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Rosebud Roots

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Rosebud Roots
Jessica Crabtree

1 May

My Dearest Beastie,

I haven't told you everything. I could tell by the look in your eyes on our mirror call this morning that you could tell. Do you get weary of the endless calls after a while? Do not misunderstand, I'm very glad you took your mirror with you so we can still talk. I know you don't like when I hold back during our conversations, but if I told you everything right as it was happening, there wouldn't be much to talk about when you finally get back.

I dug around in my desk for some stationary and a nice quill this morning. I've never had an excuse to write on the nicer pieces until now. I'm not sure yet if I will send these letters, but I thought the metallic gold envelopes looked sufficiently mysterious to send along to the castle. You'll probably have all sorts of theories about where they came from, but surprise! It's only me. Maybe I can give them to you all at once when you're with me again, and we can laugh about these.

Anyway, I wasn't completely honest with you this morning. Not everything is just fine. I went out into the garden today and pieces had been hacked off the rosebush against the fence. The middle had a hulking gap where three of the darkest roses had been growing. I was saving them for the night you get back. I know how much you love freshly clipped flowers to sit on our windowsill. I still have the pink roses we picked out the last time you were beside me. There were thick-soled footprints winding through the mud and mulch. Whoever it was didn't bother to stick to the stepping stones.

I'm glad I didn't see it happen. The bed might have felt a little colder, the palace a little emptier if I had. I wish you hadn't taken all the servants along on the journey. Of course I understand that you'll need the strength of your numbers when you reveal to the king's court that your curse has finally been lifted. But don't worry! If I decide to send this letter, by the time this letter reaches you, I'm sure all will be well again.

With love,
Belle

12 May

Dearest Beastie,

I think I've changed my mind about something. Before you left, we were laying side by side under those thick, fluffy winter sheets and you asked me if there was a gift I wanted you to bring back for me. I don't know if you remember, but I had a tight grip on your hand and I told you that as long as we were able to see the same sky, I would be satisfied. I know what I want now. I want to know what

roses look like where you are. Are the pinks and reds as deep as the ones we grow? Can you find them in blues or velvety blacks? Bring one home for me. That's all I'll ask for.

A little finch has built its nest right outside the windows of the dining room while I take my morning tea. I've thrown the panes wide to let in the spring breeze and to hear it chirp and keep me company. The books in the library have kept me plenty busy on the days when you can't call, so I suppose it isn't too lonely yet. I have kept my promise and have not left the palace grounds, although I do spend the afternoons roaming throughout the gardens.

The rosebush still hasn't recovered from being hacked apart through the middle. I have thought about paying a visit to the local apothecary to see if there is anything I could do to help its regeneration along. I know that you would much rather I stayed here, so for now I will refrain.

With love,

Belle

15 May

Dear Beastie,

I couldn't ask you during our call today because I was worried that you might start to notice that something is wrong. The bush has become much worse.

On my afternoon walk about the grounds, I checked on the bush to make sure no more had been stolen. No more had been cut away, but the plant sat drooping away from its center. Some of its limbs are resting on the ground. The flowers are going to wilt if I let it go much longer.

I think I'll go into town just to see what the ladies there have to say about such an odd situation. Do not fret, my love. I'll go in disguise so as to not attract the attention of the townsfolk.

When I returned to the palace, I decided to take the long way around. The bird's nest on the windowsill had a red thread woven through it to hold the twigs in place. Over the edge, I could just make out the white peaks of freshly laid eggs.

Love,

Belle

20 May

My Dearest Beastie,

I had to throw out the roses in our bedroom today. Crinkled brown leaves and withered petals littered the windowsill, no longer the deep shade of pink they had been when we chose them. The roses sitting in the vase had been dead much longer than the three days I thought about replacing them. The water in the vase had mostly evaporated. The remnants were suffocating beneath a layer of greenish slime. That morning I inhaled deeply and got a noseful of the sweet smell of rot.

My hands shook when I gathered them up to put in the trash. I pictured you laughing as you danced around the room before putting them in the vase. I could cut some from the rosebush in the front garden, but they would never be the ones you cut with your own hands just for our window. They would always be a cheap replacement.

I still swept the faded petals into the bag after the flowers. They would attract bugs if I left them, and the summer heat wasn't doing the smell any favors. I unceremoniously tossed the bag into the kitchen trash before brewing my morning tea.

Clear as day, I remember the day you brought it home in a little flower pot. You'd been gone a month to visit the subjects. The palace had grown cold without your voice filling the rooms. You loved to bring me gifts, and this time, all I asked for was a rose, just to show you were thinking of me. Instead you came home with the whole bush. We'd planted it together. You smeared dirt onto my face and kissed me anyway.

I cannot sit idly by while this rosebush dies. In the three weeks since it was attacked it has not improved in the slightest. I hope you'll understand when I tell you that I went to visit the apothecary shop. I fully intended to tell you in the mirror today, but it seemed like something I should tell you in person. I'm writing this here to prove my intentions to tell you, to show I'm not keeping things from you, not really. I knew you would worry. I can tell you've lost weight from the stress of being at court. The light in your eyes doesn't shine as brightly as it once did. How could I have made it worse, when me following the rules makes you so happy? I can already see the way your eyes would have hardened, slowly meeting mine as you growled out, 'What have you done?' I can't bear the thought of you being upset with me so far away.

The shop was tucked away in an alley. The cobblestones were cracked and jagged. The slippers I chose to wear were not sufficient. I wish you had let me keep my boots from the days that I lived in the country with my father. The edges of the stones cut the soles of my feet.

There was a rusted bell that hung over the door of the shop. A long strand of red thread hung down from it. If it rang when I entered, it did not make a sound that could be heard with mortal ears. A woman with long ropes of gray hair awaited me behind the front counter. She didn't seem fazed by my hood in the slightest, only gestured me forward with a steady hand.

The shop itself was conspicuously dark. It reminded me of the dungeons you locked me in once in place of my father, before we fell in love. The plants that grew there in that dark shop, I would sooner never speak of again. However, when I put my request before the woman and she growled out my answer with certainty, all my hesitation vanished. She whispered the steps I would have to take. Her face hovered so close to mine that I could smell her breath. I'd need some ingredients from the shop, so I bought them. I don't remember her exact words, but I'll summarize. I needed to combine the ingredients over a fire in a specific order and add drops of blood to solidify the intent of the spell.

Know that I stalked through the rows of strange plants and creatures and plucked odds and ends at her instruction. I am going to save our roses.

I placed the items on the counter. A sprig of a blue spiked leaf, a snail shell, and a golden acorn cap among other things. I waited for her to speak. She began discussing price. A strange aroma floated through the shop and my head felt rather fuzzy from lingering there so long in the dark. She must have noticed I wasn't paying much attention because she grabbed my hand. My head cleared instantly and her rough, rasping voice croaked out, "There will be a price for life, girl. Remember that. But your flowers, they'll make it. That I can guarantee."

I had dealt with enough people like her to know what came next. I would sacrifice every other plant on the palace grounds in order to save the roses. I recalled the soft velvet of each petal we grew and slid several gold pieces over the counter. She wrapped up my purchase with no further comment.

Maybe I will send these letters after all, just so you know how sincere my intentions of telling you about this were.

Missing you,

Belle

25 May

Dear Beast,

When are you coming home?

I left the ingredients I purchased from the apothecary on our beside table for several days. I could not bring myself to use them right away. I feel awful that I haven't told you about my intentions yet. I tried to get through to see you in the mirror this morning, but no matter how many times I made the request, the only thing it would show me was swirling fog. I have never been so alone as I am here in this palace without you. These last few calls, I wonder if you could tell that I was lying. I can still see the disappointment in your eyes from the last time you said goodbye. Did I ask what time you were coming back too often? Could you tell I've been doing more than idly passing my time? Or maybe... No, I can't bring myself to write it down.

With my morning tea, I had the pleasure of hearing the chirps of the newborn chicks outside the window, but even their cheery chirps could not drown out the lingering dread I felt. I knew not whether I could go through with the spell. I gathered up the ingredients and ventured out into the gardens.

The center of our beautiful rosebush with its deep pink roses had blackened in the middle. The cut apart stems had withered and curled in upon themselves, forming a heart of darkness stretching nearly down into the roots.

That moment, I knew I had to act, or the only living thing we had ever cared for together would die. I know you'll understand.

With love,
Belle

26 May

Beast,

I don't remember how I got into the bedroom.

I woke this morning on your side of the bed, cold as a stone. The last thing I recall doing is walking out into the gardens. I had the ingredients with me then, but now it appears that they are missing. Does that mean I performed the spell?

I needed to tell you what had happened, but when I swung my legs out of bed, my feet plunged into broken glass. I worried about your mirror for three days, and I somehow managed to break mine. The silvery shards weren't empty. They showed the same swirling mist as when I had asked for you yesterday. I suppose I hadn't canceled the request. My whole head feels foggy and disoriented. The more I think about your missed calls and my lies, the more I think...

Is there someone else?

I won't be sending this letter, or even finishing it. My head is pounding. I think I'll go back to bed.

Love,
Belle

26 May (midafternoon)

Beast,

I'm sorry. I never imagined it would end this way.

Even now, sitting right in the middle of it, it doesn't feel real to me. I don't know why I feel the need to write this letter when you'll never see it anyway, but maybe it will help me process all that has happened? I'm so sorry. I'm sitting in the garden wrapped in your jacket, knowing that this is the closest I will ever get to being held by you again.

I'll start from when I woke up.

Something wasn't right in this place. The feeling followed me from the bedroom, all the way down to the main doors when I paused. I was not sure if I wanted to see what awaited me outside. I knew deep down that I had performed the spell, but I couldn't remember doing it.

The first thing I noticed was the darkness. I stepped out of the door and into shadow. To say that I saved our rosebush is a gross understatement. We will have the most gorgeous and bountiful roses in all the world. Overnight, it seems, the bush has become a tree so tall and magnificent that it blots out the sun when you walk out the front doors of the palace. This elegance is both beautiful and terrible in that its thorns are so large and sturdy that they could tear out a man's heart with but a glancing blow,

though perhaps not yours. The roses are as deep pink and lovely as ever. The dying branches have gone and been replaced with the sturdy trunk of a tree. With that immense growth, I did not feel quite so alone. Of course, at that point I still couldn't understand the gravity of what I had done. How could I have found any happiness in that moment if I had? The comfort of that sentinel tree will have to guard me until I die, I suppose.

The wildflowers that had grown side by side with the bush had been crushed beneath its branches. The surrounding grasses withered in its shadow. It absorbed all the sunlight for itself.

I did not go out to see or touch it. Somehow both ominous and comforting at once, I could not bring myself to go. I watched from the stairs and then went back into the palace with the intention to write one last letter. I wanted you to know what I had done at once. The tree was more than a little imposing. I couldn't quite place my finger on the strange feeling it woke in me. It almost felt like *you* were standing out in the garden, just watching.

I realized of course that sending the letters would be pointless. I'd rather tell you in person, so I went for my afternoon walk. The walk was shorter today, as I still felt woozy from this morning. I came around past the dining room windows from the stables and a grisly sight was impressed upon my eyes.

The baby birds which I have admired and watched hatched have all been cast from their nest in a heap one after another. Their twisted little bodies, still featherless lay dead and cold only a few feet from warmth and safety. At first, I thought their mother had done it. She was still in the nest watching me with glassy eyes. It was only then that I spotted the red thread at her throat. She caught herself in the very material she used to hold her nest together. I could not stop thinking about her and what became of her family.

The huge rosetree drew my sight and my affection. To be near it would surely help. Looking up into the branches I didn't notice the items scattered across the ground until I tripped over them. Fine clothing covered the roots of the tree. Familiar clothing. The blue and gold jacket you had worn the day you set off for court crumpled in the dust, pinned beneath a thorn. A pair of dark riding boots. Dread settled deep in my belly, and a dark suspicion began building. The old woman's words echoed in my ears. The coat had the inkwell you never left home without in its left pocket. My handkerchief was in the lining of your riding boot exactly where I had stitched it in.

I looked at the tree which had grown so strong so fast and recalled the old woman's words again. I looked around at the gardens and saw living plants other than those the tree had consumed in its shadow. I climbed, needing to see the rest, see farther. A life for a life, so the plants had to be dead. These things always happened at equal value. I had to know which tree the spell had killed to save this one. No matter how high I climbed, the garden was still intact. I sat on a branch and thought, 'the birds, of course it was the birds.' By this time I was crying but I couldn't bring myself to acknowledge why.

That is when I saw it. It glinted in the upper branches. I climbed to the top, risking being snared by thorns longer than my forearm until I reached it.

A golden hand mirror, your golden hand mirror, showing not my reflection, but the interior of our bedroom. I let it drop from my hands to shatter on the dark roots of the tree below.

With love for the last time,

Belle



It's not for
the world