



seven days

a short story by

Annie Westphal

© 2017 by Annie Westphal. All rights reserved.

Seven Days

I only ever heard about him from people passing through. Tall tales of the prince in the wood traveled far in those days, and usually grew taller with each telling. One traveling merchant would swear on his mother's soul that the prince had a face badly burned by a wrathful fire spirit, but another highwayman would protest, saying that the prince was no more than an inhuman Beast who dined on solitude and reveled in fear. Over time, stories of the prince in the wood became the explanation for everything that went bump in the night. I overheard these stories as they changed and seemed to take on lives of their own, as if they could have easily turned on those who gave them voice and swallowed them whole. It was this that scared me the most, and so I preferred not to tell stories.

Stories could not fill an empty pantry, and so with the possibility of pay in the next town, I set off on the road through the wood. The neighbors watched me go with fear in their eyes and whispers on their lips—stories already forming of a fate that had yet to befall me. I pulled my cloak close against the wintry sting of their trepidation. My situation did not afford me the luxury of superstition. Leaving the village behind me I faced my future with the wood in between, and no stories in sight that might gobble me up.

Into the wood I ventured, equipped with a stale crust, a cloak, and my wits. It began to snow early that morning, but still I pressed on. The wind swiped sharply at my face, catching at the tips of my nose and ears. The snow tripped up my feet and weighed down my cloak, slowly encasing me in a garment of ice so heavy and cold that I was finally forced to seek shelter in the hollow of a tree. Weary travelers are always taking shelter in the oddest places. What the stories do not tell you is that river dams, caves, and the hollows of trees play host much more frequently to the creatures that do not have cozy houses with fireplaces and grandmother's quilts. Finding the hospitality of the critters occupying this particular hollow about as warm as the blizzard, I decided to take my chances with the storm.

The gauntlet of snow obscured my vision so that I did not see the gates until my nose was pressed up against one freezing metal bar. Taking a step back, I craned my neck to try to see how tall they were, yet was unable to make out more than a swatch of many-clawed iron spokes and snarls that sang out a warning that my weak human ears mistook for a whisper of invitation. It only took the weight of one finger and the gates swung open to admit me. I

nearly tumbled over backward when a warm breeze spilled out from whatever land lay beyond the gates, and I could smell the fragrant aroma of orange blossoms. I crept forward into a luscious garden that did not so much seem to be safe from the storm, but rather as I crossed through the gates, the storm ceased to exist.

I crept along the lane lined with trees, flowers, and bushes of an array of dazzling shades. The lane turned into a drive paved in blue gray cobblestones, though moss and weeds had come to claim the spaces between each stone, giving the road the appearance of being as much a part of nature as the soft clouds floating overhead. Picking my way along the road, I started to feel lighter—the sun melting the snow on my clothes and the troubles from my mind. All the stories of the prince in the wood tickled the edges of my consciousness, but I picked a flower, letting the simple pleasure of holding something beautiful chase away the nuisance of momentary foolishness.

The road led me around a bend, where I suddenly beheld an enormous palace of breathtaking opulence. It sprawled across my vision, nearly too splendid to look at directly. As I approached I had the distinct feeling that the walls, windows, balconies, and moldings of the palace shifted, as facets in a precious stone do when turned against the light one way and then another. Shaking my head to free it from the dizziness of the illusion, I trained my eyes on the path beneath my feet until I saw them climb a long flight of stone steps.

The interior of the palace was no less ornate than the exterior, though mercifully everything stayed put, allowing me to take a good look around. I did not encounter a single soul as I explored the maze of rooms, finally stumbling upon a cozy parlor filled with the softest rugs and couches I had ever stood or sat upon. Suddenly overcome with the exhaustion of my trek, I reclined on a white fluffy chaise longue and yielded to the sleep that clawed at my body like a hundred starving tigers.

Time is an invention of man, and no man or beast knows this more than those who never run out of the stuff. I could never tell how long I sat in one attitude—I stopped paying attention to the movements of the sun long ago. Hours, days, years, it hardly seemed to matter. If I sat, slept, or wandered, nothing ever changed, so I hardly bothered anymore. That is, until *she* came wandering up the drive. It had taken me some time to remember, staring at the strange speck slowly growing in the distance, that this was a woman. How

strange. I rushed—what a shock that I remembered how!—to the roof of the palace to watch her approach.

She was beautiful, that much I could still appreciate, though that was not what stunned me and left me transfixed, frozen like the statues that were my only company in that place. There was a gentleness in the way she walked along the road, as if she believed that even the cold stones deserved respect from her feet. As she drew nearer, and I could see her with more clarity, I recognized a color in her eyes—a shade so subtle that it would be no surprise if I were the first to see it. I recognized it because I had seen the same reflected in mirrors before I stopped paying them any attention: loneliness.

She entered the palace fearlessly, and I rushed—the wonder of hurried motion!—inside, the loneliness of this beautiful, gentle creature a silver dagger in my heart. I resolved in that moment to protect her, to care for her; anything she desired would be hers. Yet the dagger plunged further still, for I knew the only sorrow I would not—*could* not—remedy was her loneliness. If only I could remember why...

I dreamt that I sat at the head of a long table laden with the most superb feast I could imagine. My mouth watered torturously at the aroma of meats and sweet morsels that we had never been able to afford. The spectral grumblings of my stomach gave way to real and acute pangs that ripped me from my slumber. At first I thought I slept still, the smell of the sumptuous meal still tempting my nostrils. I was delighted to discover that I was very awake, and that a small table had appeared beside the chaise, nearly quaking under the weight of the meal waiting there. There was a note perched on top of the nearest cloche. It bore only two words in fresh ink: For you.

I ate well, hardly able to make a dent in the provided feast. When I had stuffed myself to the point of bursting, I stared down at what I had left. It seemed a shame for such delicious food to go to waste. My heart nearly broke thinking of my poor father starving at home while I gorged myself in this strange place, but no sooner had I thought it then the food disappeared into thin air, replaced by another note. Startled by the display of magic (though considering the marvels I had already witness, I was hardly surprised), I opened the note cautiously.

The leftover food has been delivered to the pantry at your father's house.

I stared down at the note, blinking. How? Who? There was nobody in the room whom I could have feared might read my mind, so how was this happening?

Another note appeared.

Trembling slightly, I reached for the note and nearly ripped it in half trying to break the wax seal.

Please do not be afraid. I will not hurt you. I am the master of this place, and your every desire will be granted.

I considered this for a moment. I was not alone in the palace, though apparently had nothing to fear. Whether I believed him or not, it did no good to worry over what I could not control. *Very well*, I thought as loudly as possible, *though I simply desire a place to safely wait out the storm.*

This is not all you desire.

I frowned. *And I suppose you are the expert in what I think?*

I am not. Apologies.

That is all right then. I paused for a moment to recognize that this was the strangest discourse I had ever participated in. There was something nice about that. *I want to help my father. He is injured and cannot work. I was on my way to the village on the far side of the wood to search for employment. If you could help me find a suitable position, I would be forever in your debt.*

The note in my hand vanished. I waited patiently for the next one to appear, but instead a heavy chest popped into existence on the floor before my feet. Curious, I lifted the lid and immediately frowned. It was filled to bursting with gold coins and precious gems of

large size and variety. “You insult me with this charity,” I said aloud this time. “I appreciate the intent, but you cannot expect me to accept this!”

No sooner had I stopped speaking than a note appeared on the table. Perhaps I imagined it, but I thought I noticed a particular kind of urgency that colored its materialization.

I would never wish to offend you, only to help. The village on the far side of the wood has no position available. You will be turned away from each establishment, and then be forced to brave the wood at night or sleep in a stable. Please let me help you.

The rational part of my mind rejected his prediction, though a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach told me he was right. I had not set off with much hope. I had no skills and no references. After my mother’s death, my father had become fearfully protective, hardly ever allowing me to leave the house. Knowing very little of the world, I knew I had even less to recommend me. “That may be true,” I said, “but I still could not sacrifice my pride and accept such wealth at no personal cost. Even if pride had nothing to do with it, nothing comes for free. I would prefer to know what price I must pay, rather than have it sneak up behind me at some unknown hour.”

What did you have in mind?

“I—” I paused. I could not think of how to repay someone that I had not even met before. Fortunately, another note came to save me from my indecision.

Remain here, with me, for one week. It has been many years since I have had company. If you will be my guest for seven days, each day I will restore one seventh of your father’s lost fortune. By the time you return home, it will be as if the horrors of the last year had never transpired.

That would only be possible if you could restore my mother, I thought, instantly blushing when I realized that he could probably read my thoughts.

Please. Let me do this for you.

Why me?

I waited for his response, expecting the same I had heard my entire life. Because you are a poor, helpless, beautiful girl.

I don't know.

I stared down at this response. All right. I thought. One week. I waited for another letter to materialize, but none came to replace the one I clutched in my hands like a lifeline. Had I completely lost my mind? A small part of me kept thinking of my father, lying sickly and defeated in bed, broken by an unforgiving world that had taken everything from him. I was doing this for him, wasn't I? *Are you quite certain about that?* another part of my mind whispered. Trembling, I stared down at the note.

I don't know.

My first day at the palace was pleasant, if a little awkward. After my breakfast, I sat alone on the couch in the parlor for a while, not entirely certain what I was supposed to do. The master of the house, whoever he was, had wished for my company. So where was he? I decided to explore the palace and grounds. Perhaps my search would yield some clues about my elusive host. Though my intentions were innocent enough, I very soon became lost in the maze of rooms. There seemed to be no pattern or set blueprint to them. I would walk down a corridor and through a door to my right and end up in the library, cross to a door on the far side that led into an atrium, and through another door that led back to the same corridor, except the door to the library now led to a long gallery filled with portraits. I started to panic when I realized I would never find my way back to the parlor, but then the next door opened onto what I assumed to be my chambers. Something I had read in a note surfaced in my mind:

Your every desire will be granted.

I had wanted to find my way back, and I had, hadn't I? This gave me a curious idea. Turning to the door, I emptied my mind of all thoughts but those of my host, and the desire to find him. Timidly, I reached out for the door handle, threw it open, and stumbled out into the portrait gallery.

I looked around and, seeing nobody about, frowned. Was the palace broken? I tried again, but each door dumped me out on the same spot in the portrait gallery. Having nothing better to do with my time, I must have tried twenty different doors, each attempt yielding the same results. Not wishing to lose myself to insanity, and bidden by renewed pangs of hunger, I returned to my parlor to find a spectacular lunch already waiting. There was a note once again perched on the edge of the table.

That is not going to work.

I crumpled the paper up and hurled it out the window, saying I had figured that out for myself, thanks, and I would appreciate it if he would refrain from being so impertinent—but as I tucked into the meal I could not help the smallest of smiles. At least he had a sense of humor.

I knew I should have been ashamed, spying as I was, but I could not tear my eyes from her for a single instant. She would only be with me for one week—seven days to remember every smile, every step, every word, and every amusing little frown, every little gesture a puzzle phrase that told the story of this enchanting girl. These memories would be my only companions for the rest of time, and they were precious to me. It was a delight to watch her explore my home, to watch her confusion at its maze of entrances and exits. *If we had eternity here, I would show you the secrets of this palace...* but she figured it out! I nearly laughed when I saw the satisfied set of her jaw, the fierceness in her eyes blocking out the loneliness for the briefest instant.

When she returned to her chamber, I realized it was probably time for me to leave her in peace, but she was staring at the door and the look on her face fixed me to the spot. I had

to know what she was thinking; what she wanted. Just one peek... I could not believe it. She was looking for me! For an instant I thought she might succeed, and I let my eyes drift to the door, willing it to swing open and fearing it more than the world. Nothing happened, and I returned my attention to the mirror, which showed me the girl standing in the portrait gallery, looking confused. Disappointment and relief washed over me, and I waited for her to return to the parlor. Instead, she tried another door, and another, always stepping out into the same spot in the portrait gallery. I smiled. She wanted to find me. Something about that stubborn little face told me that she would find a way, and the thought terrified me.

I left the mirror to make preparations for her lunch. She was going to be hungry.

The afternoon was too beautiful to remain indoors, so I took a book from the library and walked out onto the grounds to find a shady spot to read. The gardens surrounding the palace were as floral and fragrant as they had been the previous evening, and I had no shortage of lovely little corners to hide away in. The farther I progressed, the more I realized that I had no desire to read, finding my surroundings far more exciting than anything I would find between on printed pages. Instantly, the book clutched under my arm disappeared, and I happily strolled off to explore this enchanted place.

After a while I was sweating. My wool gown was too heavy for this strange summer climate, so I stopped to dip my feet in a clear blue stream that gurgled along beside the path. As I watched the light change through the leaves of the trees, I thought about my father. I told him I would be gone one night, two nights at the most. He would be in bed now, hopefully, resting his bad leg. He would also be worried. I was sunning myself beside a stream and my father would be worried sick. The idea of it gave me a headache, but worse than that was the realization that I hadn't cared. I had barely given him a moment's thought since supper the night before, and even then it was only the dutiful consideration of a loyal child.

I shivered, and realized that darkness was threatening at the edges of dusk, and I should return to the palace. I left the stream behind, and with it my worries about what kind of child I was. My last thought, the one that did not quite make it into my head, washed away down the stream—that I was happy here.

Supper was just as delicious as every meal had been since I arrived at the enchanted palace. It greeted me with a note from my host: *How was your afternoon?* I told him all about my exploration of the grounds, how refreshing the warm air and the cool water had been, and how I realized that truly anything I desired would manifest if I simply thought of it. I omitted details about my tiny existential crisis, but absently wondered how far into my mind he had already seen.

We talked (as much as what we did could be called a conversation) through the meal, and long after the feast had disappeared. We talked of many things that were not ourselves—literature, philosophy, history. His knowledge of most subjects was shockingly out of date, and I wondered how long he had been confined to this place. It must be a lonely way to live, and it was a wonder that he did not prefer to converse in person. I thought of those stories I had heard since childhood of the beastly prince in the wood. Could his deformity be so abhorrent? I had been beautiful my entire life, and it had done nothing to save my father's fortune, or my prospects. It seemed to me that beauty was good for nothing, and perhaps ugliness was the opposite end of that spectrum. Perhaps it was better to be neither too beautiful, nor too ugly, but acceptably mediocre so as not to offend anyone.

You are tired. I will let you sleep.

As I read the note I realized that I had been yawning. Out of my window I could see the stars glittering almost tangibly, as if, were I to wish hard enough, I could reach out, pluck one from the sky and wear it around my neck on a silver chain. I bid my host a good night, and traipsed off to bed, utterly exhausted by the splendor of my waking life.

The next few days passed in much the same way as the first. I had three meals a day for the first time in a year. I explored a new corner of the palace and the grounds each afternoon, sometimes with a good book, other times accompanied by the pleasure of not having to think about anything. Ultimately I grew to enjoy my nightly conversations with the Beast—as I had come to think of him—so much so that I awaited dusk with more and more impatience each afternoon.

On the seventh and final afternoon, I was walking up and down the portrait gallery, when I stopped at the spot where the palace had dumped me over and over again just a week ago. Curious, I stood in front of the door, trying to figure out if I had missed anything. There was clearly nobody there to be seen except the subjects in the portraits, who all gazed fixedly ahead, frozen in youth and glory. I frowned. The subjects in the portraits! I looked straight ahead and saw, staring directly back at me, the portrait of a young man. He was handsome, to be sure, but there was also something about his eyes and lips—the smile there tugged involuntarily into a smirk—that made me like him instantly. There was a small plaque attached to the bottom of the frame. Something that looked like a burn mark obscured most of the plaque, but I could just make out the word “Prince” and the date. My heart sank when I realized that the portrait had been painted over a hundred years ago. This could not possibly be a portrait of my mysterious friend.

I started to walk down the gallery, inspecting the names and dates of the princes and kings hanging on the wall, timeless and trapped within a square of paint. The more portraits I saw, the more my confusion grew, until I found myself back where I had started, heart pounding, staring at the portrait of the nameless prince once more. Painted over a hundred years ago, and still the newest piece in the entire collection. Could this be him? It was impossible, and yet the entire palace, the entire week had been so impossible that the world outside—real life—had started to seem as impossible as summer weather in winter, or everything working out all right in the end.

Taking one last, lingering look at the prince, I rushed back to my chambers for supper, determined to get answers. Before I left the enchanted palace forever, I wanted to see him.

Some terrible part of me—the part that hates me and wishes to see me suffer—realized that this was her last day. In the morning she would wake up, tucked safely into her own bed, and her memory of this place would fade slowly until it seemed like nothing more than a dream, and I—

I leaned in close to the mirror, so close that I could see my breath on the glass. She had gone back to the portrait gallery, and was now staring at one portrait in particular. My hair stood on end as I saw something like recognition in her wide eyes. It only flashed there

for a moment before it was replaced by confusion. I watched her walk along the gallery, inspecting each portrait, seemingly searching for something.

Suddenly I realized what it was and I felt the color drain from my face. I watched my shock mirrored in her small, pale face. It was as if the mirror were a window, and through my portrait we were seeing eye-to-eye for the first time. The next instant she was gone, running to her parlor. It was early yet for supper, but I knew she would want to talk to me. She would want an explanation.

“I need to talk to you,” she stated aloud.

“I’m here,” I replied, watching as a note appeared on the table.

So confident a moment ago, I watched as she hesitated. I yearned for her to ask me and dreaded it, a duality now become familiar to me over the seven days. “The portrait of the young prince, with the ruined frame—is that *you*?”

There was nothing to be done, she deserved to know, and I wanted her to. “It is.”

She gasped when she read my words. “How is that possible?”

“It is a very long story.”

“I have time.”

I didn’t reply—how could I when I hardly knew the answer myself? Shadows of a long-ago life taunted me, laughing in my face as I grasped for answers to my own questions.

“Please.” I heard her timid plea even through my layers of self-pity.

“I cannot tell you.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t...”

“Right.” She began to pace the small room. “Can I at least see you?”

My pulse jumped, “it is impossible.”

“Why can’t I?”

“Please, you know that I cannot.”

“But you can do so many other things!” She looked very angry, and I understood her frustration, consumed as I was by the same. “You can make things appear out of nowhere, you can read my mind—”

“I cannot read your mind, actually. I simply see that which you desire.”

“Pardon?”

"I am only permitted to perform tasks that are in service to you. The reason we can converse about other topics is that you *desire* to speak of them. The only times I can read your mind are when you want me to."

She opened her mouth to reply, but closed it again, frowning. My limbs felt strange the expressions danced to and fro across her face. I felt almost alive. "That makes sense, actually."

I watched as she resumed her pacing. "But what if I *desire* to see you?"

"Surely you have learned by now that it doesn't work that way. The palace will simply place you in the portrait gallery, as that is the only version of 'seeing me' that is permitted."

"Can you come here?"

I shook my head, but quickly realized that she could not see me. "No. The palace would lead the both of us in circles until we were driven mad. Believe me. I have tried to leave only once, because once was quite enough."

She nodded, "I believe you."

"The pleasure of your company, however I have had to come by it, has been an honor. No matter how much wealth I shower on your father, it will never be enough to repay him for what he has shared with me for this brief time."

I watched her read, barely able to breathe. There was so much more I wanted to say, but the words stuck in my throat like dry toast. When she finished reading, she stood as still as a statue, staring down at the note. *There has to be a way to save you*, her wish danced through my mind like an unanswerable prayer she whispered so quietly that I nearly missed her words. "If there is an enchantment upon this place," she stated, clearer this time, "then there must be a way to break it. All the stories say so."

My heart nearly split in two. "If there is a way, I have yet to discover it."

For the second time that week, I saw a feeling that I recognized well radiate through her entire body—the rage that consumed my first years of imprisonment. For a long time I railed against the clarity of hindsight, and the injustice of the world. Of all the things I had forgotten, the pain and the regret remained perpetually burned into my memory. I could never wish such torture on such a gentle person. It was better that she be allowed to forget.

“Do not worry about me,” I soothed her. “I am so happy to have met you, and I will cherish our memories together for eternity. Please. Let us enjoy our final night together with no more unpleasantness.”

After a while I finally managed to calm her down, and she sat to eat her supper while we talked of other things—anything else—but there was a shadow over the evening. When I bid her goodnight, she simply nodded with tears in her eyes and shut her bedroom door before they could spill to the ground. I remained at the mirror for a very long time after that, knowing that in the morning she would be gone, and wondering why I did not tell her. What was I more afraid of, that she would want to leave, or want to stay?

I didn’t know why I was crying, but that didn’t shock me, as I didn’t know much of anything it seemed. All I knew was that I needed to cry, hard, for a very long time. My father had always taught me never to bemoan injustice, but he was not there and I couldn’t help it. None of this was fair. He was the first friend I had ever made—the first *true* friend in any case—and there was nothing I could do to help him. As the night wore on, my tears gave way to icy determination. If he could not tell me how to save him, I would simply have to stay at the palace until I figured out a way. Closing my eyes at last, I contented myself with the thought that in the morning I would tell him my desire to stay. I smiled. He would be happy...I hoped.

Exhausted from sobbing, I slept like a corpse. By the time the sun woke me, it was high in the sky and my stomach ached with hunger. I had been too upset to eat much supper. Yawning, I rose groggily and went to open the window. A fierce winter wind slapped me out of my sleepiness, and I quickly shut the window against it. What in the world...I wondered, but suddenly pressed my face to the icy glass, peering out into a bustling marketplace. Finally I turned my attention to the bedroom. It was much nicer than when I had left—there were new furnishings, and the dust was gone from the corners—but it was definitely my room. Trembling, I realized that I was already home, and a new anger boiled in my chest. He knew this would happen, and he let me go to bed without the chance to say everything I would have said had I known...but what would I have said? I shook my head to clear it of those thoughts, foolish as I knew them to be. After all, I was home now, and I could

hear voices in the hall. Taking a deep breath, I grasped the door handle firmly. It's now or never, I thought, and boldly exited my bedchamber.

Alone once more, alone perhaps forever, I paced the portrait gallery in the darkness. Sometime in the night it had come to me—the memory of long-ago days, of my life as it had been before, and the day when my world changed forever. The experience of remembering was so exhausting I suddenly felt the very human urge to lie down. I did so, on the floor in the middle of the portrait gallery. At least the perpetual gazes of the dead would bear witness to my suffering. Staring up at the vaulted ceiling of my prison, I wondered if this was some cruel twist to the enchantment—that I be reminded of my crimes at the very moment that I must embrace solitude once again. This new loneliness cut me deeply. How I missed her in those dark hours. I could have been content to watch her live forever, even if I would never know the bliss of sitting together with her, feeling the time pass by with acceptance. There was more joy for me in the frustration of wondering what went on inside her gorgeous mind than in any other of life's pleasures. Because I had nothing better to do, I closed my eyes and gave myself over to despair and, for the first time in ages and ages, I slept fitfully. I dreamt of an impossible future in the sun, the light of it dancing in brown curls and blue eyes...

I could hear the sounds of the party muffled by the heavy wooden doors. My party. I adjusted my gown, still feeling a little unaccustomed to the rich cloth and ornate patterns. A party like this one, and a dress like this one, was everything a girl my age could have dreamed off—and her father too. Tears—the condensation of love, pride, and hope for all that now awaited me in my life—shone in his eyes as he kissed my cheek and bid me a temporary farewell. In just minutes I would be announced, presented to a society that waited with bated breath to meet the daughter of a man restored to wealth and glory. I stared down at my hands. They were rough from a year of hard living, hardly the hands of a lady. Hurriedly, I tucked them away underneath silky kidskin gloves, swallowing against the tide of panic rising in my throat. I was eligible, whatever that meant, and soon to be a wife and mother, all experiences in the enchanted palace reduced to a bedtime story for the children. Suddenly I missed my Beast so badly that I felt I might lose consciousness. While my mind roiled in conflict and my heart shattered, my feet slipped out of my pinchy shoes and led me away from

the shining lights, smiling faces, and sparkling futures. It took me half of my flight through the woods, my horse weaving through the trees at breakneck speed, for me to realize that I would rather be alone in a palace speaking to phantom notecards than dancing with princes.

The gates did not swing open for me, and I had to throw my entire weight against them several times over before they budged enough for me to squeeze through. The cold metal ripped my dress and my arms, but I did not feel it. I ran through a garden shrouded in darkness, the sharp stone path cutting my feet until they bled. I was no longer an honored guest of an enchanted paradise. I had left, and the world lashed out at me for my betrayal as I accepted each lashing with the stoicism of one who deserved it.

When I finally reached the front door, I paused. The definition of insanity was doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result, and I feared that I was about to step over that line. Caution already blowing away across the wood, I thought of him and opened the door.

I was roused by a sound—and at first I believed I dreamt it, for the palace was empty, and silent as a tomb. Ghosts can torment the mind, but the only reprieve from their incessant badgering lies on the physical plane. Noise is not their forte. Wearily, I sat up, marveling at how I could still feel so human after so much time living as...something else. Suddenly I froze; there was definitely a sound coming from the gallery behind me, though its source was shrouded in shadow. I rose silently and turned, creeping forward cautiously, every sinew of my body tense. There was a small figure standing very still some distance down the gallery, staring at my portrait—I stopped dead, staring dumbstruck when I realized what I was seeing.

At first I thought it hadn't worked and I wanted to scream with frustration. I stepped across the threshold into the portrait gallery, the picture of the prince smirking down at me, mocking me. This was the cruelest enchantment ever devised, I thought. To send people after one another, leading them around in circles for eternity was a special kind of evil. Feeling entirely helpless for the first time since my father's fortune was taken from him, I felt the unbidden tears come to stain my face.

But I was not alone in the gallery as I first thought.

From the shadows, just beyond the reach of what my eyes could perceive, came a cracked whisper, like the sound made when one opens a forgotten crate in the back of an attic. “How —”

I squinted, willing my eyes to adjust, hardly daring to believe it. “Did it work?”

He took one step closer and it was enough. I saw all of him at once — tall frame, shaggy hair, wide eyes, white face. He was clearly the same man from the portrait, but older and wilder. No, not older, it was something else. There was a weight around his shoulders and lips that I recognized as the gifts of true suffering. I blinked up at him. He needed a shave, that much was obvious, but there was nothing beastly about the man who stood before me. I do not know why, but I felt a small twinge of disappointment. After everything, all the tales I had heard, all the magic of this forgotten place, he was just a man. Perhaps in the end, after all the words have been spoken, all stories told, we are all humans trying to find one another.

“How is this possible?” There was doubt in his gaze, and I knew he didn’t believe that I was real; not that I could blame him.

“I’m really here,” I said. “I don’t know what I did, but it worked this time.”

He frowned and took another step closer, this time close enough so he could reach out and run one finger along my curls, which had come loose from their pins and now hung windswept and savage around my head like a mane. A light clicked on behind his eyes, and for the first time I saw the gleaming, healthy young man in the painting. I wanted to get a polishing cloth and rub him like good silver.

“It *is* you,” he said, then his eyes drifted down to my ruined dress, and he raised a slim eyebrow. “Did you have a rough journey?”

I shrugged. “I don’t think your house likes me anymore.”

“Well all of that doesn’t matter now,” and he showed me. The doors all led where they were meant to. He led me from the gallery all the way back to my old room, which was much farther away than I had realized. I found a blanket to wrap around my shoulders while he lit a fire. When he was finished, we sat on one of the couches in silence, both of us unsure about what to say. I nearly suggested we go find some paper so he could write his thoughts instead, when he said, “Why didn’t you tell me that you loved me?”

I stared at him, “pardon me?”

"Well..." he blushed, "it is the only way you could have broken the enchantment."

"But you didn't tell me how to break the enchantment."

"I could not recall how, nor could I recall much of anything then."

I frowned, "But you can now?"

He sighed, "Yes."

"I suppose that is a good thing," I said, "But if *I* didn't know, and *you* didn't know, and I *still* don't know, how do you know?"

"I—" he stopped. "Apologies, but I am afraid you have lost me."

He *looked* lost, and even a little bit hurt. "Look," I said, "I don't have much experience with enchantments, but whether or not I love you hardly seems to be the point."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well..." I thought about it for a moment. "I think what matters is that now we have a chance. Magic can be beautiful, but being alone, you knowing everything I desire—that is not love. All I *know* right now is that I would rather be here with you than anywhere else, with anyone else. Maybe that is love, but the point is that now we have a chance to find out."

His eyes held mine steadily for a moment, calculating, and then he smiled and it was like seeing the full moon for the first time. "I like that," he said.

We talked for hours, until the dawn peeked its head in the window and I was dozing against his shoulder. Gently, he moved so I was lying down, and pulled the blanket close around me. I smiled up at him. "See you tomorrow," I mumbled.

"It is tomorrow."

"You know what I meant."

He chuckled, but then got very quiet. "It has been such a long time since I had a tomorrow," he said finally. "What happens when tomorrow comes?"

I shifted so I could look into his face. He looked very young just then. I searched his eyes for the future I had been offered by so many young men—like a story already written, and all I had to do was accept my part in it. I found nothing there but the hopes and fears of a fragile heart. Satisfied, I smiled.

"I don't know."