had in her hands. Its end caught his posterior as he went.

Outside the air was crisp, despite the sunshine. Nathaniel sent the chickens squawking ahead of him as he walked across the barnyard toward the rain water barrel. He laughed up at the blue sky and the high clouds.

"She's home!" he shouted to no one, to everyone. "Beauty.....is home!"

The Beast knelt low by the pond. Wearing the black slacks and jackboots of their last encounter, but a loose fitting white shirt, its sleeves were rolled up beyond his elbows. A hair covered hand glided through the calm warm surface of the water. It felt good against the hairless palm. The ripple created a myriad of his own reflection. This natural hot spring gave life to his castle, his garden. He looked around in satisfaction. Perhaps, he thought, he would tell Beauty the secret of this place when she returned.

Softly, he drew the hand up and away, wiping the wetness on the thigh of his pant leg. The afternoon's song birds singing rested easily on his ears. He stood to listen, his head back, his eyes closed. The warm breeze caressed the downy softness of the hair along his cheeks, gently tossed the long reddish blonde tresses that graced his broad shoulders.

The air was thick with wildflowers, earth and the dampness of rain soon to come. His head came down slowly, savoring each scent. Opening his eyes to the garden, he felt strange. He could still feel her close; Beauty was content. Happy. He let the emotion envelope him, hoping secretly, beyond hope, that she would honor her promise and soon return.

Silently, he wondered if Beauty had felt him too. Soberly, he made his way back to the courtyard and the front doors of his castle.

Time had passed by so quickly that Beauty was taken aback by the date. It was spring in the valley. The merchant's illness had gone and with the help of a new friend, he had re-established himself at a little shop in town.

The scent of wildflowers by the barn, the chirping of the songbirds that helped the chickens with their cracked corn in the farm yard, the bright blue sky made her smile. Though her smile was a sad one.

The callouses Beauty had gotten so long ago had returned to her small hands. Her face blushed from work outside and in the fields. Her hair pulled back away from her heart-shaped face by a long scarf, hung down her back in soft curls. She listened to the clucking of the chickens around her as she gathered eggs from the nests. A warm breeze filtered in through the cloth draped window.

She had helped her father in town when she could, found a woman who needed a maker of fine

laces. Beauty smiled remembering where she had learned the delicate craft and how odd it was that such awesome fingers could have produced something so beautiful.

Outside in the sunshine, she tucked the basket of soft brown eggs under her arm and walked back toward the front door of their cottage. Once inside, she lay them carefully on a cloth draped across the long kitchen table and counted them. There were enough there for themselves and a few to sell.

She smiled to herself at that. Slowly but steadily she had saved up a bit of money. Before long she would be able to purchase a good strong horse to return to her Beast. A maid to take care of her father at home and Nathaniel.

With a semblance of his old life returned, the merchant had developed a new sense of vigor for his work. The shop was small, but it suited his liking. The small clientele he garnered was agreeable. His creditors had been paid in full and he enjoyed the idea of going into town now.

They had been very happy, even Nathaniel. One night after a barroom brawl, the Magistrate had sentenced him to work at hard labor without pay to the Innkeeper, until all the damage had been repaid. Instead of prison, it seemed the only thing for him to do.

His body ached when he came home. But Nathaniel genuinely seemed to enjoy the work.

Beauty had met with both her sisters. They had married up from poverty, but neither seemed any better for it. One sister had married a man more vain, it seemed, than herself. The other, a tradesman with such slovenly manners, that she was forever picking up after him.

Beauty paused by the table. She could have been so very, very happy, there with her family, if it were not for the want to listen to that unique half-whispered voice. To see how the candle flames cast reddish highlights into the amber and gold of his hair. To feel the warmth, the softness of that hair that covered his hands in hers. To again look into the sapphire eyes that were forever hopeful, yet so shy.

"Beauty, child..." Her father put a hand to her shoulder. A Saturday afternoon, he had come home early. "What is it?"

She looked up at him perplexed. Nathaniel's eyes darkened as he came from the kitchen from outside. Beauty had heard the old plow horse, but it had not registered on her mind. There were other things there to make her preoccupied. Hearing the conversation, he had come inside at once.

"It is him," Nathaniel scowled.

"Who?" her father asked her.

"The Beast," Beauty confessed. "Father, I have had no word of him. I fear for him, it has been so long. Without our mule, I cannot leave, and I fear something dreadful has happened."

"He has more than likely forgotten you," Nathaniel said, still scowling. He pulled up an apple from the bowl of fruit on the table and bit into it with a loud crunch.

"I... do not think he can," she said defensively.

"How is that?" The merchant wanted to know.

"I am not sure," Beauty cautioned. "One day he told me that he could feel what I feel. Almost as if we were one person."

Beauty looked down at the table. "Father, if this is true, then he would be unable to forget me, as I am unable to forget him."

"What of Elias?" her father asked. "Has he not helped us through this time as well. He had not courted you?"

"Father," she tried to explain. "It is not the same. Elias desires me, yes, but he does not love me. My head tells me that he is a good hard-working man. That he would make a fit husband for any woman, but, his aspirations are too high. He reaches for the star rather than that which first comes within his grasp. No... he does not love me," her tone was bitter.

Nathaniel tossed the apple core into the sink. He stood glowering down at Beauty. "And you think this Beast of yours has the capacity to love you?"

"Yes!" she cried. "I do! Once more, I feel he needs me more than ever, and that I should go to him at once!"

"Beauty," her father's tone was puzzled and weary. "Dearest of my daughters, we have no way to take you there. I know not where to even begin such a search. Perhaps for once your brother is right. Surely if he loved you as you say, he would have sent a message to you. Some word."

"I know," Beauty frowned. "I know."

Night shrouded the castle in soft darkness, but the shadows held no solace for the Beast. For the first week he had kept busy, as he always had. Tending his vast domain, keeping himself from the woods.

He had written letters and sent them by courier to Beauty's home. Yet she had not answered even a one of them. He stood bathed in soft moonlight on the balcony of her room. His black clad shoulders slumped forward.

Tear drops laced his long eyelashes. Sparkling like diamonds with the reflection of the moon. His attire had been to hide his differences as well he could, so that she would at least be able to tolerate his presence. Now the constant black had become his color of mourning.

If it had not been so very far, the risk of being killed before he could reach her so very great. If she had not on her honor promised to return to him, he would have taken his white horse and ridden the long miles to reclaim her. Yet, he had no real claim to her at all.

Inside Beauty's empty room, he walked slowly about, relishing in the feel of her coverlet. He stopped at her vanity and picked up her hair brush. Softly, he brought it up to his flat hair-tufted nose. A few strands of her hair still within it, still carrying her perfume, the natural scent of her.

His heart felt as if it would break. It pained him as nothing had before. Had she lied to him? Had she only wanted to get away from his ugliness so that she would have agreed to anything to reach that end? No, he shook the heavy head, no. He had felt no deceit in Beauty's words or manner. She had never spoken untruthfully to him, and yet, why.....did she not return?

The Beast set down her brush and swiftly walked across the bed chamber. Closing the door behind him, he raced along the hall and down the stairs in a swift blur. Through the dining hall he threw open the front doors and ran down the steps to the garden. In its center, his arms up stretched toward the dark heavens he cried out her name in painful anguish, "Beauty!"

Beauty sat by the fire. Sadly she let the book slip from her hands across her lap. The room was warm, the fire crackled invitingly in the fireplace. Yet, it could not cheer her.

The day had been like all the others, except for the incident of this early evening. Her brother and father had gone to town. Some disagreement over her brother's debts again, so she had feared. A messenger had come into the yard, just as she had finished the evenings milkings.

The young man seemed surprised to see her there, and when asked to explain, he had said that he had come several times from the castle of the Beast. That he rode by there on occasion to catch him up on the latest news, and to see if he needed anything. That they had been good friends for some time.

She had at first pretended not to know of what he was speaking. For it was surely an enchanted place. He assured her that he did mean what he had said. That though the Beast's appearance was initially frightening, that they were indeed close friends. The Beast had saved him from brigands along the road, and whenever now he had the chance, he returned the favor.

Beauty frowned at this, not knowing what to think. She had heard a rider there, just before she had left. He could have been telling the truth. Yet, there were so many other reasons for deception. He had no other correspondence with him at the time, and no proof to support his claim.

He seemed sincere enough, yet Beauty felt still that she could not trust him and bid him a good day. Night had fallen without her family's return, she had time to think. She had prepared dinner for them, but could not force a morsel down thinking of the rider. Instead she had opted for the book, the chair and the fire.

The rider's words still troubled her. Had he told her the truth? Had the Beast sent messages to her? If so, where were they? She surely had not received them. The frown deepened on her face. Nathaniel was the one who had first mentioned the lack of correspondence. Had he something to do with all of this?

Beauty put the book down and left the warmth of the fire. The stairs creaked as she hurried up to the second floor. She had left her brother's room to him for the most part. A grown man should have been able to fend for himself. Nathaniel was not unable, though unwilling might have been a better term.

She opened her brother's bedroom door and went inside. The room was as usual in disarray. The bed errantly done. The dresser stacked with all manner of things he liked to tinker with. A battered pot sat in one corner, a dead and dried plant hanging over its lip. His boots and cloaks had been thrown over a set of chairs.

The frown deepened. Determination set her strong jaw line. She had to know the truth. Slowly, she began opening drawers and going through his clothes. When the dressers brought no satisfaction, she began searching in the inner pockets of his great coats.

She searched inside the leather packs that he carried over the horses' back to work with him. Even inside his boots. Tears touched her green eyes. Was she wrong? she thought despairingly. Had she falsely accused her own brother, just because of his errant nature?

Angrily, she sat on the bed, a hand to her forehead. Her eyes softened. The room was quite rifled through. Perhaps she would clean it. The more she thought about it, the more it seemed only right. Standing up, she pulled the tangled sheets and coverlets from the down-filled mattress. As she did, Beauty noticed a wrapped packet had fallen out from between the wood frame of the bed and the mattress.

She let go of the sheet to retrieve it from the floor. The frown returning as she unwrapped the parcel. Several letters fell from its wrapping. Her heart pounded in her ears as she picked up one, then another. There could be no mistake as to the sender. For each was addressed to her in the exquisite left-handed script she knew so well. The Beast had sent her letters. Had been missing her.

The clapping of several horses' hooves drifted up from outside. Two of which Beauty did not recognize. She wiped the tears from the sides of her eyes and gripped the letters firmly. She would confront her brother with this, if it were the last thing she would do. How dare he keep them from her!

Beauty's face flushed with anger as she hurried back through the house. She opened the front door before the merchant had a chance to do so. There in the semi-circle of light from the kitchen door, stood five men. Two had on the uniforms of the Magistrate. The third the rider she had spoken to earlier. Nathaniel stood dejected before their plow horse and her father's face was filled with anger much like Beauty's own. He held the reins of their plow horse.

"Miss Beauty," one of the officers began. "We have reason to believe that this horse may belong to you."

"To me?" she questioned. Her father let him take the second set of reins, and as they moved to accommodate her sight, Beauty grey cold inside. Dark rage caught at her heart. The horse was the same white stallion that the Keeper had so graciously allowed her to ride. The same had brought her home.

She stared at her brother. Yellow fire licking at the green iris of her eyes.

"Nathaniel! How could you! You keep his letters from me." She drew up her fist, the knuckles white. The letters clutched tightly. "Now, his horse? He sent it for me! How long have you had it?" she accused.

"Beauty," her father tried to soothe. "They found out about this only this morning, when Nathaniel tried to barter the horse to the Innkeeper for the rest of his debts. I had hoped that he had changed."

"How long ago?" Beauty pressed.

"I do not remember," he answered her sourly. "I did it for you... for us! I couldn't let you go back to that... that thing!"

Beauty's face became livid. She tore from her father's grasp and slapped her brother hard across the face. "How dare you! He is more a man than you will ever be! And now... Now he may be dying or dead because of you! I never want to have to look at you again!"

"Beauty!" her father's tone was pleading, but she did not hear him.

"Help me up," she said to the rider, who stood by the Beast's proud mount and his own. He took hold of her slim waist and helped her into the ornate saddle. "He needs me," she said to her father, turning the horse. The rider mounted up beside her. "I am going back, Father," she said, soothing the dancing mount. "I am going back!"

The rider gripped his reins, turning to the old man. "I will go with her, sir," he reassured. "I will make sure she arrives safely."

"Be well, Beauty!" her father called after her. In a heartbeat Beauty kicked the horse and it galloped off out of the farm yard and out onto the night shrouded road. The messenger not far behind her.

They raced along like the wind itself. As if their mounts had sprouted wings. out passed the settled areas and into the deep forest. Beauty had no thought but to hurry. Something inside felt as if it were dying.

They rode, disregarding the many hours, the days it took to reach the forest road. The passage there was difficult as the path was overgrown with autumn's weeds and thistles. At the front gate, Beauty jumped from her mount and handed her reins up to the rider.

Without further word, she slipped through the iron grates and ran as fast as her feet could carry her

through the long courtyard. No light emerged from the castle's windows. The front doors had been left open. Fear gripped at her heart with icy fingers.

She ran through the garden, hardly recognizing it. The trees, the plants had all been left unattended, the grass had grown tall and smattered with weeds. No song birds greeted her. Panic added to her haste.

Through the garden she ran, down the stone chip path, now infiltrated by small grasses. Panting from the running cold with fear and sick with worry, she found him by the pond.

Beauty fell to her knees, crying out his name. She lifted the heavy head from the edge of the water. Its wonderful calmness covered now with a green scum. The flowers around it withered and dying.

The Beast's long hair bobbed in the ripples around his submerged face like the dark tendrils of some sea creature. The water was cold to the touch as she had pulled him from it. Quickly, she turned him over on his back.

"Beast!" she cried, brushing the wet tangled hair from his face. Not caring that the foul smelling water stain her dress, She pulled him into her lap, his pale cold cheek against her breast. "Beast! You... you cannot die! Oh God in heaven, let it not be so!"

Tears ran freely from her eyes. Streaking down her road-soiled face, she looked down upon his still countenance between her trembling hand. The closed eyes, he was so still.

"Beast!" she implored. "Look at me... please! Open your eyes!" Beauty choked on the words. "Oh Beast... It has not been you that has been the monster. It has been me! Please..." she sobbed. "Please...do not die."

Her salty tears fell softly down on his face. They ran down the soft hairs of his upswept brows, along his nose and into his eyes.

Beauty's hands clutched at the shirt at his chest, for her heart was breaking. "I love you..." she cried, sobbing onto his hair. "I do love you..."

"And...I, you." The velvet and granite baritone was windy, but there. Beauty looked down, expecting her mind had snapped. And perhaps it had, for laying there in her lap, his light blue wondrous eyes looking up at her so full of love, was her Beast. Yet something had changed. The roughness of his features had eased. The brows that had been so harsh had softened. The beautiful tawny mane was longer, with soft golden waves that sent ringlets across her knees where the water had dampened it.

"Beast?" she questioned, still not believing her own eyes. "Is that you?"

"Yes," he said softly, his voice a bit stronger, velvet and sand that tantalized her ears. Slowly, gently he sat up and turned to her. A weak smile played along his cleft mouth, open enough to see the glint of long white canine teeth underneath. He took her hand in his.

"It... is not a dream, Beauty," he reassured her. "I am... your Beast. The love I feel from you makes me look as I do. You see me with your heart."

Shakily, he stood. Beauty rose also to steady him. His touch no longer threatening, it was warm and incredibly soft. She looked up smiling, her eyes still wet, into the wonder of his face.

"Beast, it is true. I did not know it before, but I do now. I love you." She pulled him into a strong embrace, marveling at the feel of him all around her. How right it felt. She noticed how thin he was. The unspoken question clouded her eyes as he gently pulled back.

"Remember... when you wanted to know my name, Beauty?" he asked. Her look deepened with puzzlement.

"I remember. I was such a fool. I had seen you as a pet, an animal. Trying even to give you a name. That was cruel, You are no animal."

"There is yet another reason why I ran from you that day," he paused, taking a breath. "You see, of all the names in the world in which you could have picked from, you spoke my real name."

"Vincent?" she smiled.

"Yes," he said, returning the smile.

"Then I too, have a confession to make... Vincent. You... are the most beautiful person I have ever known. Both in appearance and in spirit."

Vincent's eyes widened in surprise.

"And as such," she continued. "I cannot have you calling me by a child's name. Not when we are to be married." She watched the lights in his eyes, felt giddy with the happiness shared. "My given name is Catherine."

"Catherine," he repeated with a sigh. She drew closer to his bulk, letting her arms reach about him, to help support him as they moved slowly back toward the courtyard.

For a moment, he paused, bending to meet her as she stood on tiptoe. As their lips touched, each knew the others' heart. Love for each other would live in them both forever.

END