

T W I C E   U P O N   A   T I M E

*Beauty* <sup>and</sup> *the Beast*

*The Only One Who  
Didn't Run Away*

W E N D Y   M A S S

SCHOLASTIC INC.

*To all the readers who asked for more  
Twice Upon a Time books. This one's for you.*

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book was originally published in hardcover by Scholastic Press in 2012.

ISBN 978-0-545-31019-2

Copyright © 2012 by Wendy Mass. All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc. SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 13 14 15 16 17 18/0

Printed in the U.S.A. 40  
This edition first printing, May 2013

The text was set in Minister.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Beauty

Today started poorly and got even worse. It is now night-fall, and I am certain even the village's dung heap cleaner would not want to change places with me. I should have known the winds of good tidings were not blowing my way the moment I laid eyes on the baker's new apprentice, a boy a few years my senior who I have never seen in the village before. Our kitchen maid usually does the errands, but she is visiting her family today, so I went to fetch our order of barley rolls.

I do not often venture out into town alone, for Papa worries and his worrying makes me nervous. But this morning I made sure to hold my head high and to look more confident than I felt. I ignored anyone who called out for me to buy whatever they were selling, and made sure to step carefully over the waste constantly being tossed out the windows to the street below. Part of me wanted to take off running in the fields behind the village church and forget the barley rolls. I never feel nervous when I run. But that would be unladylike. I have not been allowed to run freely for years now.

When I arrived at the bakery, the baker — a kind man who always smells like fresh bread — greeted me by name. One of three things happens when someone hears my name for the first time. The worst is when they laugh. The

second worst is when they *start* to laugh but quickly turn it into a cough so as not to appear rude. Lastly, if they are a halfway decent sort, they will squint at my face as though searching for some prettiness that perhaps they missed initially. Upon finding none, they will then say something like, “Have you seen the new juggler performing in the town square? Such talent!”

No one, in all my twelve and three-quarter years, has ever said that the name *Beauty* suits me.

I blame my mother (may her soul rest in peaceful slumber amidst fields of wildflowers). She used her very last breath to bestow my name upon me. If I were the betting type, I would say she was more likely referring to the beauty shining forth from the gates of heaven — which were no doubt opening wide in welcome — than to the infant held up before her, red-faced and sporting a nose that leaned a bit too far to the left. My nose, thankfully, has righted itself as I have grown. Mostly.

When the baker said my name, his new apprentice turned to look. I figured he would choose the first option and laugh. He had the type of sharp chin and thin lips that indicate a certain meanness of spirit. But he did not laugh. Rather, he surprised me with a response I had not heard before. He tipped an imaginary hat at me and said, “Good day, Beauty, my name is Handsome!” And *then* he laughed. The baker gave him a sharp jab in the ribs and waved off my coin as he handed me my sack of rolls.

I cannot tell if my face flushed from the heat of the baker’s huge oven, or the hurtful words. Likely both. I know the teasing should not bother me, for I have many good qualities. My sister, Clarissa, insists no one makes better ginger candies. And I can outrun a hare, not that there is much use

for this skill unless one is chasing hares. (Which I am not allowed to do anymore after chasing away the Easter hare three years ago.) Plus, no one in our village reads as well as I, including the monks at the monastery, and they read all day long.

But the teasing bothers me nonetheless.

I wish my name had gone to Clarissa, nearly three years my senior, who truly *is* beautiful. You know the type — hair soft as the finest silk from across the sea, round blue eyes like robins' eggs, and a forehead so high she has been mistaken for royalty. She is also sweet and gentle and does not furrow her brow by thinking of serious things. All of the boys in town want her hand in marriage, but she turns them down. Though she cares deeply about maintaining (or bettering) her social standing as the daughter of a successful merchant, Clarissa is holding out for love.

Where she is a romantic, I am a realist. Romantic love is something found only in the books Papa sells to the lords and ladies of the kingdom for a tidy profit. I should know, for I have read many of them. My head is full of stories from the books Papa buys and sells without ever opening the cover himself. Clarissa's head is full of purple silk gowns and dances and handsome troubadours playing the lute. One day soon, Papa shall tire of Clarissa's silliness and will marry her off to whomever he deems her best match. Although the thought of marriage currently makes me shudder, neither my sister nor I shall marry for love. It is simply not the way of things.

Clarissa insists I should not look at life so bleakly, for it makes me seem unpleasant and no one will want to be in my company. She says that if I took the time to comb my hair and powder my cheeks and stopped wearing Papa's old

tunics and breeches, people might actually smile when they hear my name. She may be right, but I do not intend to find out.

Much to my surprise, being insulted by the apprentice turned out to be the high point of my day. For sometime between this afternoon when my sister lit the hearth to stave off the first autumn chill, and sunset when I returned home from my errands, our house burned to the ground.

## CHAPTER TWO

# ↔ Beast ↔

Darkness. Cold. Silence, but for the fearful panting in my ear. The breath warming my ear is not mine. My own mouth is closed tight against the cold air and the tiny winged bugs that surround us. My vision is clear, though, impeded only by the thickness of the forest.

“Jump!” the voice screams. So I spring up, easily clearing the top of a ditch. We run deeper into the forest, thick trees ominous and unyielding, the ground hard and unforgiving on my bare feet. I do not know why my feet are bare. My mother, the queen, would never allow me to step foot outside the castle without boots on, even when the sun is high and hot in the sky. Yet I clearly feel the dirt and rocks and twigs beneath me.

“Duck!” the voice yells. I try to twist my head to see to whom the voice belongs. But it is dark, so dark.

“DUCK!”

I have waited too long to obey. The top of my head crashes into the branch above, but it does not hurt. It never hurts. But after the crash, the voice shouting in my ear is silenced. It is at this point I always wake up, my nightclothes stuck to me with sweat. My first thought is always to look around for the person who shouted to me in the dream. But I am always alone. I’ve had this dream every week since I

turned thirteen a few months back, but this is the first time I have had it while out of my bed.

I hear my brother calling my name, but do not reply to Alexander's shouts. I shake off the cobwebs of the dream, surprised that I actually fell asleep while hiding atop the castle's tallest tower. I turn my attention to the stars above. In my dream I cannot see them. My tutor, Master Cedrick, says that there is a star in the heavens for every person who walks the ground below. Mother says my tutor has peculiar ideas. I think that's why I like him, for I, too, have been called odd.

If I were a normal prince, I would be inside with the rest of the royal family escorting our remaining guests across the dance floor. Instead, I am sitting with my back against the hard stone wall, trying to pretend my nightmare does not bother me. All I wanted to do tonight was to play my bagpipes and admire the bright stars of the Summer Triangle, which shall soon be disappearing from view as the summer turns to fall. Was that so much to ask?

The door to the balcony creaks open behind me. I know without turning that it is Alexander, the heir to our father's throne and a much better prince than I. A much better *everything*, actually. But I don't mind. If only one of us should have the ability to speak five languages, it should be the one who will one day have a kingdom to rule. If only one is able to discuss the great works of philosophy and mathematics with the finest minds in the land, while also being charming, witty, handsome, and an excellent rider of horses, it should be Alexander.

And tall, did I mention tall? At fourteen, he is easily a head and a half taller, although I am only a year his junior.

"Riley, Riley, Riley," he says, sitting down next to me and

pulling his knees to his chest. "I have given you as long as I could. I even pretended to check the dungeons, and you know how I feel about them. You must return to the party immediately. Mother is beginning to turn various shades of purple."

"Must I truly? I have already stepped on the toes of two princesses, a duchess, and a lady-in-waiting who I am pretty sure snuck into the castle when the royal guards' backs were turned."

Alexander leans over and straightens the silver chain that links the tips of my velvet cape. "There are worse things in the world than dancing with beautiful girls, little brother. You make it sound more unpleasant than cleaning the dung heaps. Now come. Duty calls."

I do not know why everyone always assumes the worst job is cleaning the latrines. It is smelly, without a doubt. But sometimes, amidst the waste, a pearl will turn up, lost from some woman's necklace, or coins from a nobleman's pocket. Or so I am told, since Mother keeps me far from the laborers.

I blow one last forlorn note on my bagpipes and follow Alexander back into the small room inside the tower. I rest the bagpipes against the wall before heading down the winding staircase. If I brought them with me, Mother would no doubt make me play them for the gathered guests. Being the center of attention gives me hives, and I do not want to end this already disagreeable evening with a visit from the castle doctor. The man is all too attached to his leeches.

## CHAPTER THREE

# Beauty

Although neighbors had rushed to douse the flames with barrels of water, only a handful of our belongings survived the fire: my mother's old locket (although the rose petal inside is now a pile of cinders); our iron bathtub; one chest of Papa's books, which had been with him at the time of the fire; a basket of clothes that my sister grabbed when she ran from the burning house; and a few jars of jellies and pickled pig's feet from what used to be the pantry.

All of the books, all of the paintings, all of the furniture, all of it is gone. Clarissa has taken the loss of our belongings very hard, and is barely speaking. Even though I lost my collection of found objects — arguably my most valued possessions next to my mother's locket — the fact that we all escaped from bodily harm has kept me from wallowing too deep in self-pity.

Three days have passed and we can no longer accept the charity of our neighbors. They were kind enough to give us beds to sleep on, and bread and cheese to eat although we've been without an appetite. Papa has sold off the few books that had been stored in the chest and bought us the most basic belongings. We are moving to a tiny cottage on the western edge of the village. I will have to find employment while Papa works hard to build up his business again.

Without our maids, Clarissa will be charged with making sure our home is in order, as before.

Well, perhaps *better* than before, what with burning it down and all.

I have gone to the church to contemplate our new life and to seek comfort. Soon I will not have the luxury of stealing away to think, and Papa is too upset to worry that I am off alone. He (and I) will have to get used to it, since there are no more maids to accompany me.

I have positioned myself in the last pew, right beside my favorite stained-glass window. I close my eyes and allow my face to be bathed in warm blue-green light.

"I thought I would find you here," Clarissa whispers, sitting down next to me. Her voice is small and sad, but at least she is talking again.

I turn to look at her. Her skirt is wrinkled, her boots unlaced and scuffed. Her usually shiny hair is dull and pulled back in a messy braid. Without her face powder, she is blotchy and pink. This is not good. Only one of us is allowed not to care about our appearance, and that person has to be me.

"Clarissa," I say, lifting her hand into mine. Her nails are bitten to the quick. "I have good news!"

"Will it bring back our home? The many possessions Papa worked so hard to get for us? Return us to our rightful status in society?"

"Well, no," I admit. "But you can stop blaming yourself for the fire. It was not your fault. It turns out a pigeon had gotten caught in the chimney and blocked the path of the smoke. You could not have known."

That gets her attention. For the first time in days, her eyes widen with interest. "Truly?" she asks. "How do you know?"

“The carpenter went over to see what materials he could salvage for us,” I tell her, which is the truth. “And he found the bird.” (Not true.) “Wedged in tight, poor thing.” (Also not true.)

Clarissa exhales deeply. “That is good to hear. Well, not for the bird, of course.”

I look around the church, glad that we are alone. It is not like this is my first falsehood, but surely my first inside a church. Perhaps in light of all we have been through, the parish priest will let this one pass.

“It is time,” she says. “We must make our way to the new house.”

I nod, aware that when I stand up, I will be leaving my comfortable, familiar life behind, and walking into the unknown. I do not want to let on how scared I am. I have to be the brave one. Both for her and for Papa. He tries hard to raise two daughters on his own, but I know it is not always easy.

By the time we step out onto the road, a new determination has settled upon Clarissa’s face. She is standing taller. When a fancy woman in a lace dress sniffs in disapproval at our appearance, Clarissa even tosses her braid in defiance. Once the woman turns into the shoemaker’s shop, however, Clarissa’s shoulders slump again. “Our new home has no well,” she laments. “Papa’s back is so bad he cannot possibly lug water from the stream all the way to the edge of the village. How will we bathe?”

I reach out for her hand, feeling, not for the first time, as though I am the older sister. “I shall fetch our bathwater.”

We enter the crowded marketplace, lively with peddlers hawking everything from hair ribbons and rabbit pelts to carrot soup and chamber pots. If this were a normal day,

Clarissa would already be haggling for the best prices, her arms laden with objects she simply *must* have. But this is not a normal day.

“And what of food?” Clarissa asks as we pass a vegetable stand, the sacks of corn, peas, and beans from the summer harvest piled as high as my head. “Papa puts on a brave face, but he is worried, I can tell. We have no money and no land to farm.”

I swallow my own fears. “I shall find work,” I assure her. “Our bellies will not be empty.”

After a long pause, Clarissa says, “Do not take this the wrong way, dear sister, but there are only two things you could be — a maid, or a lady-in-waiting. And you have the skills for neither.”

Normally, I would pinch her for a comment like that, but I restrain myself due to her still-fragile state. That, and the fact that she speaks the truth. I have watched our various maids perform all the household chores but was never encouraged to learn them myself. And although Clarissa was the unofficial “lady of the house,” she certainly did not dirty her hands preparing roast duck or beating our woolen tunics with a broom. Neither of us can weave cloth or spin wool into yarn or even mend the holes in Papa’s socks. We cannot make candles or butter or cheese or ale. We have never gathered eggs, and have not picked our own berries or nuts since we were little children playing in the fields.

We stop to watch a group of boys play leapfrog on the riverbank. They leap over one another’s backs and then run to the end of the line as fast as they can. They have given me an idea. “I know! I can earn money by running!”

“How?” Clarissa asks. “By challenging the squires to a footrace and charging them a shilling when you win?”

“Do you think I could earn that much? I am certain I would win!”

I have missed the sound of Clarissa’s laughter, but she indulges me now. “Beauty! No squire would risk his knight-hood by being outrun by a girl.”

She speaks the truth. We start walking again, and I continue to ponder how else to take advantage of my speed. “I have it! I can be a messenger! Papa’s friends are always muttering about how slow the messengers are, and how by the time they receive word on anything, months have passed. I would make an excellent messenger.” I can already imagine myself running like the wind to some distant land, an important document rolled up and tucked inside my belt loop. I would run so fast that I would leave all my fears behind in the dust. And no one would be able to fault me for wearing pants. A messenger could not be expected to run in a skirt across roads of dirt and rock.

“A messenger needs a horse,” Clarissa points out. “You, however, do not have a horse. Besides, the roads are much too dangerous for a young girl to travel on her own. You are the one always scolding Papa for riding after dark, or staying at an inn without a guard. You must keep thinking.”

I sigh. I may jest that Clarissa’s head is full of more air than a pig-bladder balloon, but she knows a lot about the ways of the world. Plus, I have a feeling my fears would follow me no matter how fast I ran.

We continue to follow the stream until we reach the mill. A line of farmers and peasants stands with arms full of bundled stalks of rye, wheat, or malt, waiting for their turn to have their crops ground at the millstone. I watch as the power from the stream turns the huge waterwheel, which then turns the millstones in a graceful partnership. An argument

has broken out amongst the group, with angry voices and flailing arms. This is a common occurrence at the mill, since the miller is known throughout the village as a cheat.

A man in a gray traveling cloak has stepped between the miller and the farmer. From what I can tell, the farmer is accusing the miller of not handing over the full allotment of flour due to him, and the stranger is telling the miller something in a low voice. A few rotations of the waterwheel later, the miller ducks behind the giant millstone and returns, grumbling, with another sack of flour for the farmer.

“Who is that?” I ask Clarissa, pointing to the stranger in the cloak.

“I have heard Papa and his friends speak of him,” she replies. “He can tell if someone is lying, and then he convinces that person to own up. He must get a lot of business at the mill.”

As we watch, the farmer doles out three handfuls of his flour to the stranger before picking up the handles of his wheelbarrow and heading off. The stranger adds his small sack of flour to a growing pile at his feet, and leans back against the fence, no doubt waiting for another fight to break out. “I can do that job!” I exclaim.

“You?”

“Certainly! I always know when people are fibbing.” I do not tell her that since I have some practice with lying, I am an excellent candidate to catch someone else doing it.

Clarissa throws her head back and laughs. “Beauty, you *never* know when I am fibbing.”

“Yes, I do. Like the other day, when you told me I had a turnip in my hair, I knew you were only jesting.”

She laughs again. “No. A turnip really *had* taken up residence in those curly locks of yours.”

“What?” I reach back to feel the top of my hair. I do not feel any vegetables.

“It fell out the next day as you ran to greet Papa when he came home from his latest trip. Truly, sister. You need to comb your hair more often. If you like, I can comb it before bed as I do my own.”

I sniff. “No, thank you. I am quite capable of combing my own hair.”

“Then why not do it?”

I shrug. “I simply forget.”

She rolls her eyes. We pick up our pace as the sun sinks lower in the sky. The road soon veers away from the stream and toward the forest, thick with trees and the sounds of unfamiliar wildlife. I get a chill, although it is a warm day. By the time we reach the wooden cottage with the thatched roof and the tiny windows, we have walked an hour and not seen a single person.

“This is it,” Clarissa says, stopping on the overgrown brick path that leads to the front door. “Right where Papa said it would be.”

“Do you have the key?” I ask. A glance at the rusted old door handle tells me we will not be needing one. “Never mind.” I step forward to reach for it. But before I can grab the handle, the door swings open to reveal the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Long black hair straight as a sheet on the dry line, eyes the color of the green sea glass I once found along the riverbed, skin like the finest caramel. And I am not prone to sentiment.

Clarissa and I stumble back in surprise. Papa said nothing about a beautiful woman coming with the house. To my further surprise, Clarissa reaches out to touch the woman’s arm. “Mother?”

## CHAPTER FOUR

# ↔ Beast ↔

Upon the queen's orders, the entrance to the tower room has been nailed shut until further notice. My bagpipes are locked inside, along with my astrolabe (which I use to chart the planets) and my collection of dried plums that look like various members of the royal court. I would be quite irked at this, were I not focused so keenly on a more pressing problem. Instead of transcribing the five rules of knightly behavior as instructed by Master Cedrick, I have used my last piece of vellum to come up with five compelling reasons why the royal caravan should leave me behind when they set out for the Harvest Ball tomorrow at a kingdom so distant we shall be forced to spend the night.

1. My feet remain quite swollen from the dance last night and will not fit in my dress shoes. I shall be forced to wear my slippers, and everyone will whisper about the queen who let her son wear slippers to a ball.
2. While admittedly unlikely, what if all the girls take one look at me and are so overcome by my dashing good looks that they no longer want to dance with Alexander? I should not want to damage his self-esteem in any way. He may give off an air of confidence (some may even say *overconfidence*), but inside he is quite fragile.

3. I have an exam next week on the proper way to storm a castle. If I am forced to go to the ball, I may turn on my family and storm THIS castle while you are all dancing without a care in the world.
4. I do not travel well in the back of the royal coach on bumpy roads. The journey to the Harvest Ball is nearly a full day. I shall complain bitterly the entire journey.
5. My experiments are at a very sensitive stage. If I leave, weeks of work shall be for naught. Plus, I ask for very little.

I wait until the stewards have whisked away our plates from supper before reciting my list. Mother listens, her hands folded in her lap in that queenly way of hers that is supposed to indicate a gentle, patient nature but fools no one. When I have finished, Alexander sprays the table with the mouthful of cider he had been about to swallow. "I am not fragile. Neither inside, nor out!"

"Not so, son," Father says, leaning back in his seat. "You helped me care for that wounded falcon, and when it did not survive, you wept."

"I was three years old!" Alexander cries.

"Nevertheless," Father says, calmly picking gristle from his teeth with the tip of his knife. "Your brother has a point." Alexander lays his head upon the table in frustration.

"Thank you for your support, Father," I tell him. "I can always count on you to be the voice of reason in this family."

Alexander begins dramatically banging his head against the solid oak table. He would never say it aloud, but I know he does not approve of Father's non-kingly gentle nature. Or

his fondness for good-natured trickery. Or his inability to sit still during a meeting with his lords and barons for more than a moment without glancing longingly toward an open window.

Sure, Father sits on the largest throne in the castle and wields the largest scepter. And whenever he gives an order in his deep, measured voice, all his subjects scurry to obey. And, of course, it is his family's crest that our knights display proudly on their shields. But everyone knows Mother is the true ruler of our kingdom. And that is the way they both prefer it.

"Alexander!" Mother raps him atop his head with the closest object within her reach (a wooden spoon). "Stop that banging before you break your forehead, or our table, or both." To me, she says, "You are going to the Harvest Ball, and that is my final word."

"But, Mother, what of my reasons? Are they not most worthy?"

She sighs deeply, a noise I am all too familiar with. She taps my list, now wet from Alexander's cider. "First, instruct Godfrey to soak your feet in honey and primrose oil and they will heal overnight." She glances down at my list again. "Second, while both my sons are equally deserving of attention, neither your brother's reputation, nor his ego, will be at risk should you dance with girls. Third, your exam can wait. Knowing your tutor, he is likely off wandering the fields, deep in thought about why the sky is blue, and will not even notice your absence. In addition, you have never showed the slightest inclination toward the knighthood, so I do not think we need fear you storming our own castle. Fourth, you can chew ginger root if your stomach ails you on the journey. And last, if you do not ask for much, how is it that

we had to build an extra room upstairs for your laboratory, filled, at last glance, with a dozen bottles and beakers and beeswax candles, pots and bowls and all manner of jars and tools and flasks, which, as far as I can tell, have been useless but for bleeding dry our kingdom's funds?"

"And the smells," Alexander adds, rubbing his forehead where a small bump has indeed formed. "Sometimes I am not sure which emits an odor more foul — the butcher shop in town, or Riley's laboratory."

Father begins to laugh, but ceases when I glare across the table at him.

Other than when I am looking up at the heavens, I am happiest in my laboratory, grinding minerals, mixing potions, and aiming to understand how air, fire, water, and earth can create all that we see around us. Even Master Cedrick does not understand as well as I the nature of plants and base metals, and it is he who introduced me to the misunderstood art of alchemy in the first place. I am aware Mother only allows my experiments to carry on because it keeps me busy. The second son of a king has very few responsibilities, and a bored prince is a troublesome prince. Or so the saying goes. When I am grown-up, my hobby will no longer be tolerated.

"Forgive me, son," Father says, holding up his goblet of wine and turning it back and forth in his large hand. "If you turned this into gold for me, I should laugh no more."

At that, everyone (except me) begins to laugh. Even the kitchen girls sweeping the remnants of our roast quail from the floor are tittering. No matter how many times I insist that my goal is not that of the ordinary alchemist, my family insists on taunting me. They do not understand that my aim is much grander, much nobler, than turning lead (or wine, or

anything else) into gold. I intend to find the secret to everlasting life.

My chair scrapes against the stone floor as I push it back and get to my feet. "Laugh now, beloved family. For when I am celebrated throughout the seven kingdoms for my great discoveries, you shall laugh no more."

Alexander raises his mug to me. "I shall look forward to that day, dear brother."

I turn on my heel and stomp upstairs. Even though my shoes have little effect on the hard stone stairs, the act of stomping makes me feel better. My chamberlain Godfrey is waiting inside my chambers, pouring honey into a large bowl of smelly oils and ground-up tea leaves. A trunk is laid out upon the bed, my traveling clothes and boots beside it. Godfrey does not waste any time. He is completely blind in one eye and mostly blind in the other, but he makes up for his lack of sight with an unearthly sense of hearing. He can hear the seamstress drop a pin from down the hall, and the fluttering of the falcons' wings all the way from the mews on the other side of the castle. Hearing my mother's words through the thick stone floor taxes him not at all.

I slip off my shoes with a grimace (for my feet well and truly ache) and point to the bowl. "That looks like my old chamber pot."

Godfrey nods. "I assure you, young prince, it has been well washed."

"There is nothing else we could use for this task?"

Godfrey shakes his head.

I try not to focus on the bowl's previous life as I slip my feet into the murky water. Godfrey adds more honey and I have to admit, the feel of it sliding between my toes is not entirely unpleasant.

“As you recall,” he says as he sprinkles a few more tea leaves on top, “the Harvest Ball is where your parents met for the first time.”

I groan. “How could I forget? I hear the story all the time. Father was hiding under the table with the gilded goose, and when he jumped out with it everyone shrieked except for Mother.”

“It was love at first sight,” Godfrey says with a sigh. He dabs at his eyes and I roll mine. Honestly, it is easy to see why Father is so sensitive. Godfrey was *his* chamberlain for nearly twenty-five years, more like a second father than a servant. His kind and gentle manner clearly rubbed off on Father.

I lift my feet from the sludge. “The last thing I am interested in is falling in love.” I shudder involuntarily. “I would rather drink the contents of this bowl.”

Godfrey pats my feet dry with the towel. “That will not be necessary. One day you shall change your mind about love.”

“Do not hold your breath, my faithful and trusted companion.”

Once I have been dried and dressed in my nightclothes, I send Godfrey to his chamber for the evening and retreat to my lab. Master Cedrick had taught me that to practice the ancient art of alchemy, one must be clear of mind and spirit. Dances and love fade from my mind as I take in the shelves of beakers and bottles, the small furnace that I am only allowed to use under supervision because of one tiny incident involving some scorched nose hairs (Father’s, not mine), and the notebooks where I carefully record the results of my experiments. In the corner of the room lies the pallet of hay where I sometimes rest if the night grows long. I am pleased to see that next to the pallet is a large box of

mineral samples that I ordered from the apothecary shop. One of the new pages must have brought the crate up while my family and I were dining. I have not gotten to know the pages by name yet, and in truth, I probably will not. Although usually of noble descent, they are taught to bow their heads when addressing us. How am I supposed to tell them apart by the tops of their heads?

Most nights, my first task would be to stand before the room's one small window to measure the movement of the planets. But since my trusty astrolabe remains locked in the tower, I turn to the new box instead. I am convinced the secret to everlasting life is to be found somewhere in the combination of ingredients that I already possess, along with something I have yet to obtain. This confidence is due to the fact that I have successfully kept a small river worm alive for a month longer than its natural life expectancy. I figure a little dash of this, a dropperful of that, and the next worm may live to see a hundred. The key is figuring out what the *this* and the *that* actually are.

I reach for one of my sturdiest long-necked spoons and use it to pry open the wooden slats on top of the crate. I expect to find ingredients ranging from copper and zinc to gobo root and crushed dung beetles. Instead, only three small glass bottles lay nestled in a bed of dried hay. Each dark green bottle is labeled in a fine handwriting, although in a language with which I am not familiar. I could ask Alexander, but I am still annoyed at him.

I sift through the box to make sure nothing is hidden below, then sit back and tuck my slippered feet beneath me to ponder. My first inclination is to pack the crate back up and return it right away. For whoever got my order must be feeling the same disappointment.

But then I glance over at the tray full of worms that sits atop my workbench (some alive, some not so much) and a thought occurs to me. My longest-living worm was the result of an unexpected happenstance. I had thought I was mixing crushed milkweed into the elixir. It turned out I had labeled the bottles incorrectly and had added milk thistle instead. Had I actually used milkweed, the worm would not have lived to see another sunrise. Perhaps some power greater than myself has guided the hand of fate and allowed this package to come my way. Might these ingredients be exactly what I have been looking for?

I lift out the bottles, careful to hold them upright so nothing seeps from the wooden stoppers, and set them gently upon the workbench. I pull my best iron pot from the cabinet, determined not to squander what fate has delivered by using inferior equipment.

With the help of a pair of wooden tongs, I pull out the stopper of the first bottle to reveal a gray powder ground more finely than any I have seen before. The other two are the same, only one is white as snow, one a coal black. I am accustomed to spending hours chopping and grinding my ingredients before they are fine enough to blend into an elixir or a paste. But now my job has been done for me!

I grab my measuring cup from its hook on the wall, only to find that I had forgotten to clean it after my last experiment. Master Cedrick has told me time and again that if the equipment is tainted with other ingredients, you can never be certain of your formula. I would wash it now, but I am banned from cleaning my tools within the castle walls merely because one time Mother got a rash after I rinsed out a bowl of crushed ivy in her bathtub. How was I to know she would be so sensitive to the three-leafed plant?

It is too dark to clean it in the moat, so I resign myself to making a smaller mixture using a spoon instead. I carefully top off each spoonful and mix the three ingredients into the pot. I then add a few drops of water and some grape-seed oil to thicken, then pluck a worm from the tray. After five minutes of squirming around in the watery paste, it stops moving. Hmm. That is not good. Perhaps the mixture is too strong. Heating it would lessen its strength, but I am not supposed to use the furnace without Godfrey overseeing it. It is much too late to bother him, though, and after all, he cannot truly oversee much in his condition.

As I debate the question, I stir the mixture a bit. It is such a small amount that it will heat through in only a moment. I am fairly confident that my tiny rule-breaking will simply escape Mother's notice.

Before I change my mind, I blow on the smoldering embers, secure the lid on the pot, and close the furnace door. Since a watched pot never boils, I pick up my latest notebook and record the details of the experiment while I wait. I then return to the recently deceased worm on my workbench in the hopes that it has somehow revived itself.

I am about to poke the worm with my finger when BOOM!

The furnace explodes with the loudest noise ever to ring through the castle, shattering most of the glass in the room and forming a furnace-shaped hole clear through the wall.

Now THAT Mother's going to notice.