

ONCE UPON A DISORDER:
A COLLECTION OF FAIRYTALE ADAPTATIONS

By

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A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelor's degree
With Honors in

Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

D E C E M B E R 2 0 1 6

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Abstract

This creative fiction thesis has developed and grown from the original idea that happened over a year and a half ago when this project was the first to be assigned. Showcased as a collection of short stories in the form of fairy tale adaptations that concentrate heavily on the elements of character development as well as threading plots. Each of these stories focuses on and develops the idea of fairy tales alongside psychosocial disorders. As a writer, I challenged myself to write what I did not know—in this case, mental health disorders—and present them in a way where my primary interest of adaptations could be used. Within each of these stories, I have attempted to focus on fundamental elements of craft using personality traits and quirks that are associated with each well-known fairytale character as well as the psychological disorder attributed to them to prompt a discussion about mental health awareness in fiction. These stories are not meant to be serious—though the themes within them are of the utmost seriousness—instead it was my goal to keep the feel of them as lighthearted as possible to counter balance the graveness of the topic.

Artist Statement:

Though well out of my childhood and rooted in the real world as an adult, I consider myself still very much a child at heart. Stories we've grown up with stick with us even in the most abstract and diluted ways. As I set out on this journey of my Honors Thesis in fiction, I mulled over several possible avenues in which my inner child could come out and play so to speak. Stemming from my fascination with adaptations as something I love to read for leisure, I approached the idea of writing my own in several different settings. Managing to settle, as if by fate, on the fairy tale. Fairy tales are something that have had such an influence on my writing for years now it only seemed right that this was my topic. Whether it be from the Grimm Tales to Disney World and the idea of the ever after, fairy tales have a whimsy about them that I can enjoy now as an adult for the complexities but can also share with the younger generations in my life as a means of instilling hope. It was this whimsy that intrigued and scared me the most about this. I didn't want to mess up the tradition.

But I did want to try and take a fresh spin on the world of fairy tales. While many of them presented at times very lofty and even eccentric characters, I could not do justice to myself or my work if I didn't try to use this in some way. So, the idea of a therapist talking to fairy tale characters was born. The idea both excited and amused me, as I brainstormed with my friends in the writing community. To see them either make a face at me or smile encouragingly was the perfect reaction to such a simple and yet complex idea.

As I set out to flesh this idea into stories, it became increasingly clear to me that I needed a reason for there to even be a therapist. Finding that there was little to no attention paid to less known psychological disorders like mysophobia or narcissism in writing across fiction and nonfiction, I decided to start there. And what better way to stimulate conversation than have your favorite fairy tale characters suffer from certain disorders, and end up in therapy for some reason or other.

This project was maybe the most fun I have had in a long time as far as academia is concerned. It did not feel like a project for my college degree but rather something that I can take and show the world as an example of my writing but also pursue in the future and build upon as a collection of short stories maybe even a novel.

It became apparent within the first meeting with my advisor that this project was going to be rather extensive in the research and sources I consulted as I set out to do something I've never done: write what I did not know. It began with rereading fairy tales, fairy tale adaptations and short stories that fit into the genre of the fairy tale. It was clear that to write a fairy tale adaptation I needed to know them in the most basic form possible. The necessary bits that people would look for within each story, i.e. Cinderella and the glass slipper or Red Riding Hood and the big bad wolf.

With the basic step of picking and choosing which fairy tales to rewrite, came the research into each disorder. This process was a little more involved than I anticipated but after finding a couple of books and scouring the internet, I found several great pieces to work from and did this several times over the course of each story. Cinderella being the easiest to find due the many medical journals and explanation of mysophobia readily available. Others like hallucinations and multi-personality disorder require enlisting the help of a fact-checker in the psychology field—who happened to be a friend of mine. Together she and I combed through the manuscripts and began fine-tuning small details to add that extra piece it was missing. While my audience was not necessarily those in the psychological field, I, as a reader and writer, feel it is important for authors to take the initiative and gather all the facts before sending their works into the world.

Another key aspect of this was reading original adaptations of *Coraline* and other short stories that made use of the fairy tale genre or were simply adaptations themselves. It was an eye-opening experience to see how many authors took stories that everyone was a little bit familiar with and changed aspects and still hold on to the essence of the piece. I found myself very much in love with

reading books like *Wicked* or *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*, as I told my advisor at our very first meeting, which hold these aspects so close to them. I think that is part of the reason I was eager to try it myself. I had been enamored by the subject already, yet had never dared crossed that line because as a writer I had always been told that I had to be unique and original or my career would never flourish. This became a major goal of my thesis process and continues to be something I strive to disprove as I move from my undergraduate career into the vast world of publishing and a business that I wish to be part of. I wanted to prove that though the underlying bones of my narratives were already told time and time again, that I could spend ten to thirteen pages showing readers and myself these were not the same stories we knew. That these were not the same concepts and ideas we had seen before in short stories. I wanted to change the fairy tales—add humor where many were dark and grim—just enough, so they were different and new and addressed many things I had not seen in writing before but held onto the bare bones and the recognizable pieces of each one. The hardest one to do was by far the queen of hearts. Having things allude to her like the crumpets or the hatter being mad was a great exercise in creative licensing.

Though, I had all the research done and was set, I realized I had never actually written a short story. I had over my course of writing classes always opted for the longer novel excerpts finding my writing style of being better suited for the longer pieces like novels and novellas. Setting out to write a shorter piece proved to be the most fruitful. Trying it for the sake of trying it, at first. Testing the waters, so to speak as I used Cinderella's story for my 304 workshop. It was the first time I had considered doing something like this, let alone a short story, that focused more on character rather than plot. It was an experience, to say the least, and one I am proud to say allowed me to learn a lot. Luckily, my advisor suggested just sitting down and mapping out the "essential" elements of each story: Cinderella and the glass slipper or red riding hood and the red hood for example. By doing so, it helped me keep in mind the goal of maintaining the story's authentic pieces.

Moreover, as the plot was already written for me, I was able to focus more on the characters, their dialogue and incorporating more of the twist with the psychological disorders that I wanted to see in the story then so much as the story itself.

Entailing that I had to focus more on other elements allowed me to explore areas that I did not think short stories could have. Like threads throughout them—which was maybe a tad naive on my part—or reappearing characters. While my workshop letters express that some didn't quite understand that some characters were given their own stories, I was still glad to see myself pushing the envelope and using things taught throughout my major that weren't given as much attention. For example, the keystones to writing (like ambiguity as an element of the craft beyond just the basic of character, plot, dialogue, setting and pacing) and have fun with each of the stories.

This was one of the many ways I see this piece as an example of a capstone for my major. It encompasses many things that as a Creative Writing major I am supposed to know—even if I ignore them for creative purposes—by the end of my college career. Moreover, I would like to state that I believe I have done just that. I have taken a subject that I loved to read for leisure and became more familiar with the genre through these.

It became apparent that while writing these my artistic intent was to get the audience thinking about psychological disorders, in a humorous way to ensure they stick, as well as fairy tales. I wanted my readers to look at these pieces and not see their favorite fairy tale character for whom they remember from Disney adaptations or TV renditions but instead as someone who could be a real-life person going through something. It became very evident as I wrote these I did not want to bog down the light-heartedness that fairy tales revolve with their happy ever after's and morality and thus chose to a more comical outlook. Not to detract from the seriousness of psychological disorder but instead to highlight them in a way that continued to get the audience thinking about them and their role in the world of written literature. To show readers and other writers that while disorders

can be used as a twist on a character trope, they are very real and hard to deal with. I believe that to be a stigma in writing fiction, and wanted to push the boundaries and spark a discussion that could be used to show that not every writer focuses on the “most” famous disorders.

In the revision process, my advisor and I sat down and began to talk about if I intended to have them all connect or not. The honest answer was I never intended for them to connect beyond the character of Dr. Dour. But after the conversation, my advisor made me realize I needed something more. Something else to keep them all connected. Sitting down to brainstorm the idea of the necklace and Prince Charming’s ruthless quest to take the crown came about, and it was simply too good an opportunity to pass up. They were far too humorous to leave out and often found myself chuckling at the sheer stupidity almost that came about in the earlier drafts. While some of it remained in the final project—like the Three Little Pigs and the puns—it became essential that I needed to relax and not try to too witty or focus too heavily on how they all connect and let it happen naturally (within reason to this piece).

These five short stories are not just some capstone but rather a work I can show someone and add to my portfolio. From the sheer amount of work and maybe some tears that went into them, to the exploration of different academic interests that were put into this, I have learned a lot. The lessons didn’t just stay within my major with the craft elements as I learned through my workshops to better develop these narratives, but to areas that were outside my college or interests. This project allowed me to answer the burning question of what would happen if our favorite fairy tales were not as perfect as we assume as spectators on their stories. Moreover, to develop these narratives because no one had only thought to write them down.

Though this is not a traditional capstone; I feel that over the course of my time doing this, I have learned a great deal about what deadlines, edits and revisions, and the process of continuing to work with people and develop relations in areas that could prove useful in the future can do for me.

I was able to go through the revision process and get a small taste of what the industry that I am marketing myself to be part of is like (regardless of the small scale it was). I made connections between fields that rarely get made to help promote awareness to a topic that many people tend to shy away from. I learned a great deal about myself over this process and how I work as a writer. I also learned how to network, as oddly as that is to associate with works of fiction. However, by having someone check my facts, as I mentioned, I established a professional relationship to use in the future.

These five stories, have taught me that I have learned and honed over my college career but found myself implement things only discussed in classes—even if they weren't writing related like Elements of craft or Workshops—like many of my Honors courses to develop on core building blocks of character and time and pacing. At the end of this process, I discovered more about myself as a writer: what works for me when I go to write, how I revise and edit and take into consideration answering bigger world problems and incorporating those into my works, as well as finding how to diversify my dialogue and process even more.

I finished this piece, and while I am sure I will continue to come back to it (given some time and space from the completion of my undergraduate degree) to expand and perhaps publish it later, I feel a sense of accomplishment and pride to see it all fit together the way it has.

Off with Her Head

It only made sense to go back through the archives in means of tracking down the necklace, at least that is how she saw it. Sitting in her office, surrounded by the quiet calm of the castle late at night, Dr. Dour was sure to keep the light dim as not to draw too much attention to her office or to the meeting that was taking place.

Darren sat before her, fingers tapping on the arm of the chair. Impatiently huffing every minute to voice his displeasure of being ignored by the doctor.

“Staring at me, watching me is not going to make me move faster, your majesty. My notes are very detailed for a reason. And honestly, I don’t see how this is going to help you at all.”

The pointed look he received from her was evident she wasn’t doing this because she wanted to, but because he’d demanded it and instead of losing her head (so to speak) or getting fired, Dr. Dour had complied. She suspected that Darren didn’t listen to anything that he himself hadn’t come up with.

“First, we can’t find the brat-”

“Red. Her name is Red” She corrected in a manner that suggested it was highly disapproved.

“Right,” His said apathetic, “And no one can find the Pork chop either.”

Dr. Dour sighed, thick brimmed glasses removed from their perch on her nose. Fingers pressing into the bridge of her nose and she rubbed—attempted to anyway—the tension away. She liked it better when the world was simple. When her job was just the mere talk of how someone felt. Now, she was on some wild goose chase for Prince Charming—or as she referred to him as the-glass-slipper-in-her-rear-end—trying to find the last piece of the puzzle to make

him king. Dr. Dour shook her head, firmly enough that the tightly pinned chignon jiggled like Santa's belly. "Prince Darren, I don't think sending anyone into my office is really the way to solve where the necklace is. We can't just send everyone and their fairy godmother in to see me in hopes they'll have some deep dark secret or know who Pig" the name was emphasized in the clipped manner she spoke "sold it to. It could be far, far away by now, Grimm only knows."

"Can't hurt." He mumbled, pouting like a child who didn't get their way.

"How about I go through your mother's file and see if we can't figure out a way around that little hiccup. Maybe it'll help you find out where she put the necklace alright?"

"Hexicent."

A short bob of her head and Dr. Dour's gaze glued back down to the file. She didn't need to bid him goodbye, he'd leave without her telling him. He wasn't one to stick around much when the attention wasn't focused on him.

Peace and quiet finally. Thank Grimm for some things.

Pale eyes scanned the file before her. She remembered the day she wrote the contents like it was yesterday, when in fact, years separated the events. She didn't need the file's date to remember the setting of the scene. It played like a black and white film.

Once upon a time, Annabel Rebecca Hart was not the typical patient for Dr. Dour. No Annabel was an interesting peculiarity, boggling doctors from all over. She sat herself down in the mahogany chair diagonal the desk and tilted her head.

"So this is it?" She asked, voice melodic and sweet.

"Were you expecting the yellow brick road to carry on into here?" Dr. Dour said with a snort.

“No. That’s just silly.” She smiled sweetly, raven-colored lock wound around her finger. Dr. Dour removed her glasses buffing out the smudge, before returning them to their perch on her nose, “Everyone knows that’s not a real thing. And I might have some problems, Doctor, but I’m not that mad.” At least that’s not how Annabel saw herself, and she knew some loony characters. For starters, the milliner was merely mad as a hatter but thoroughly entertaining to Annabel. She loved their conversations even if they didn’t quite make sense. She often found herself pondering the same riddle he asked, why was a raven like a writing desk? Frustrating as it was she never got an answer to it, she always seemed to let it go without losing her head—so to speak.

“Do you know why you’re here?” Dr. Dour asked interrupting the inner musings of Annabel’s thoughts.

“What?” She blinked, “Oh. Yes, I do. The other ones—those before you—lost their heads trying to figure me out” The smile on her face was strangely unnerving to Dr. Dour, but she remained poised, and it didn’t let on.

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

“Well, what makes you so special then?” Annabel asked

“Let’s just focus on you, okay?”

“But, I’m curious.”

“And curiosity killed the cat. Let’s stay focused on the task at hand.”

“But if they couldn’t figure me out, how can you?” Annabel pressed the topic.

“I know a few things they don’t” was all Dr. Dour offered.

With a light shrug of her shoulder, Annabel accepted the answer. But she wanted to know—just would get it another way. The brilliant smile on her face lit up again, and she waited for the doctor's next questions. Arms folded in her lap, Annabel sat confident and proper.

“So, your majesty,” Dr. Dour spoke, gaze down on the page, “Do you know why you're here?”

Annabel shrugged her shoulders again and nodded, “King Francois said something about not acting myself... Fits of a different person altogether, at least that's what started these little visits from the others.”

She didn't like the insinuation that there was something wrong with her. Who was she to argue with her husband after all? And so, she'd sat in many offices after offices talking to whomever said they had the magic cure to her ailment.

“And what did he say exactly?”

“Well one day while playing croquet in the garden I lost my head, so to speak and began screaming at the guards. Something about red roses. But I don't remember a thing. I've never once raised my voice to anyone.”

Dr. Dour rose a brow, “And these fits of amnesia,” spoken tentatively as if any word would send her off, “Happen quite frequently?”

Raven curls sat upon her shoulder as her head tilted in question. Her brow puckered for a moment, and Annabel tried, as hard as she could, to think of other times. And there were many. She remembered bouts with the milliner over tea. Go on and on about how adorable the little crumpets with 'eat me' written on it were, and she had been told no. Not to eat those. But she wanted one. And who was in the place to tell a queen no? She'd reached for it again and then had the plate taken away. Normally, Annabel was docile. But blinking—not aware of the time—

she'd seen the fear and tremble of the milliner and his funny little friend March. That was the first sign.

“No.” She lied. If she'd told the truth, Annabel was sure she'd be here longer than she wanted to be and that simply wouldn't do. She had a croquet game to finish, and this silly Dr. Dour wasn't going to keep her from it, that was for sure.

“Alright. Let's talk about something else. How about...” Dr. Dour pursed her lips in contemplation, “The family necklace? I heard it went missing?”

A pale porcelain hand reached up to her neck, bare from the necklace. Fear crossed her face at the mere idea it wasn't around her neck. The intricate piece of jewelry was more than just an heirloom, it held the key to the kingdom, quite literally. No vault could be opened without it. No coronation could commence. Silly traditions of course, but that's how many great cities were forged. “I-I..” Annabel began to stutter composing herself as regal again, “I don't know...” Confusion swept across her brow for a moment promptly replaced with something else.

Dr. Dour's hand scratch against her notepad before looking back up ready to prompt the Queen once more. “Annabel?” She asked, taking note of the less than pleased expression on the angelic face.

“Hearts.” Annabel corrected, “My name is Hearts. The Queen of Hearts, you insufferable little twit.”

Like lightning, the Dour's hand took note of the rapid change. Odd, but not unexpected after reading the previous notes: Easy to Anger. Snippy.

“Hearts, of course, my apologies your majesty.” Dr. Dour reconciled.

“Better, but I'm not going to tell you, of all people, where to find that precious trinket.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not worthy of it.” There was an edge to the woman’s voice, not quite Annabel anymore. “Because you’re common, and I don’t tell commoners the royal business.” Behind her thick rimmed glasses, Dr. Dour met the icy blue eyes of the queen. Not quite so friendly anymore.

“Right...How about you tell me about the tea party instead?”

The expression on Annabel—Hearts—was not one of amusement but wickedness. The tilt of her lip would have made even the slyest villain quake with fear.

“That silly little thing?”

Nodding Dour gave a not so happy smile.

“Well, I’m not one to brag but that stupid hatter nearly lost his head.” Hearts began, arms crossing over her chest, Nose pushed into the air. A visible display of displeasure and haughtiness rolled together.

“What happened?”

“First he cheated! I was supposed to win our little game of croquet. I’m always expected to win! But the dodo birdbrain he is couldn’t let that happen. Even his ingrate of a friend let me win, you’d think this is common knowledge!” huffing in displeasure, Hearts gave another wicked look to the doctor, “So I made it clear that wouldn’t do at all. Finding that my roses, my precious red roses were not red but some terribly inconvincible excuse from the deck of cards guards Boucher decided to hire, were painted red was just enough to set me over the edge. And let’s just say heads rolled.”

Laughter, regal and cold bubbled from Annabel’s ruby stained lips.

“I see, and this fits into the hiding of the necklace?”

“What is it with this silly little necklace that has your britches in a pinch, hmm good doctor?”

Dr. Dour swallowed visible hard for a moment, “your king would like to know where it is.”

“I hid it.”

“I got that.”

“Like a game. I do love my games.” And she did. Hearts was found of them more so than the other personality of Annabel. “But, no one wants to play these games with me. They’re terrified of me.” The pout was not a real pout but one of mockery.

“And can we play this...game?”

“Well, of course, we can, but I must warn you the royal vizier—he likes to smoke his pipe and ask silly questions like ‘Who are you’ and continually tell you you’re not who you are. And those stupid servant boys, they’re the best at this game. Twiddle Dee and Dumb as I call them, always fumbling over each other, always trying to separate themselves but not quite being able to.”

Another wicked grin, “I told them.” Said like it’s a triumph and not a secret.

“You told the vizier and servants where the necklace is?”

“No silly, I told them clues.”

Dr. Dour scratched it down in her file and looked up at the girl, “Hearts, can I know those clues?”

“Certainly not. Positively not.”

“Why not?”

“Because I said no.” Annabel’s voice had taken on a colder tone, higher in pitch.

“Oh?” This was dizzying.

“I said no, and that is final.” She said in a firm voice accompanied by a polite head nod, not too far off from Annabel’s original demeanor. Only this time, the change had come in the way she held herself. In the way, she sat, back straight, gave soft blue eyes hardening into steel. Colder than the warm, friendly girl that had started this conversation.

“Is it a secret only you get to know?”

“Well of course. That necklace is valuable to the kingdom, and I was just parading around the town with it on my neck? It was a disgrace! It needed to be locked up, and saved for the next generation.”

“Is it still in the castle?”

“Of course, but his majesty can fret all he wants calling this a ‘guise’ for getting my treatment. I’ve heard him talking behind what he thinks is a closed door. Funny little man he is.” But Hearts knew better. He wanted to take the necklace away. Take it from her even if it was a simple trinket. It was an important one at that. Like most rituals, Hearts knew that the coronation needed to have something from each house. Her line—or rather Annabel’s—and King Boucher’s. Then the scepter. Much like a wedding: something blue, something old and new and something borrowed. Only, in this case, it was all old, all borrowed and nothing blue. Silly trivial matters that were meant to be good luck were key pieces on the chess board. Her necklace would be joined with his ring, and all would make sense perhaps. Hearts or Annabel neither cared really. It was beyond their understanding as everyone decided to say.

Dr. Dour, scribbled away trying to make sense of what was being said. For all she knew the king did have ulterior motives, but she was only concerned with getting this girl the help she deserved.

“And besides, it’s in plain sight, they just have to...think like me,” Hearts said with a devilish smile. One that stated that they’d never find. “I’ll give you a hint...It lies corroding and rusting. Beside that oh so famous vaporal sword. You know the one I’m talking about, right? It’s in the Castle now. In a room where they’ll just overlook it. Fantastic place to hid things...Right in plain sight.”

Pen set down, Dr. Dour looked at the girl. “Plain sight?” She made sure to note that in the file. Somewhere, in all the room and halls and possible places the necklace would be found. Maybe not until after the Queen’s recovery—if she could recover and at this point, Dr. Dour was even beginning to lose faith.

“What?”

“I asked what you meant by in plain sight.”

“What is in plain sight?”

Looking up, head tilted, Dr. Dour examined the expression upon the girl’s face. All hope of ever finding the necklace would have to wait until Hearts reappeared. “The neck— Nothing...Tell me, Annabel, how much time do you think has passed since my last question?”

“A few moments, Dr. Dour, and I assumed you were a smart little dodo bird” She smiled, sweetly

“Uh-huh.”

“Is that not the case? Did you ask something else in the meantime and I missed it?”

“No, but I’m afraid, I’m going to need more time than just today, your Majesty.” Dr. Dour, closed the file, tucking the notes away before she put it down on her desk, “I’d like to further examine you, see if we can’t figure out some way to better help you and these fits of amnesia.”

“That I’m sure can be arranged. What kind of Queen would I be?”

“I don’t know” Dr. Dour answered honestly.

And she didn’t know still. Closing the file again, Dr. Dour almost missed the conversations with Annabel and the Queen of Hearts. They were an interesting bunch. Had she had more facts? More time, and knowledge about the girl, perhaps a precise diagnosis could have been reached. But frail and gentle as Annabel was, she simply lost her battle with winter. The necklace still missing.

The loud knock at the door drew her attention back to reality.

“Anything?”

“Charming...Maybe, but I’m not sure if it’s even there.” Dr. Dour began, pushing her glasses back up the bridge of her nose, “Your mother was quite the mad hatter so to speak.”

“So I’ve been told, but what about the necklace!” He prompted, foot tapping with impatience.

“She said it was in plain sight... What that means I’m not sure. And honestly, it could mean any room.”

“No, no it can’t. She favored one room above them all. You, just need to think harder. You spend years with her. Something had to have come up.”

“Vaporal sword... We talked quite a bit of that.” Not that it meant much to Dr. Dour as she only ever went from her house to office and back again.

“That’s it.” Darren said, hand slapping down on the table, “That’s the room. We’ll have the guards look.”

Dr. Dour wanted to ask, wanted press but she didn't. She had others waiting. Guards to see. Twiddle Dee and Dumb, as Heart so referred to them to council even the milliner came in for trauma help. All pieces of work.

“If that's all.” Dr. Dour prompted, “I have another appointment.”

Stash of Goodies

“A what?” her voice called after the distinct pop of gum. Did she just... Red blinked, sitting up in the chair. Looking at the woman, Red sat in silence with her brows puckered letting the confusion seeping in.

“I said, kleptomaniac. It’s not all that common in people, a rarity really.”

With an arched brow, Red laid her chin on her palm and huffed out a breath. What did this woman know about her? Or whatever that word was, anyway? And better question what did the brunette care, really truly care?

“And that means...?” The words fell from her lips, petering out in hopes the doctor would fill in the blanks.

“That means you lack impulse control. You take things that don’t belong to you because you can’t help it.” Dr. Dour offered flatly.

Red didn’t care particularly what it was, if she were honest. The words drifted past her as she reclined in the chair. The doctor gave one of those forced smiles after a moment of silence from Red, the one Red was so used to getting when people were uncomfortable around her or with her. Typical. Another sigh left her through her nostrils

“How about you just start with what brought you here, and we’ll get into the rest, sound good to you?”

Right, because she wanted to relive that moment again. The stupid guard—no that stupid prince and his harebrained scheme to take over the world or some narcissistic something or other like that. If she were honest, his long speech about whatever the plans were when she’d been taken to the throne room, had gone in one ear and out the other. A lot of back and forth until

he'd finally snapped it was this therapy session or locked into a prison cell. That had shut her up real quick.

"Okay, I guess?" Red said, lips pursing, though honestly, the idea sounded ridiculous and like a waste of her time. Like the doctor could even help her. With another resigned sigh, the girl slouched a little further into the chair, feet kicking up to land on the edge of the physician's desk. Catching sight of the nameplate as it glittered in the filtered sunlight from the window. She wanted it in her pocket...Not that it would fit but that was beside the point to Red.

"Things were tight, with the farm for a while." Taxes were murder—or so she could quote her father. "Ma and Pa did the best they could but really who could expect them to do much when they were just villagers? Nothing special. Didn't even own the land." A delicate shoulder raised and fell before the pop of gum sounded again. "Cows weren't selling like they were supposed, our neighbors soon sold theirs for three magic beans. What's that gonna do when you're looking to pay property taxes? The kid was not so bright. Then Gran got sick."

Maybe she shouldn't have said that. Red paused, gum snapping several consecutive times between her morals as she thought about personal information protect. Did this doctor really need to know her true life story?

"Your grandmother got sick, then what?"

"Well, ends couldn't meet just with the farm, so Mama and Pa started helping Gran at the bake shop. What's this gotta do with--what did you call it?" She questioned.

"Kleptomania—"

"Right, that..."

"Well, like I said it's impulse control...or rather the lack of one. They take something because there's an emotional component and not due to lack money. So, I find it helpful to know

where the problem originated. Or the easier answer, the Prince has demanded a thorough investigation."

A slow nod of her head and Red scoffed, "In other words, you and he think I'm gonna tell you where I hid his necklace...Assuming you think I have it on me or even in procession still, just 'cause I tell you my life story? You're off your rocker, lady."

"I didn't say that." Dr. Dour protested gently, "And it's Doctor if you will."

"No, but 'cha was thinking it, huh?"

Red ignored the correction.

A cocky smirk pulled her lips up. Red was not some stupid teenager like everyone thought she was. No siree. She was smart, knew when she was being played. Sometimes it was harder to tell, but she'd like to consider herself about 98% accurate in these things. Astute observations. And she had to be astute. Had to be able to study things, make notes quickly; it all was a matter of getting caught or not. Taking observations of how people ticked, you know to best avoid them, or to best lie and get out a sticky situation. The doctor was no different. Red could see she was being used.

"Whatever lady," Red started, "Should I keep going?"

"Doctor" She corrected a bit tersely.

Promptly ignored again, brown eyes took in Dr. Dour's appearance and then the office. It was simple, nothing special. Wood paneling lined the walls degrees hung in frames. Bookshelves stacked with pretentious book no less and little weird pamphlet holders. Zeroing back in on the Doctor Red watched and waited. Her frail looking hand scribbling on the notepad, about what Red wasn't sure but that wasn't important. What mattered was the next thing to catch her eye. Intricately directorate, Red smirked beside herself. She leaned forward, eyes watching

the doctor as she scribbled away. Inching closer to the desk. The faster she got out of here the faster she could go pawn that necklace.

“Please, do.”

"That's when it actually happened. The bakery started hoppin'." Another smack of gum and Red continued, "We started making a name for ourselves, and it was pretty hextacular. I started helping in the shop; you know easy kid stuff like sweeping up the dirt or putting out the signs and setting tables. Pa didn't like me on delivery, said I was too young. But Mama tried to convince him. Every so often I'd pocket a fork from the table or something real interesting like an earring that'd fallen out or maybe a cup with a chip in it. Or small things I knew wouldn't be missed. Just something cool, because it was all I could think about days prior. It felt good to take it. Like scratching an itch finally."

The only encouragement to keep going was a nod, hand still making notes. Not that Red was going to complain, of course, as her hand slowly inched toward the desk. Two slender fingers inched toward the barrel of a silver pen, inscribed with some words Red couldn't quite make out.

The clearing of the doctor's throat had her looking up with a sheepish smile. Another shrug and her hand retracted back to her lap. Red sighed popping her gum one more. Next time, for sure.

"One day, Pa and Mama got busy, and deliveries were getting slower" Her face scrunched up slightly, and she shrugged, "But not enough to hurt the income, just enough we could breathe a little. That's when Pa let me take up the deliveries and long the way, I bumped into Pig and a few other...characters."

"Pig?" Dr. Dour asked, brow arched above her glasses

“Not an actual pig—well he kinda looks like one—that’s just what he likes to be called. Pig and I became fast friends. You know the kind you just know is gonna work out just fine, you got their back they got yours. That’s Pig. Good fellow, a bit...” She motioned to her head in a circular motion of her finger, “Screwy, but not a big deal.”

"Anyway," Red continued without being prompted. Maybe a bit too fast. She had things to do and people—well person, in particular, to see—“Pa didn’t know it at the time, but I had a stash of things I found cool in my room—you know things—hidden under the bed, just growing steadily. A few fancy silver spoons with this intricate leafing on them. It was like an itch when I went on deliveries. Something shiny to take with me. A memento almost.”

“Would it get worse the more time you put between your...” She paused contemplating a nice way to say thefts, or so Red assumed, as the doctor continued to be an elusive mystery.

“Lifts?” She purposed

“Yes, lifts, did it get worse?”

“Pretty much yeah, I’d get the itch, and nothing seemed to work. I’d try just, you know, focus on the stuff Pa told me to do. Or like the things I’d already taken, but nothing would get rid of it.” Red stated matter-of-factly. Fingers tapping against her knee with the sudden need to keep moving. In nervousness? Maybe, but Red pushed it aside. “The feeling didn’t let up until I took something new. The rush wasn’t satisfied until I got something...something well unique to the situation.”

With skeptical eyes, Red looked upon Dr. Dour and pursed her lips. Holding back her question Red continued to scrutinize the doctor as she scribbled away. The action was becoming increasingly more annoying as Red focused in on it. This was taking up that precious time.

"Keep going."

"Right," Red stated slowly, "The stash only got bigger the...uh... delivery orders got as Grannie's got more famous. The best piece, still—that's a funny story actually—is the pocket watch with this great shiny fleur-de-lis on it with the initials. B.B.W. in some fancy script."

Red sat up suddenly eager to talk to the doctor, about anything non-necklace replayed, snapping her gum as she grinned ear to ear at the fond memory, "You see, I was just traveling through the woods on my bike, basket full of goodies for Gran to sample. I wasn't supposed to take the wood— Pa thought it was too scary or something silly like that" Her eyes rolled as she remembered the warning given to her that day, "Just on my way to this weird formal-meeting thing for the ball later in the week—Pa had booked Gran's for the prince's coming out party or something." A low whistle left her lips, "You would have thought we was royalty! People lining up for miles to get a taste of our goodies. Deliveries got a little more complicated. So, I started taking the woods as a shortcut—fastest way to Mulberry Lane. We had to upstage that Muffin Man somehow.."

"So, you did attend the ball then?"

A chuckle followed by the sound of popping gum left the girl's mouth, "In a manner of speaking, sure."

"Care to elaborate?"

Huffing out a sigh, because she didn't have a choice in the matter, Red complied. The prince's warning ringing all too clear in her head. "Well, we got asked to do some catering. You know the good stuff. Cakes, little like cookies, crumpets, silly rich people desserts. And the family—Ma, Pa, Gran and I all got invited to some fancy luncheon." She paused snickering at the word. The royalty never seemed to cease amazing her. "With the King, logistic things or something. And well while the 'adults,'" an eye roll, "talked, I went exploring. Not like they'd

notice, too busy discussing center platters and the best icing for the occasion. Everything had to be perfect, o' course. My hands were shaky, twitchy in a way, I had pocketed a few trinkets throughout the castle already—a small candleholder, an earring just laying on the ground—as I passed by. Just anxious with the need to see what I could add to the collection, ya know?"

"You weren't scared of getting caught?"

"Caught? Lady, please—"

"Doctor Dour, Please, Red."

"Right, Doctor. I take every precaution to keep a low profile. Take nothing that is worth much—that's for sure," Red snorted. Of course, there was always a first time for everything. The exception to the rule and it just so happened to be this time.

"Except the necklace?"

"I'm getting there," Red stated, smacking her gum between her teeth. "Right, so, the itch. Man, it was bad. Like, you know when you just gotta move? You get that weird feeling if you don't? That's kind of what it feel like."

Her brown gaze moved to Dr. Dour's hand scribbling on the legal pad again. Fingers fiddled with the sleeve of her leather jacket that just barely brushed past her thumbs, before moving once again the ballpoint pen she'd been eyeing early. With slow, subtle movements. Her fingers curled around the pen, inching it toward the edge of the desk. Silence wafted between them as Red watched in irritation—or maybe it was more curiosity than anything by now—as the doctor continued to write some weird scientific mumbo jumbo about Red's "problem" if it even was a problem. And she didn't honestly think it was. Red wasn't hurting anyone. It was always things that didn't have high value. No diamonds, no rubies, not valuable gems or

whatever else would attract the unwanted attention. Until the pocket watch and necklace, it would seem.

“So, I was walking through the castle, you know seeing the sites and such. Stuff you can’t do as a regular non-royal person ‘cause gates are closed to the public most of the time.” A shrug lifted her shoulders, “And that’s when I found it.”

“The necklace?”

“No, not yet, the room I knew had some great things in it.”

“Was it the treasury?” Dr. Dour questioned.

“God, no!” Red stated horrified at the idea, “I’m not stupid. I didn’t need none of those stupid wolves breathing down my back.” Thanks for that, lady, she wanted to add but bit her cheek to stop the comment of sass, that bubbled in the back of her throat. “Just some room, I’m not sure whose it was or what they used it for…” Didn’t matter to her, after all.

Head bobbing up and down slowly in means of trying to signal Red should keep going, Dr. Dour lifted her gaze, which had been glued to the notepad previously, to meet Red's. Scribbling down something yet again. “Right,” Red stated more to herself than for the Doctor's use. It wasn't like she was actually paying attention, of course.

“I took a peek inside, you know, no harm, no foul, or whatever it was,” Red laughed slightly, “Nice room. Nothing too fancy, big on the black and red, though. Even had this pretty croquet mallet in the far corner. But there was a lot of stuff. Jewels and what not sat on the dresser, just out in the open.” She thought back, lips pursing. There had been a lot more in the room than she had actually shared. Crowns—or were they tiaras?—decorated the shelves on one side. Priceless jewels and what-not on the other side. More gold and silver—real gold and silver-- than Red had seen in her lifetime. Lots of rubies and heart shaped things. And yet it was

just stuff. Stuff she didn't need to take but wanted to take. Simply because it made her feel euphoric in the end. The items had no appeal—and that alone was enough for her to question why she took it at all—but she wasn't going to. Maybe she did need help elevating the feeling. To feel better without snatching something. But even that would only lasted a little bit, it was deeper than just “because she could” as she'd said before. That little bit would have brought her back to taking something else. Something that would have brought unwanted heat to her life. At least the necklace was small enough keep from getting from being noticed for too long. It looked insignificant in comparison to the rest of the room. Looks were deceiving, though.

Perhaps it wasn't that, though. There was this pull, this vehement desire and Red wasn't one to ignore such impulses. She as the doctor said, lacked impulse control. Something just said take it, and she took it. The necklace with its intricate chain that seemed to be woven with crushed rubies and pendant of the deep charcoal royal house monogram encased in a liquid pool of mercury was an exception. It radiated. How could she pass up an opportunity like that? It wasn't likely. But had she known where she'd end up because of it maybe it would have been that charm bracket with silver playing cards dangling from it after all?

As quick as the thoughts had come Red found every excuse not to follow up with this doctor. I like who I am. I don't need help. The list went on and on.

Thoughts preoccupied her for a for moments longer. Silence lingered again before Red snapped out of it. “A lot of money in the room,” she continued as if she'd never stopped talking, “But it didn't really appeal to me.”

A soft, almost strained laugh left Dr. Dour's lips. Something funny, Red almost asked but thought better She was already on thin ice as it was. “It would have brought way too much attention. And then I saw it.” And what a great little gem it had been.

“Just kinda laying there, on the dresser, a little corroded over, but man did it have this pretty little gem snuggled in the middle. Really unique. It didn’t seem as valuable as the other items, not half as shiny too, but it was just right for my collection.”

Humming a little with self-satisfaction, Red adjusted herself, so she was no longer slouching. “So I took it. Slipped it right into my pocket and walked out the door.”

“And then?”

“Well, then I went on my route to tell Gran. You know fill her in all good details she’d missed. Gran understood this.” Red paused, “What’s it called?” One beat of the heart, “Klepto-what’s-it-called.” A shake of her head, “Don’t matter. So while I was on my way, I figured I could give the necklace to Pig, and he could stash it. But,” A bitter laugh crept out, “Little did I know those wolves were out on the prowl. I did my regular stops. Y’know the butcher, the candlestick maker Ruple-whatever his name is with the baby fetish. Each stops filling my pocket with a few knick-knacks here and there.”

“Normally Gran didn’t answer the door, so I let myself in. I didn’t see her in the kitchen so I checked the bed and what I saw instead was...not what I expected. Instead of Gran—still not sure where she was—there was a wolf. Big eyes and big ears” She blew a bubble with her gum, letting it pop before she licked it from her lips and began smacking it again. “He was sent—or so he said—to escort old Gran to the palace for the...royal thing, Ma and Pa were still brown nosing away, but stuck around to finish off her plate of cookies. He claimed Gran gave him to him but can’t trust those sly wolves no how so he probably helped himself.”

Her brown eyes rolled, and she shook her head, “Probably doing some shady. So while he wasn’t lookin’ I swiped his watch from the table. Probably meant something but he never came after me...Not even when we were at the ball.”

Brown orbs met the Doctor's thick-rimmed glasses, engrossed in the story maybe? "I dunno what started it, but, you know, it was funny. Stole lots of things and I didn't once sweat it. But this..." Red paused avoiding the word necklace, "I knew that's what brought 'em out. Not the watch, not the other stuff."

"Taking off through the forest to avoid those main roads cause traffic was killer—this is where it gets really close to that silly story going around. No, there wasn't a wolf who ate my grandma. But there was a wolf, and I mean the royal guard—in case you weren't sure—did dress up like her. You know to coax me into not giving them a hard time about their questions."

Now, that had been a strange sight. Odd, but yet, Red was having a good chuckle about it now. "They thought I wouldn't notice—but you know Gran was only five something. And Suddenly? She's got these big legs? Big square jaw. Didn't add up, but I played along... Thought I could sneak past them if I played dumb."

Leaning over her knees a little, Red smiled at the doctor. "You know 'What big eyes you have' or my favorite 'What big teeth you have.'" Red laughed. "Never happened. Though I did ask things like 'When did you get such a deep voice, Gran?' and you know the obvious questions."

Red shifted, "And I'm sure you know the rest."

Dr. Dour lifted her gaze, pen stopping. Thank God for some things, Red wanted to say. "No, I don't. I was just asked to...help get the story straight."

"Well, then, help, lady." Red said, popping her gum once again, "I ain't gonna tell you where it is. And I ain't gonna try and fix my," fingers bent mimicking quote marks, "my problem. I like how I am."

An exasperated sigh left the doctor's mouth. She had caved on correcting the girl. "I'm sure you do...but wouldn't it be nice to not have that itch?"

"I've gotten a lot of great stories because of that itch...And it's not like talking about it is gonna fix it anyway." Her previous thoughts of maybe needing help disappeared altogether.

"Let's just" Dr. Dour paused for a moment tentatively adding, "keep going."

Pursed lips and an eye roll later, Red spoke: "Well when they finally dropped the charade, I was picked up on account they had a witness—or so they claimed, I don't think that's quite right." Nibbling on her lip, Red debated on whether or not to tell the doctor about where she'd put the necklace. She always wondered what made it so valuable, thought to ask but didn't. That could be perceived as guilt and therefore a harsher punishment. Not gonna happen.

"Questioned, about where the necklace was—though I was sure it was cause the wolf knew I took the watch—how I got it, and then the Prince came in—haughty and furious." Red grinned, "He doesn't wear that shade of red well but to each their own."

"If I thought the guards were wolves, charming Prince Darren was the biggest and worst of them all. And his monolog." Red groaned, "Seriously, the dude is just full of himself." And pompous to boot. But if she were a prince, Red would probably be a borderline hoity-toity too.

She remembered more than she let on about his little chat with her. Something about the family heirloom needed to be present, or it was no kingdom for him. Boo hoo. And he wanted the country. That was evident. And here she was standing in his way. Red had only smiled—that innocent little girl smile and nodded. But she hadn't cared then and frankly, she didn't care now either. Regardless what hollow threats he gave, Red hadn't actually been charged she was doing this cause she was being forced. Not by the prince, but her parents Pig was gonna stash the necklace at their little treasure trove, and when the heat died down they could take a closer look,

it would either fit...or would be fenced off to someone in the market. Though, Red was fairly sure the piece of chain and junk would fit perfectly next to that pocket watch.

“So, that’s it?”

Nodding, Red blew a bubble with her gum and held back the laugh. What else was there to say? Besides where she hid the necklace—which felt dangerously heavy in her boot—and whether or not she was gonna return it.

“And you still don’t want to tell me where it is?” Dr. Dour coaxed gently.

“No? Because I don’t remember.” A lie.

“Is it with this...Pig?”

“No.”

“Well then perhaps we can talk about something else...Like how I can better help you? Perhaps you’d like a list of resources?” She reached behind her to grab a pamphlet, “Or another appointment, I think we’re making progress.”

Brow arching, Red regarded the woman with skepticism, “I think I’ll pass. Plus, I think our time’s up.”

Standing, Red dusted herself off from whatever would be laying there and clapped her hands together signaling the end. With a cheeky smile and two finger salute, she made her way to the door, Red tossed her red hood over her head.

“I’ll catch ya later, Doc...hopefully never.”

Red didn't give the doctor a moment to reply before stepping outside, pawing the shiny paper weight as she passed the bookshelf. She had places to be, and a little porker to go see about some beautiful jewelry.

Three Pigs and a Doctor

“When someone picks you up off the street and blatantly disregards the other two you get a little ticked.” The stout man before Dr. Dour began.

“Other two?”

“Yeah, my brothers.”

A slow nod lifted Dr. Dour’s head, keeping her confusion hidden. When they had finally tracked down Pig--no thanks to Red--she had expected something else entirely. But there he sat across from her, chubby hands gripping the wood armrests, pudgy legs swinging back and forth, flattened and upturned nose sniffing every so often. At least Red's description of him as 'Pig' was spot on.

“Why don’t we start at the beginning.”

“Sure,” he stated, “Me and my brothers, we were the smallest of the litter. The runts.”

Dr. Dour gave a slow nod as if processing the information. Perhaps she thought he was crazy? Many people did. They just didn’t understand them. Not really.

“Tell her, the part where Red comes in, Pig.”

“I’m getting there, now shush Fred and let me tell the nice lady our story.”

Scribbling down on the paper, Dr. Dour took note of the comment to a question she hadn’t asked. As if he were talking to another person all together. An encouraging smile lit up Dr. Dour’s face as she nodded hoping to proceed. A limited amount of time and it seemed they had such work ahead of them.

So we were runts. Ma used to call us her ‘three little pigs’ but that was when we were children. You see, we grew out of that stuff.”

“I see.”

Clicking her pen, Dr. Dour's hand began scribbling on that legal pad. Red had told them about that. How she had a tendency to just keep on writing like her life—and yours—depended on it. But they shrugged it off.

“Don't forget the part where the wolvies come!”

“I said I got it, didn't I?”

Those thick framed glasses hid her narrowing eyes. She was thinking something. Something about them. Something bad.

“Please continue.” She said.

Grunting Pig nodded, “Well you see we had a big family. Everyone had a job. Fredrick—he don't like being called Freddie.”

“But ya call me that anyway.”

“Freddie,” Pig grinned big and bright, “He was in charge of bailing the hay.” Pig shook his head, “Guess that's where the house made of straw comes from, maybe?”

Shrugging his shoulders, Pig moved on without much thought. He could ponder it all day. Had on many accounts had a deep argument with his brothers about who was supposed to be who. It always ended the same. But he didn't tell Dr. Dour this. That would be too much information. And she already giving them those eyes.

The same eyes that Pig had seen so many times while they were walking in the markets. He heard the whispers too. But choose to ignore those.

“Maybe.”

“Wasn't ask you dumbos.” Pig shook his head. “No manners.”

“Perhaps,” Dr. Dour echoed, “But let's keep going...”

Right, time was running out. Good. Perhaps then the king—prince was it still?—would leave them alone and they could go back to business as usual. Ignoring people until it came time to make a deal.

“Freddie got the straw. Swinedel, he oversaw building the fireplace—or rebuilding it when it crumbled with storms and whatnot. He’s the baby, though, so Ma never left him to work too hard or anything.”

“Ain’t so.”

“Too so.”

“Not.”

“Would you two stop? You’re arguing in front of the nice doctor like you don’t got no manners.” Pig shushed

“And you, Mister Pig?” Dr. Dour pressed.

She was doing it again, Pig noticed, she was ignoring his brothers like they weren’t even there. Rude, but by now they were used to it. That’s why they’d moved out. Started living in their own little house, tucked away in the back of the market place. Prime retail space, Fredrick had claimed. Really, it was just because they were secluded enough that people wouldn’t talk.

“Purcell,” Pig corrected, “Only my friends call me Pig.”

“You ain’t got friends, Porkchop.” Freddie laughed

Pig ground his teeth together and made a low rumbling grunt mixed with a snort. Leave it to Fredrick to try and get under his rawhide. It was pathetic. He chose to ignore it but sat patiently waiting for a cue from the doctor.

“He’s got us, he don’t need no friends, Freddie.”

“Right, Mister Purcell, what was your job?”

“I got to play the music for the family. Entertain ‘em during dinner and stuff. When I wasn’t doing that, I got to pile the sticks for the fireplace.”

“Sounds, like you all had a place and job.” Commented the doctor swiftly.

“Sure did. But then you know that was when we lived out in the country.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, ma and pa had a farm. We used to come to the palace market to sell stuff. You know the normal family stuff. But then people started getting sick.”

“Sick?”

“Yeah, fevers and delusions.”

“And did this illness hit your family?”

Pig nodded grimly. He didn’t remember much, but what he did it came in a silly dream like instances. “Yeah, sure did” He stated, “I remember Ma getting sick first...Then Swinedel...Then Fredrick.” Pig made sure to say his name as he preferred, but not without a look to his brother.

“Did they...” pausing for a long moment, the doctor let the comment fall.

“No, no. Good Grimm, lady no. They’re right here!” Pig motioned toward his sides.

“Of course...Of course. Keep going.” Dr. Dour stated, between strained smiles and nods.

“Right well, they all got something fierce and started talking crazy. Like how we needed to build some houses. As if we didn’t have any. Fredrick went out one day.” Pig laughed slightly, turned toward the left. “Well, why don’t I just let him tell you” Holding his hands under his chin, Pig turned his body to face his left.

Brow risen above her glasses, Dr. Dour looked between Pig and his left. Again her pen met paper and she scribbled down something.

“Thank ya, pork chop. I just minded my own business, you know building houses and what not. Out there tryin’ ta make a house outta straw!”

Pig snorted.

“And y’all just let me do it going about my business. Wasn’t until I started hollering like some banshee about wolf huffing and puffing—and I mean knocking door to door creating some trouble. Them wolves are hextacular are that..”

“Very...uh...interesting” Dr. Dour commented.

“Right, so while he’s going about how his straw house got blown down, Swinedel and Ma were inside sweatin’ up a storm. She took started hollering every time the guards got near her. Saying them, wolves were gonna eat us up and spit us out. After a while, they stopped asking us back to the castle. Money got tight and well, this is the not so happy part of the story.”

Pig sighed and looked to his right. “Swinedel, also started saying that ain’t no wolf gonna get him by the and I’m quoting ‘hair of my chinny chin chin’ as if that made any sense to anyone. Poor boy didn’t even have a beard! Babyface an all.”

Shaking his head, Pig shifted in his chair. Glimpsing at that clock. They had to move this along, he was sure Red was getting impatient. This was just waiting time.

“And then?”

“Well, then my brothers see they got better.” Pig smiled, “It was a great miracle. But Ma...” his voice lowered solemnly.

“She died? Is that when you started fencing things?”

A tight nod jerked his head up, “It was easier. To deal with that type of people then you know...family issues. So we moved out here and that’s when we met Red.”

“More like saved her butt because of them wolves.”

“Yeah, yeah I’m getting there!” Pig snapped.

“Can I interrupt you one moment?” Dr. Dour asked, softly—not meek but gently like she was gonna be breaking the news to a kid their favorite toy was broken.

“Not yet, this is the good part!” Fredrick said, to which Pig nodded in agreement to the statement. “I don’t see why not. You’re the professional, ain’t ya?” Swindel interjected quickly.

“Sure, thing Doc.” Stated Pig with a roll of his eyes.

“You know why you’re here, right?”

“Cause Red squealed like a piglet,” Fredrick muttered sourly.

“She did not,” Pig protested. He was the only one out of his brothers, Red knew or talked to. She wasn’t as bad as the others but, man did he feel like she should meet them!

“Who didn’t what?” the doctor asked head tilted, hand still scribbling down something.

“Red, she *didn’t* squeal,” Pig snapped

“No...not intentionally. The prince found out that you might...” Dr. Dour paused and sighed again. Longer than before, “Think you might have the necklace.”

Of course, they had the necklace still. But if they didn’t go soon, their buyer was gonna walk right out their door and poof went the rent money. Poof went eating. She was a tough cookie, but Hattie was their best customer.

“Gonna be hard truffles ahead,” Fredrick replied with a shake of his head.

Pig snickered before snorting, “That was just bad, Freddie” he commented

“Yeah, Freddie that’s gonna have some re-pork-cussions.”

“Really?” Pig groaned, “I’m sorry about them and their terrible pig puns. They think they’re funny.”

Tick. Tock. Pig squirmed a little in his seat.

“Mister Purcell,” Dr. Dour began, “Have you ever heard of the term hallucinations?”

His head shook from side to side. No. But it sounded fascinating. “Can’t say I have.”

Setting her legal pad down, Dr. Dour looked at him square in the face. Hands clasped together, she let out a deep sigh. “It a disorder where people tend to see things that just simply aren't there. Hear voices that aren't there. They're rather real and life-like.”

A pause.

“And see things that aren't there. Like delusions of grandeur.” She removed her glasses from her face rubbing the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. “No one knows what causes...but there is treatment to help only no cure...”

Moving from her seat, to stand, Dr. Dour came around the desk and leaned against it.

“I'd like to keep seeing you.”

You. You as in the plural you all? Pig wondered. He exchanged a confused look between his brothers. They remained silent. It was a miracle.

“Why?”

For a long moment. Pig looked at Dr. Dour. Examining the somber expression. She was going to say it, he could feel it. Why did no one believe him? He wanted to scream but squealed in frustration instead.

“Look, I appreciate it, but no thanks Doc. Me and my brothers were fine. Always have been.”

Nodding, “Well, in that case, I'll have to get the royal family involved...”

Both Fredrick and Swinedel protested loudly. That was unneeded. And would be wasting more time. Lady Hattie whatever-her-last-name-was was awaiting and they were just being silly now.

“Just consider this...” Dr. Dour began, “How many times a day do people ignore your brothers? How many times has someone run into them and not apologized?”

pursed his lips.

“Has Red ever seen them? or talked to them?” She pressed further.

“Course she hasn’t. They’re shy!” He protested. He wanted to leave. But why couldn’t he leave? Interest? Truth? He didn’t care. They were fine—needed no fixing—as they always had been. No need to change now.

“Okay...” Dr. Dour nodded, “Say that’s the truth. And when I say I wanted to see you, I mean as in talk therapy. Nothing crazy. Actually, another patient of mine does the same thing. We go over her...well story and we see where things don’t add up. Does that sound do-able?”

Another grunt left Fredrick.

“Yeah, sure... We were done?”

“Not yet.”

“You are gonna make us late, lady. Enough with the question!”

“What Swinedel said!”

“Can’t it wait until next week?” Pig purposed

“Afraid not. I need to know about the necklace... It’s a bit important.” Not just for her job sake but her sanity as well. If she had Darren in her office once more time she was going to

Pig sighed, opting for a lie instead, “We sold it already.”

“That was fast.” She admitted, “Do you know who?”

“That’s private information, don’t tell her that, Purcell. Or I swear I’ll hit ya until ya squeal.”

“Nope, sorry. My mind a little preoccupied with all this information.” He lied smoothly. Or what he hoped was smooth.

“Right...well then I suppose I’ll have to see you next week?”

Pig nodded, shook her hand and was out the door faster than he’d entered. He had to admit the Doc was a nice lady. But she was crazy if he thought he’d be coming back. The ball was coming up fast, and the market place was just ripe for the picking. Between the three of them, they could haul quite the score.

Looking back over his shoulder, Pig noticed Dr. Dour welcoming in another person. But her gaze remained fixed on them like she could see right through. To the air that surrounded Pig. He shivered. His brothers' forms shivered. It was like she could look through them and see what really laid there. Just thin air.

Sterilized Slipper

“Once upon a time...Only once upon a time was every single day. No breaks, not a holiday in sight. The same routine every morning, like clockwork: get the laundry rinsed, wash the floors, chickens fed, cows milked, kettle over the hearth for the baths started. The same list over and over, with a monotony about it that it was a wonder she never went mad. Or broke down and just-”

“Let’s pause for a moment,” The doctor asked politely, a legal pad resting on her lap, pen click, click clicking open and closed every few seconds. Dutifully listening to her patient, nodding and smiling pleasantly—encouragingly—every time she spoke. Her features were bland at best with dark framed glasses that casted square shadows down her cheeks.

She blinked, watching the doctor licked her lips in wait. Repulsion swam through her as her nails, polished and clean, dug into her thigh. A short, shallow breath drew her lungs in and her green gaze never moving from the doctor’s lips. Did she not understand what she’d done? The impulse to lean away from her, to get her a tissue to wipe the saliva off was so intense but she remained composed. It physically hurt her, to be so close to whatever microscopic things were just a mere foot away from her. It took all her willpower to ignore it. “Sure.”

“Do you think this is where it started? The chores, your sleeping conditions, the disgust at dirt?” she asked candidly.

“Maybe...It always bothered me? But I guess having to shift through the ash nightly would do that to someone.” The implied Don't you think was clear in her tone as she retorted, holding back the eye roll. Dr. Dour had heard the story a thousand times, and still she seemed to gloss over that small little fact.

Who knew what was living in those ashes with the lintels: small little larva, fleas skittering about, ants, microorganisms, or worse germs. *Rhinopharyngitis*, influenza, or worse *Yersinia Pestis*. How susceptible was everyone who spent their time picking through the soot on the heated hearth floor?

The doctor snaps her fingers, “Did you hear me, Ashlin?”

“No, sorry.” she mumbled, cheeks inflaming with embarrassment, “Can you repeat that?”

The woman nodded again, a gentle smile playing on her lips as she looked at the girl opposite. With a brief nod, she spoke, “I asked if you were forced to sleep on it, like in the story.”

An audible and horrified gasp left Ashlin’s lips. “Heavens no! She was mean, but even that was beyond her cruel punishment.”

A nod. A scribble.

“Continue with the story then.”

Another sigh and a heartbeat before she continued, “It’s a wonder I never went mad or lashed out. Between Dana—her name was never Drizella, I’m not even sure that’s a real name—and Annalise—again her name was not Anastasia where that comes from I can’t tell you—calling you every break of dawn to get their corset tightened and the chores that piled up waiting on them a person would surely lose their mind.”

“Because you liked things to be clean?”

“Because I liked things to be neat, well-scrubbed and germ-free.” Ashlin corrected tersely, “As I was saying. Clean and tidy. That’s why step-mother Hattie, had— well forced, but now we’re getting into semantics—me do all the chores, she was just as prone to details as I was. Every morning. She always commended me on how perfectly hot their baths were as if I’d let

whatever crawling in those wash bins from the laundry touch their skin—I mean we came into contact with each other for heaven’s sake. But that’s not what you want to hear...Where was I?”

“The chores.”

With a nod, Ashlin continued, “Right...It wasn’t a big deal then. I just lived with it, making faces, continued with life as I knew. But then the ball happened.” Her features screwed up in the unmistakable grimace of repugnance.

Ashlin paused, looking at the doctor. Behind the thick frames of her glasses, she could see the utter joy of figuring out where this was headed, where it all in words she’d once used herself went wrong. How many times did they have to talk about that night, though? It was life-changing sure, but the fact still remained how she could face the prince after what had transpired between them?

Her breathing picked up a little with the turn of her thoughts. She hadn’t exactly said yes or rather anything at all. Just took her slipper and high—

“Are you still with us, Ashlin?”

A vigorous nod while thoughts of only 5% of people properly washing their hands drifted through her head. “Yes,” a few loose strands of muted blonde tucked behind her ear, “Sorry.”

With a gentle tilt of her head inward Dr. Dour signaled it was okay, though if Ashlin were honest, the tilt was just another quirk the doctor had. She used it often with a certain complexed look over the brim of her classes in means of begging for an explanation or detail. What it really did was make it more noticeable that the doctor never cleaned her glasses, as dust clung each inlaid piece Dust mites, old cells, dandruff.

This time Ashlin didn’t stare like she would. Instead, she wrung her fingers, dry and in dire need of lotion, nervously awaiting the question that would soon follow that look.

“Let’s pick up on the ball shall we?”

“Right...” She took a breath, “The ball.” It was muttered as she adjusted herself on the chair, careful not to touch anywhere she hadn’t already done so or had previously wiped down. That risked too much.

“I was dying to get out of the kitchen. When the announcements were made that every eligible lady was to be present, it seemed like a perfectly good opportunity. But, stepmother Hattie directly forbade me from attending, scared I’d embarrass her and her daughter’s chances to impress royalty. Of course, that didn’t stop me. I had to know if the upper class could obtain the cleanliness I desired and wasn’t achieving. It was a chance to see what it was like to live where the world around you sparkled like a fresh, clean window.” A smile pulled her thin lips up, and Dr. Dour returned it. All the encouragement Ashlin needed to proceed. “The tree so famously known for its good graces was just a peach tree, I and my mother had nursed before my obvious problem came about and her untimely death. But the fairy godmother,” Ashlin paused letting the soft laugh.

“Was not a fairy godmother or fairy just a nice lady down the road from us. The pumpkin carriage and mice turned into horses is horrific to think about and just purely made up.” A shiver rolled down her spine. Fueled by repugnance, Ashlin tried to remain composed and poised. She squirmed in the chair a little more to displace the feeling growing in the pit of her stomach.

“The carriage was just a carriage. Nothing special no bippity boppity nonsense, just a dank soiled (with who knew what) linen curtains. Splintering, swollen wooden seat—it wasn’t all gilts and glam like people think,” her voice drew into a low tone, the crossness in her voice rang in the nearly silent room. Dr. Dour’s scribbling ballpoint pen scratching against the yellow woven fibers of her legal pad, was the only real sound Ashlin had picked up. She looked down at

her hands, touching the arms of the chair horrified. Unclean. The term rang through her head like an alarm blaring its ear-piercing song while red lights flashed warning of danger or fire or a toxic spill. Toxic. Chest rising as the air in her lung expanded, Ashlin tried to dispel the irrational thoughts running through her head. You can get sick from touching any given surface. 2.7 billion germs, protozoa and bacteria crawl on porous surfaces like this; thrive in it. Wash your hands. Who had sat in this chair before her? Did they know the proper technique to covering of covering your mouth? Wash your hands again

A bottle jiggled before her eyes snapping from the internal monolog and bombardment. “Thank you.” She replied sheepishly pumping the bottle until the shimmering gels infused with bubbles of 68% alcohol. Robotically her hands moved over each other’s rubbing the solution in, letting it seep into each wrinkle and pore expunging the microscopic organisms, fictitious or not, that inhabited her skin like a village of people flushed by a flood. A sigh of content left her lips a second later.

“As you were saying?” Dr. Dour asked, a bit impatient to keep going. She always got like that when Ashlin absentmindedly reached for the jug sitting on her desk or would scrub furiously at a speck or stain on her blouse.

“The reality of it was it was filthy. But I wasn’t about to turn it down, it was kind of her to offer it in the first place.” Ashlin said pumping the gel once more into her palms. Thumbs rubbing the emulsion over her palms and then the backs, watching the already dry skin tighten and brighten with a red discoloration. She ignored the sting. “It was okay as long as I didn’t touch anything or bump into it,” her breath halted slightly before she added, “or thought about it—which is nearly impossible. You jostle all over the place while riding on the streets.”

“And the slippers?” Dr. Dour prompted

“Right,” Ashlin stated on a breath, “Sanitization. Do you know how easy it is to keep the glass clean? And there was no way I was going to borrow someone else shoes. That's just ridiculous.”

A ‘Mhm’ had come from the doctor, though, Ashlin didn’t need to look at her to know she was scribbling away tucking, a piece of honey hair behind her ear. She had a tendency to do that when she was deep in thought while processing what Ashlin had said. A look of concentration clouded her blue eyes, but she didn’t give any more indication that she was going to say more on the subject.

“So yes, Glass slippers. Dear Grimm they are terribly uncomfortable, but we all do things for beauty, right?” A strained laugh escaped her lips. “So there I was scrubbed from head to toe, all dress-d up having stolen a mall tarnished trinket from my stepsister room, a necklace that they didn’t seem to care for much. Or at least I’d never seen them wear. After that, I was ready to see what it was like in the castle. “

“Hold on a moment. A necklace?” Dr. Dour interrupted, head tilted caught on the phrase. That certainly struck a chord.

This was new. Normally they stuck to things that pertained to the illness, not the superficial. A nod of her head and Ashlin was curious as to what tripped the good doctor up this time? Hadn’t she mentioned a necklace before?

“It was dirty...disgustingly so. Rusted and corroded over. So I soaked it in some lye, cleaned it up a little make it sparkle—“

“And touchable?” A slight smirk on the lips of Dr. Dour’s face was mimicked in Ashlin’s.

“Yes. A Touchable.”

“Do you know where they got it?”

“No...Someone in the market perhaps sold it to Hattie. I’d only seen it there when I went looking. It seemed old enough to calcify and dust over, though.” The image of the necklace before she’d been able to make it wearable causing a slight gag. The mere thought that anything sitting that long made her skin crawl.

“Of course, keep going.”

“Right. I was more than ready to see the sparkle in the marble tiles or whatever was supposed to be in a castle. Anything is better than wood floors that collect the smallest of dust mites, and there’s no real clean way to scrub them without spreading the gunk around on the floor.”

Ashlin relaxed against the chair. This part of the story she was so comfortable with, having told it a hundred times by now. She had come to terms with the fact that the inside of the carriage had been the first inclination that it was going to be that kind of night. Heart labored in her chest as each little hiccup had her hands bracing against the door only to shrink back in fear. The hours spent cleaning and scrubbing the ash and dirt from her body—because she wasn’t going to think about what else was really crawling over her skin leading to the urge to go back and scrub again and again until she felt thoroughly clean. Her hands brushed her arm. She winced visibly. Dirt. It clung to her skin, sunk into to the pores, clogged them, filled them with protozoa of the unknown classification variety, infected them slowly, germinating her very cells as they began their invisible assault. She. Needed. To. Wash.

“And what did you do after you arrived, already close to breaking, I assume?” she asked, an accent she corrected quite well peeking through every so often—German perhaps? —snapped her from her internal nightmare of the memory. Dr. Dour’s gaze rested on Ashlin’s face, her blue

gaze meeting green for a fraction of a second before a small spread across her lips. The understanding was in her features but an analytical cloud laid behind the thick frames.

“A-After,” Ashlin paused taking a breath, “After I had arrived, I needed to wash. It wasn’t a luxury but a necessity that grew stronger the longer I waited to be announced at the ball.”

“Did you?”

A vigorous nod bobbed her head from side to side. “As soon as the footman announced my presence—under the name Ella, if my step mother knew I had joined the fun she would have made sleep in the ash for disobeying her orders to stay out of sight. And that was not something I could live with—it wasn’t the ash that bothered me, but the thought that it would touch my skin that made me go white with fear. She always threatened that when Gentry or businessmen came to the house.

“I walked into the ballroom—or one of them I suppose—searching for a bathroom, wash tub something to get rid of the feeling. Nothing in sight at all. But it was nothing compared to later on when I really think about it. Throughout the crowd, I looked for a means of escape, too preoccupied to actually take in the cleanliness or lack thereof.”

Dr. Dour held up her pen as if she was going to speak but she remained silent. Composed. Thinking. Behind her lackluster eyes the, wheels turned mulling over some word Ashlin had said while her pen scribbled away “Keep going.”

“I walked in hoping to find some kind of water, clear and clean. But I didn’t see any of that. Just a fountain—and there was no way I was rinsing my arms or hands in that. Besides the urine or other things, just think of the more harmful bacteria that’s swimming it!” her voice rose to a higher pitch as she fought to remain calm. One breath. Two. “I went searching for the

kitchen they had to have a kettle or something going but before I got the chance I was swept into a dance. I think it was a Duke, but I'm not too sure. He smelled too." Again her face twisted into a slight grimace at the memory. "I know for some people baths were a luxury, even my step sisters only bathed once a week at best. While I purposefully stayed up late to prepare some water for myself...But...But still!" She sighed and shook her head dismissing the thought.

"After the Duke, I was on the verge of tears. My lungs were working double time as I tried to act natural. Normal. And not dwell just where his hands had been or when was the last time he bathed? It didn't work so well as I went stumbling into the crowd drawing the unwanted attention of not only the party-goers but the Prince himself."

Dr. Dour, moved in the seat, "Let's look at that shall we?" her voice was methodic soothing, besides some harsh sound of her accent.

Ashlin nodded.

"What was your first thought when dancing?" She asked, tilting her glasses down her slender nose.

"That I didn't want to touch him. He looked dirty. And that dirt would be on my collecting...permeating my skin." There was a pause in the girl's statement, "and that I wasn't ever going to be able to remove them, no matter how feverishly I scrubbed."

"And is that what set you off?"

"Is that why I'm here, you mean?"

A nod, tight and jerky. Like the woman who'd given it. No nonsense. Rigid.

"No, no that's not the reason. At least not entirely," she said thoughtfully. "It was the prince. And the ball really." An audible gulp sounded, a click of a pen and the scratching sound once again echoed.

“Let’s address the prince...If he’s the reason you’re here.” She prompted, her pen moving in the air as she spoke, pointing directly at Ashlin. With focused eyes, Ashlin noted the bite marks on the pen, the frayed ends of the cap that pointed directly at her. Her eyes closed and she let a slow breath escape through her nose.

“O-okay.”

Opening her eyes, Ashlin chooses a spot on the wall, just above the doctor’s degree. A nice white patch with not a spec of dirt. “Like I said I drew a lot of people’s attention as I began to melt down, struggling to remain composed. I made it outside, into the fresh air and clutched my arms, breathing through my nose hoping to relax a little. It couldn’t be that bad all the time, I tried to convince myself, but until then all I had witnessed was how bluntly the rich decided to ignore simple hygiene processes. Or just didn’t care. It was awful to realize all the dreams and hopes were just so quickly shattered within a few moments of being there.”

Instinctively her hand grabbed the bottle from the desk, squeezed gel once again into her hand—feeling like she was at that moment again. Unable to properly rationalize that her fears of being dirty and succumbing to illness were just delusions of a hypochondriac.

“You doing it again, Ashlin.” The harsh scold from Dr. Dour had her freezing in half circulation of her wrist. This marked the fifth time since she started this session she’d reached for the sanitizer, put it on and repeated. Her skin flaked at her hands right between her thumb and index. A sign that she’d, as Dr. Dour had told her the first time the word mysophobia were uttered, been washing too frequently due to irrational thoughts and processes. She had tried her hardest to cut back the impulses, this session. She was improving but not enough.

“What?”

“Trying to rationalizing you need to sterilize your hands.”

“Oh..” it was a sheepish answer, low and embarrassed as red flamed her cheeks.

“Let’s keep going. Stay conscious of your actions, though.”

“Uh-huh,” Ashlin muttered and continued, “It wasn’t just gentry or commoners who saw my mini episode –that’s what you called them correct?” a nod confirmed her question, “It was the Prince. After a few moments of getting composed, though it was practically of no use, I went back inside and was once again pushed into the dance. This time with him.”

“We danced, and it was pleasant and very enjoyable because he wore gloves and not a speck of dirt to be seen on him. Sterile.” A dreamy sigh had left her lips before she continued, “The best part was when we talked. I wouldn’t say it was love at first sight—because it wasn’t—but maybe a kinship at first glance. We moved out into the fresh air where we talked about keeping things neat and tidy. For the first time in my life, it wasn’t just some weird quirk I tried to hide, but something that another person went under the same thoughts as I did. We laughed and enjoyed the rest of the night out in the garden. It was magical—again not love me until I die magic—but really different from the other people I had encountered. He understood it. Or so I thought.”

“Just as we were talking about the best way to get a stubborn spot of a carpet, he sneezed. His gloves had come off earlier, I’m not entirely sure when but it didn’t bother me as much. There was no way contaminants could have crept in there. He sneezed directly into his hand. His hand!” her voice rose again hitting that inflection that was a sign of distress, “Then proceeded to touch mine.”

“And you ran?”

She shook her head, “No. No first I screamed as the clock chimed midnight. His germs had just touched my skin without even batting an eye. My hands and body were completely

susceptible to anything he had festering inside his cells. They would wage war on my cells and mine would lose. His expression was confused, that much I remember, and I'm sure mine was horrified. I recoiled my hand, grabbed my dress and ran toward the entrance of the castle once again. I don't know if it was the sneeze so much as he touched me afterward that set me off."

A soft sigh left her quickly followed by her leaning her sterilized hand against her cheek, "He was so sweet...you know? We had lots in common and then he just had to do something like that!" Frustration seeped from her tone. "Isn't that common sense, not to sneeze into your hand, though? How can he not know! Didn't he get a proper education?" She pressed as if Dr. Dour had all the answers.

"I just don't get it" shaking her head she shrugged, "So I pushed past the guards stationed at the garden entrance, and ran down the stairs. The clock chimes were the only thing that really stood out to me until my slipper fell off. So disgusted with him that I didn't notice until my foot landed in a puddle. Mud squishing between my toes. Froze me in my step and I glanced over my shoulder my slipper shining on the pristine marble stair.

"You didn't go back?"

"No. I had to be back before Hattie returned and at this rate, I was going to be scrubbing myself raw to just hope I came out clean."

"And that's why you left early, to go clean up before your stepmother arrived...You felt compelled to leave?"

"Yes, what was I going to say to the prince. I'm sorry but you sneezing on me is a turn-off, sorry I don't want to marry you. You can't talk to princes like that." She laughed slightly, amused by the idea, "And the rest of the story...well, you know that. He found me. Put the slipper on my foot, and we rushed to get married."

“You don’t like that?”

She shook her head, “how can I explain all this to him? 'Darren dear, your soon to be bride, doesn’t want to marry you because you touched her.' Seems a bit harsh”

Dr. Dour sighed and shook her head, “Ashlin, you’re trying to cope with living with mysophobia, I’m sure if you explain it to him you’ll be alright. But we can start you on some routines to implement again. You were doing so well last time.”

Ashlin nodded, “I just don’t see why it’s so hard for someone who thinks things look better clean could be so naïve about what they’re doing on a dial bases. I’ve tried to just pinch myself when I feel the need to wash my hands or body or scrub needlessly at something...I cave too quickly.”

Setting her notebook on the edge of her desk, Dr. Dour, pinched the bridge of her nose, moving her glasses up. “I understand it’s hard—“

The alarming buzz interrupted her mid-sentence, and both Ashlin and the Dr. sighed heavily. “That’s all the time we have today. I’ll see you in the group meeting right?”

With a nod, Ashlin swallowed and extended her hand to the good doctor. Progress. “See you then, Dr. Dour...”

Oh Too Charming

Pacing. Back and forth and back and forth, as he waited outside the doors. Head jerking up every so often to make sure no one saw him there frazzled. The ideas that would spread. That simply didn't fit into his plan. A mistake he couldn't afford this far into the game. With jerky movement, he was headed back past the door only to veer and pass again. Over and over.

This was officially the worst thing to happen since he was told he had to marry in order to get the crown. Hands down. No competition. Not only had he picked a girl--at random who looked somewhat decent--, but she had problems. Problems that were in his way of the crown.

The creaking sound of the door opening was his only indication the session was over. Finally. Brilliant smile--diplomatic and fake but nonetheless dazzling--as she emerged from the room. Hands wringing together in their nervous fashion. To someone meant to be in love, it would be endearing, but to him not so much. Instead, he saw it as a reminder of how far he had come just to wait and wait and wait.

"Ashlin," he started toward her. Could he have rushed, swept her up in his arms as most people believed? Sure. But he kept his walk leisure. Body parts remaining at his side as he nodded. No touching. That's what the lady behind the large oak door had said.

"I'll just be but a moment," He stated, slipping in past that door and into the office.

With her back to him, Darren was able to slide effortlessly into the chair that he assumed Ashlin had sat once before. A swift—but not subtle—cough to clear his throat and he had her attention.

"Can I help you?" She questioned with no indication for bowing or curtsying. Just a blunt question.

"How much more time does she need."

If she wanted to be blunt, he would. Only, this time, he began totaling how many sessions. How much longer and the days that had been crossed out to coronation—or the anticipated date he had marked. The longer this took, the more desperate he thought he'd become.

“A while...She's making small steady progress.” She remarked. Dark rim glasses moving down her nose slightly, so beady eyes narrowed in on him.

“A while.” Slowly dripping from his mouth, the world moved in slow motion. Just like that things changed.

A tight nod that bounced the tightly woven bun on her head slightly was all he received.

Alright, new plan, he thought. First, he needed to see just how bad Ashlin was. Then he would work the minor details out. Patricide was so frowned upon; he couldn't go about it—if that was where his plans lead him—without some type of fall back.

There was a brief lapse of silence. The wheels in his head churned as he fought to regain control over.

“So this is it, huh?” He asked, only mildly impressed with the tiny office. Sure it wasn't fancy. It wasn't the biggest room in the building, at least not that he'd seen. No, this room was cozy. He hated cozy. Cozy lead to secrets spilling.

“This is it.”

With a tight nod, just the short jerk of his chin, Darren confirmed the statement. A slight fidget in the seat. One that seemed a bit too tight to house his body properly. No life of luxury that was for sure. She was staring at him now. Beady eyes boring into him despite the thick framed glass in their path.

“And people come you...a lot?” an innocent question, right? He didn’t need to know the answer, was only making small talk while he waited for the right opportunity to peek at those files just laying on his desk. Small talk enough to avoid being one of her subjects. He was the embodiment of sane after all. Not like Ashlin or the good Doctor herself. He knew her tricks; he’d heard the stories. She’d ask questions and try to get him to respond so she could pick it apart. As if there was anything wrong with him wanting to be crowned after months of waiting. It was a laughable thought.

“They do,” She stated, her gaze still intently staring. Pen aggravatingly still. Was she planning on diagnosing him, he thought with a slight squint of the eyes? She cleared her throat before speaking, “Was there something else on your mind?”

“No, no... What can I do to help her is all?” He asked feigning concern, pulling at the neck of his shirt. That was his intention, he convinced himself. But did he care, really truly care? Not unless it benefitted him. And at this point, the answer was no.

“Can you be a little more specific?” Her voice drew him from his internal rant and Darren blinked.

“What can I do to help her progress of recovery move faster.”

His hand clutched the armrest. Stupid woman.

“Ah, be patient...Though, I can’t actually share.” She stated calmly, “But I do have a few questions myself.”

Sit and talk. This doctor was crazy. This was a waste of his time, but her next patient—Ashlin—wasn’t due to show up for another hour. At least, that’s what her clock said. A whole hour with her worried him. Then again perhaps the knowledge would give him an insight in how

to rid himself of this nuisance once and for all. What Ashlin didn't know didn't hurt her, at least, that's how he thought about it.

“Talk? About what?”

“Why you're really here.”

Green gaze snapping back to her glasses, he swallowed the lump. “To check on Ashlin...It's hard to see her like this.” Lie. Smooth and rehearsed. How many times had he had to tell someone why exactly he wasn't married? Or why they hadn't even met the princess? An exasperated sigh left him.

“I take it you're not happy with the arrangement?”

“No.” Flatly stated, “I just want to be king.” It came out rushed before he could even filter the sentence. And that's how it began, he supposed, him spilling his deepest darkest secrets. Telling this stranger why he wanted to be king so badly. No that just wouldn't do. Besides being devilishly handsome, he wasn't stupid. Wasn't going to fall prey to her tricks or anyone else's. He made the rules.

“Why do you tell me your side? Maybe it'll help?”

Oh, she was good. He had to give her that. Persistent even. Innocent questions and fake interest. Making him feel like he could trust her in such a small amount of time. Making him the center of attention. Feeding his ever-growing ego. But he was better. He knew how to play the small game of cat and mouse better than anyone. Why even bother trying to just make polite conversation now? Maybe he finally had the audience he wanted. Darren prided himself on his wit, and one silly doctor wasn't going to ruin that. Not today. Not ever.

With a slightly strained laugh, Darren nodded. “It all began about a week before the ball.” Trying to find a comfortable position, he leaned—slouched—back into the chair.

Appearing deflated, Darren ran a hand down his face. “My father and his vizier came rushing down the hall as I entered for our daily hunt and archery practice. You would have thought the castle was on fire.”

He remembered that day so clearly. The white marble had been freshly waxed, the curtain pulled back maybe moments before. And between him and his stout father the gaping grand entrance was full. “For a man who couldn’t be bothered to do much in the way of exercise he was making great strides.” He paused a slight chuckle leaving him. His belly heaving on his knobby knees. “I thought for sure he was going to tell me some horrible news. Something along the lines that we’d discovered another heir to the throne. That would have been disastrous.”

Dr. Dour’s brow crinkled, pen clicking open before it moved across the pad. Craning his neck to peek at whatever she’d just written, Darren felt a slight flush at her gaze and cleared his throat. He was going to have to play along. The faster he got out of this “progress meeting” the faster he could keep pushing this silly marriage and finally get what he deserved.

“Disastrous?” She questioned.

“Well, of course. I was in line for the crown...if there was another heir. An older heir I would have been bumped out of the running...” Darren deadpanned. This is common knowledge; how didn’t she know that?

“Of course, of course. Go on.”

Another nod and he spoke. “They came rushing toward me. Of course, preparing for the worst I just wasn’t sure what to expect. My father, by some miracle, got to me first. Out of breath and panting, the old man tried and failed to tell me what all the craziness was about. After about, oh I don’t know, five minutes of his whizzing he finally got it out. There was going to be a ball. In my honor, of course.”

His smile brightened, and he looked at the Dr. Dour as she scribbled. Head bobbing to show she was listening but that page, the page she'd started the moment this conversation began was filling up rapidly. Could he use this to his advantage? Of course. Could he pretend he went to the Dr. Dour in good faith? Without a doubt. But why bother with the messiness of seeing a shrink in the first place? It wasn't as if he needed her.

"Please go on." She encouraged with a slight tilt of her head.

"A big party where the whole kingdom was invited. The small catch was after three days if I didn't pick my bride-to-be, the father would pick one for me." Just a slight hitch in his intended plans. "I'm not about to rush a marry someone" I can't control, he left off, but that was letting on too much to the doctor. "It needs to be someone I can see myself with" if only for a short while.

"It was annoying," he commented almost a snarl, but he refrained. Always mucking up the plans, like the old man couldn't ever just let things happen the way Darren wanted. There was always some higher scheme his father failed to see. But the ball gave him an excuse to reevaluate his plans. Adjust to the circumstances. It was the fastest way.

"How so?" Dr. Dour questioned again in that tone that held no indication of her thoughts or process.

It unnerved him. He was normally very at manipulating people. Keeping them going the direction he wanted but Dr. Dour didn't give him any hints as what direction she was going. Hot or cold.

"I just had plans." He let slip. "Plans for how I would become king. But a wedding would speed the process up of course." He confessed on a breathy sigh. Puffing the hair from his eyes, Darren slunk a little further into the chair.

“So, then it was a good thing? And not so annoying to have plans shift?”

“I suppose not. But no I didn’t think of them so…” Huh, he hadn’t thought about it that way. Finding a girl to marry had thrown him for a loop while he had great plans to rid himself of the king—who seemed to be taking far too long to kick the bucket—he wasn’t opposed to keeping his hands clean in that respect.

“Go on.”

He proceeded, “With the preparations for the ball started. It was more of a whirlwind of things rather than a relaxing vacation. What color plates. What drapes. The music. This and that. It was rather exhausting. I’m certain I formed wrinkles from frowning so much.

“As things grew closer the chaos only grew worse. And of course, the ladies and duchesses—or whatever they wish to be called at court—stayed in the many open rooms set up for just this type of occasion. The ballroom had been staged, and it seemed that things were going smoothly. I should have been happy. But-”

“You weren’t?”

Again, with the prodding questions. He wanted to groan. Probably did groan but it was a soft sound. “No. I wasn’t. I’m not one to let things be whisked from my control.”

She didn’t respond like he thought she would. Even more aggravating. He’d expected her focus to be more on the unhappiness, but he’s response died on his tongue. Not even an affirmative *mhm*. Grey eyes narrowing, Darren let out a breath through his nose.

“I had everything set the way I wanted. One suggestion from one lady and the whole thingy was thrown into chaos. An hour after hour getting asked if any of the noblewomen hit my fancy from my father, the vizier, the maids, the servants. It was nice to have the attention, but it wasn’t the way I wanted that attention.”

Hand moving through his hair, brushing the dark strands from his face, Darren pursed his lips in contemplation. How had the whole event even progressed? How had they even moved this far from the main goal?

“The first night of the ball started rather boringly.” He continued after there was no indication to stop. “A few dances. No one as strikingly attractive to match my own attractiveness. Just girl after giggling girl who fumbled over their words. Curtsied wrong. And I was supposed to pick one of them? To marry? Just to get my father to hand over the crowns and keys to the castle? To give me what was rightfully mine?” His voice grew more disgusted as he talked. But something kept the words to coming. No filter.

All the while pen scribbled against paper every so often as Dr. Dour gave an “mhm” or “continue.”

“And then she showed up.”

“Ashlin?” she prompted.

“Yes. She was beautiful—considering the rest—but the way she stood was like nothing I’d ever seen. At the door, she backed away from the harold, was interesting to say nonetheless. Different, that’s a better word.” He described her gingerly. “Almost like she didn’t want to have contact with us. No, exactly like that. I watched her from across the ballroom, as I moved from partner to partner but none seemed to hold my fancy like she did. Or rather what she had around her neck...”

Smitten. Sure. Just a slight infatuation he assured himself. He couldn’t be falling in love with an expendable person such as Ashlin. And she was expendable. “We talked, she run off. I chased.” His hand waved dismissively.

“I was rather determined to keep her around the second night. No one refused *me*. Or my charm. No one told me no. Why would they? That was until she showed up.” Was that a hint of resentment in his tone? An emotional response from him? He blinked. What was that? It caused him to gag a little.

Emotions, he hated them. Emotions meant attachment and attachment meant putting someone before yourself. He simply wouldn't do it.

“We talked some more. I only danced with her and only her. Still rather fixated on that necklace of her. It looked so familiar. So, I shooed the other women who wanted my attention away. She was intriguing as the others weren't. Aggravatingly so. Every touch of my hand on the small of her back, a flinch. Every time I went to touch her she flinched!” Again, that emotion came creeping up. It was the most frustrating thing. “She didn't seem to like the contact, so I kept my distance, making sure she was comfortable. Something you do when you plan to court a woman...” As if the action needed explanation. “And that's when I realized why her necklace was so intriguing...”

“But you didn't know she was ill... You have a right to be upset.” Dr. Dour chimed in finally, “And why?”

A nod and a sigh. “I do. Don't I? I mean she's the one who has the problem. Not me. She's the one who ruined everything set in motion because she can't touch my hand or kiss me. And somehow...someway that necklace we were searching for ended up around her neck.” Again the words were not new to him, but saying them out loud was a very different process. Stirred different emotion in him. Anger, for sure, but determination above all else. Swimming cozily next to relief that it had been said finally, his emotions seemed to level out. Someone finally understood.

“I mean how can you marry someone who can’t even kiss you Or hold your hand without immediately needing to wash their own. How can you marry someone who would probably just use a bottle of hand sanitizer during coronation! And on top of that I can’t even take what’s mine because I’ll *infect* her or containment it?” His arms flew up into the air with exasperation, causing his neatly tucked shirt to pull from its position.

“How am I supposed to be king if I can’t even get married?! I’d have too...” He paused, hand running down his head, “I’d have to resort to patricide or something just to finally get the title!” The confession slipped from his lips. Quickly followed by, “Not that I would ever do that. Of course.”

Strained chuckle.

“And the plans to get married...to get the crown their on hold because of Ashlin?” Dr. Dour commented once he finally stopped spewing words. “It makes you upset because things haven’t gone your way? That you can’t get the title without her?”

He nodded. “Well of course it does. I can’t very well do what I please if I’m not king.” He retorted. “And she’s...she’s mucking it up! This isn’t even about her. We were talking about me!”

She nodded. “Yes, we were. We are.” She corrected swiftly, “Do you think of how hard it is on her?”

There was no defensive ‘not’. Just a simple question.

“No, I don’t. I don’t care how hard it is for her. I have enough to worry about besides some girl from the village who can’t stand the sign of dirt. It’s not *my* problem.”

“Well, actually she's-”

“Not important. The fact remains I can’t do anything I want with her stuck here coming to these silly sessions. Where nothing gets fixed.” He countered on a huff.

Standing, Darren crossed his arms and looked at the clock. Almost a full half an hour. He’d been here for far too long. Far too much exposure had happened. He slowly re-tucked his shirt

“How about we start with you,” She explained, “I suggest we start meeting.”

“What?”

“You and I.” She calmly explained pen hitting the desk in front of her for the first time.

“You don’t seem to realize this, Prince Charming, but you too suffer from an illness.”

That was preposterous. A scoff left him, and he shook her head. “Nonsense.”

“It’s all right to be scared about it. Unsure or even confused. This is perfectly reasonable.”

“Normal? I am a prince. I don’t have problems that require a shrink...or whatever it is you really are, Dr. Dour. Beyond that I’m perfect as is.”

“Just...give it a thought?” She purposed, “Narcissist Personality Disorder, is nothing you need worry about. It can be treated, albeit slow going. Might even make you a little happier.”

No dignified response would leave his lips—not that they could because he’d turned away from her and clutched the knob in his hand. Narcissist Personality Disorder. What kind of malarkey is that? He didn’t need help. He was Darren Charming! He was the embodiment of perfect, the one all the girls were crazy about. He was going to be king—He sounded narcissistic.