

## Bella and the Beast

### Chapter 1

Tops of trees are great lookout spots, but only if you remembered to relieve yourself before climbing up to the highest weight-bearing branch of the tallest tree in an ancient forest.

Bella Mae peered over the fortress walls, trying to gain a glimpse of the castle within. She hoped to find out what she needed to know, then scurry back down to the ground and blessed relief as quickly as possible.

Nothing. That's what she saw. Bleak grey stone piled on top of bleak grey stone, topped with wrought iron pinnacles and dark shale made darker with age and gathering night. Black squares were all that told her windows existed. Of the grounds, she could see nothing.

Her efforts had been useless.

She made record time back to the ground, not that anyone was there to count the moments for her.

As she prepared for a night in the desolate wilderness, she reflected on her own foolishness in undertaking such a challenge.

Why did she think herself capable?

She allowed herself no fire that night, as she was too near whatever enemy waited within the big stone structure blanking out half the night stars. Instead she wrapped herself in her bear hide and hunkered down into the hollowed out earth shelter she'd built earlier in the day, and tried to sleep.

Her journey had begun three weeks before, with the request of an old man who'd come knocking at her door. He'd regaled her with a tale of woe about his youngest son, an impossibly long journey, and an evil spell.

The old man's dialect was strange, and spoken with a thickness to his words that made it hard for Bella to understand. But the bright gold he offered made his meaning as clear as she needed it to be.

He needed a rescue, so he'd come to her...Bella Mae, the best hired warrior in the Seven Kingdoms.

If she'd known the mission would be this impossible she'd have given him his gold back, forfeiting the second half promised upon the son's return, and never looked back despite the fact that she'd be able to live off that amount of gold for at least a full cycle. Well, maybe she'd have taken one or two coins for the trouble of listening to the man's sob story, but that would have been only a fair payment.

But no, she'd taken his coins, endured his teary gratitude, his pledges of eternal servitude, and started out two days later, Diablo, her trusted horse, as her only companion.

The crude map the old man provided had apparently been drawn by a half-blind, fully crazed ancient explorer who'd only heard rumors of the castle the old man swore was his son's prison.

She'd followed that map for three weeks until she'd become hopelessly lost, then finally, late on the last day before she was going to turn around in defeat, she'd come upon the imposing structure reaching into the sky from out of nowhere.

Why such a massive fortress would have been built so far from any city or village, she could not tell. She walked twice around the entire thing, the stone curtain wall, complete with rampart and postern, interrupted by flanking towers and topped by what she now knew was a parapet walk all the way around. The corner towers each rose highest, and a footbridge with two arched barbicans led over a broad moat on the north side. The keep rose high and intimidating, topped by a row of wrought iron pinnacles.

All of that meant she had no idea how to get inside. The drawbridge was up, and she saw no other way in.

Finally her mind wearied of turning the problem over and over, her eyes drifted shut, and she slept.

## Chapter 2

The next morning the sun rose just like every other day and found Bella Mae already up and puzzling over the question of how to gain entrance into the great castle. She walked its perimeter again, noting no convenient holes in the walls, no ladders placed special for her to climb. It was indeed an impenetrable fortress, except for the path leading to the drawbridge, and presumably a wrought iron portcullis, in no way willing to let her pass.

Still, the footbridge as her only viable option drew her. Perhaps she could pretend to be a weary traveler needing only a hot meal and a day's rest. Perhaps that was exactly how the old man's imprisoned son had gained entrance, and wound up being kept in this desolate place for the last two cycles.

She shook her head. The guards at the gate would most likely never believe a young woman in the woods traveling alone in these unexplored forests, even if she did wear warrior attire and ride an impressive war horse. They'd believe her to be some sort of witch, or perhaps a wood sprite intent on taking over their minds. She'd be immediately dispatched, and not in a gentle fashion, either.

So, there Bella stood holding the reins of her horse, at the end of the footbridge, looking through the stone barbicans at the wooden planks of the drawbridge. Something compelled her to take a closer look. The dust and pebbly dirt of the path crunched under her feet, and Diablo's hooves, as she made her way closer. Through the arches of the barbicans she went, noting that they still remained strong and true as if they'd just been recently cut from their original rock. No cracks or rubble, not even trailing vines grew up the sides, as if even the forest dared not encroach on anything belonging to this castle.

Finally she stopped at the end of the footbridge, looking across a moat between herself and the massive drawbridge. No one had challenged her so far, and she saw no way of alerting gatekeepers to a visitor's presence. Perhaps they typically made a watch and rang an internal alarm at someone's approach, but she'd heard nothing. Only the cry of the wild birds broke the silence of the morning around her.

Standing there staring at the giant keep to the right, the far corner tower on her left, and the giant drawbridge was getting her nowhere. She must find a way. She'd come too far to go back now without making some sort of diligent effort to rescue the young man.

Without hardly realizing she was doing so, Bella raised one hand and placed it against the stones of the rock parapet on her left. Much to her surprise, the entire thing shook at her touch. It shouldn't have. It should have remained stock still as any inanimate object would, ignoring her completely.

Instead she realized with a cry of alarm that the drawbridge was lowering. Backing quickly, she watched it slowly lower until it met her at the end of the footbridge. The portcullis over the entrance to the castle was lowered, standing with imposing steadfastness against her hope, but why would the drawbridge lower if she wasn't being invited inside?

She then did the only thing left to her to do, she crossed the drawbridge and stood silent before the iron bars of the portcullis. Shrugging her shoulders, she grabbed one of the iron bars and was rewarded with it shaking as well. This time she wasn't as surprised when the iron gate began slowly rising, hidden gears protesting loudly, the chain pulling it all grinding on its pulley. The sharp teeth-like ends of the bars of the portcullis made her shudder as they passed by her face.

She did not move until the portcullis had reached its highest point and stopped. Diablo was not small, but she could have easily stood upon his back and passed underneath the iron spears with considerable room to spare.

Knowing full well that this unchallenged entrance was very suspicious, she still walked in with head up, stepping confidently. Diablo felt her assurance and stepped high, tossing his regal head, black mane flying in the breeze.

The great courtyard lay deserted, bare of even weeds as if it had been swept clear every day. Yet she heard not a sound of any other human movement. Who had raised the portcullis? Who had lowered the drawbridge? The guardhouse to her right was empty, though she should have been questioned as to her intentions by now.

### Chapter 3

A massive castle lay before her, stables and other outbuildings scattered around the courtyard, though all was silent. Not even a butterfly flitted past.

Diablo shook his head and blew loudly, his nostrils distended as he peered over Bella's shoulder. He was a loyal horse, but his unease had increased with each step, and Bella was not at all sure that he wasn't going to bolt at the first sudden sound. She took her bedroll and pack off her saddle, not wanting to lose it if he did run, then released the reins, letting Diablo know he was free to roam in the immediate area.

He normally would have dropped his head and begun the ever important search for anything to graze upon, but this time he stood still, four feet planted wide, not trembling for he was brave, but every sense obviously on high alert. Bella could only continue without him, for bringing the beast into a Great Hall would only cause more chaos than even she hoped to create.

Taking a deep breath, drawing her courage about her like a shroud, she walked up to the massive doors of the hall and raised her hand to the iron handle. Suddenly she realized the doors stood partly open already. A stab of alarm shot through her, she knew this was more than coincidence. It had to be – perhaps magic, or some other sort of trickery to get her to think that she was in a safe place, a place of friends when she knew she had none.

However, better to face a trap head-on, knowing it's a trap, than to be paralyzed with fear and wind up giving up the mission from sheer cowardice. A trap sprung can no longer harm, and she'd sprung many a trap in her day.

Ten paces into the dark space, the wooden doors to the courtyard creaked loudly and swung shut with a resounding boom. No matter how she tugged, the doors would not open again. She heard Diablo's frantic neigh outside, his hooves pounding the dirt outside to no avail. There was no helping it. She couldn't go outside to him now, and he knew it. Perhaps he would go back to the forest through the gate, but more likely he'd stand in the courtyard and wait for her. Hopefully there was a back door to this place, and it would provide a way out.

She turned back towards the now-darkened Hall, a sense of massive space around her growing. The tall, arched windows above let in a weak light, and until her eyes became used to it, she could hardly see more than five paces on all sides. Gradually her eyes accepted the lower light source and she could make out a large fireplace taking up the entirety of the western wall, a grand sweeping staircase dominating the eastern wall. A raised dais along the southern edge of the great room stood out as the focal point, the place where a leader could intimidate any who dared enter his presence. Now though, the place was empty, the long table in front of the dais empty and dusty, the great fireplace cold and abandoned.

An arched opening led off from behind the dais, probably a private room for whatever great personage used to hold court here.

Above the dais, accessed by the grand staircase, was a balcony, bounded by a wrought iron balustrade. Several doors were visible on the opposite wall, and the balcony led off into another dark space, probably winding up and back into the farther reaches of the castle towers and turrets.

Bella Mae had no desire to explore those dark spaces. Fear was not a hindrance for her, but she knew if the man were a prisoner here somewhere, her energies would be better spent first trying to find the dungeon. The old man had told her the son's name – Cenek, she thought, or something similar. The name was as strange to her ears as the old man's speech had been. She'd need to start thinking of him as a name, a person rather than just the old man's son.

As she mused, Bella first made a torch for herself. Always carrying the necessary tools for making fire, she soon had a roaring one in the great arched fireplace, and could light one of the torches ensconced in the walls.

Carrying her new light, she turned from the Great Hall to an arched doorway leading into the northeast tower. One flight of stairs led down, another up. She went down first.

## Chapter 4

To the left stretched a great kitchen, with storage rooms, pantry and cellar leading off it from the other side of the large space. The fireplace from above continued here below to provide cooking space for the grand feasts that surely must have happened at some time here.

Her torch lit her way enough to pick her way through the room, around tables and counters, cupboards and chairs. Surely the entrance to the dungeon was not through the kitchen though.

She went back to the tower stairs, up to the main floor, and cautiously explored the rest of the castle. Room after room proved to be empty of all life, dusty and dank, though no cobwebs were in sight, oddly. She heard no scurrying rodent sounds, either. Everything was eerily silent and still, until she came to the large room behind the raised dais in the Great Hall.

This room was different. Dust seemed to have fled the room. The bed's trappings hung loose and carefree, as clean as if they'd been newly washed and hung. Grey light from the two narrow windows on the wall opposite the bed made the torch she still carried cast greater shadows, the corners of the room becoming weird and distorted. Bella placed her torch in one of the sconces near the door, and searched the room, trying to find the reason for it being set apart from the rest of the castle.

A wardrobe sat flush against the eastern wall of the room, empty but clean. The western wall of the room was the rounded outer edge of a corner tower of the castle, and a little door sat right in the middle of that curved wall. She didn't open that door though. It could wait for just a bit.

How inviting the bed looked suddenly. It had been more than a fortnight since she'd slept in her bed, which was nowhere near as nice as this one. The more she thought about it, the more a quick rest seemed to appeal, the more it seemed absolutely necessary. Perhaps a short time sleeping would not hurt. She'd found no other soul in the whole place, so if her journey had been for naught, she may as well take advantage of the one luxury she'd found in all this.

She sat on the bed, bounced a little, and found it quite as comfortable as it looked. Lying down was like floating on a cloud, and within moments she was asleep.

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She woke with a start. All was pitch black in the room, and for several moments she couldn't remember where she was. This had never happened to her before, for no matter how far she traveled, she had always awakened with perfect clarity, always aware of her surroundings.

The feel of the soft bedding brought her back to her senses.

Suddenly she realized there were sounds coming from the Great Hall outside the room she was in. Laughter, conversation loud enough to be heard, but not loud enough to understand any real words, and light dancing around the edges of the closed door – all came from the previously abandoned Hall.

Softly, she crept to the door, trying to peer through the crack. All she could see was bright yellow light from flickering torches in the wall sconces, and shadows dancing about like tiny wild pixies.

Nothing distinct. It was all quite frustrating. She didn't dare fling the door open for fear of what could wait out there for her. But she also didn't dare stay in that room, as it was obviously part of a royal chamber. Surely any nobility that held court here would not appreciate some strange traveler hiding out in his bedroom.

Then suddenly, as the sleep fell from her mind, Bella remembered the little door in the rounded western wall.

Quickly crossing to the edge of the room, she felt her way along the wall until she found the little door. She flung it open, meeting only more blackness. She was able to see only a few inches thanks to the dim light shed between the cracks in the door, but it was enough to see that there was a floor beyond the door. She ventured inside, hands flung out in front of her, until she felt a staircase. Up she went, up and up, until she came to another door at the top. This one also showed the lights from the Great Hall, though the noises coming now sounded farther away and below.

Cautiously she opened this door as well, inching out onto the balcony that overlooked the dais. The sounds from the revelers continued in the room below, the light ebbed and flowed like torches had been lit in every sconce, she could even feel the heat from a raging fire in the fireplace. But she could see none of it.

Step by step, she edged closer to the balcony rail, and still she saw nothing. The wall sconces that should hold torches remained barren – yet light was all around. Sounds of a roaring fire came from beneath the mantle – yet she could see nothing burning. The great table below became visible – yet no one was there. As she continued to stare, she realized that while there was no one seated around it, the table itself was piled high with food of all sorts now, whereas before it had been as barren as everything else.

Her stomach suddenly grumbled loudly. She hadn't had a meal such as that in ages, if ever; certainly not since she'd begun this foolhardy quest. Still, her goal was to find this Cenek – if he was even here, and alive, both of which she was beginning to doubt.



## Chapter 5

Bella stood at the balcony rail, listening to the noise from a crowd that wasn't at the tables, seeing light from torches that weren't on the walls, and feeling heat from a fire that didn't exist.

Before she even realized it, she was standing at the head of the staircase going back down into the Great Hall – this time in full view of the empty room. Then she saw it...the room wasn't completely empty.

Sitting in the biggest chair, at the very center of the great table on the raised dais, was a giant white wolf. Food was flying everywhere as he shoved it into his mouth. The entire table in front of him was a mess, and Bella could only stare at the spectacle. The impossible spectacle.

She stood stock still, hoping the great beast would not see her, but there was no way he could miss her. Her position halfway down the stairs as much as guaranteed it. Only then did she notice that she'd walked partway downstairs, leaving herself in full view of the beast if he only turned his head.

As he devoured all the food before him on the table, she studied his form. A great hulking creature with shaggy white fur, he sat on his haunches in the chair like a man, shoveling food into his great jaws with his two front paws. Though when she looked closer, those paws were longer, more hand-like than a normal wolf. His eyes were also larger, and a strange green color that were so bright she wondered if they glowed on their own, or if the odd light coming from nonexistent torches was lending them their strange shine.

Suddenly he stopped, clamped his jaw shut around the half-chewed bone of some large bird, and turned his head toward Bella. His eyes glowed even brighter as he stared at her, then narrowed. In one fluid motion he rose, shoving the heavy chair back as if it were a mere child's stool. Falling onto all four feet, he tossed the bone aside with a shake of his head. It landed with a clatter under the table, but he did not take his eyes off Bella.

Even on all fours like a regular wolf, he towered taller than Bella. She knew she should run, should feel petrified. Perhaps she was so frightened that she had grown numb. She wanted to draw the sword from her scabbard on her back, or the dagger from the holster at her side, or the throwing knives from their hiding places under her upper arms, or any of the other weapons hidden on her person, but couldn't seem to move to do so.

Her stomach grumbled again, apparently the only part of her body still functioning. A low growl rumbled from his throat as he took one step toward her, then another, his wolfy lips curled up into a menacing snarl.

Finally her body did what she told it to and she took a step back, crouching low. One flick of her wrist and a throwing knife appeared in her hand. She drew it back and let it fly, her movements quick and practiced. The wolf didn't even see it coming as the blade flew straight and true, sinking deep into the creature's chest.

He let out a great roar of pain and anger, shaking his head and stumbling forward. One of his great paws reached out to slash the air in front of her face, but she ducked and rolled out of reach. He still came for her in one great bounding leap, the knife staying buried in his flesh. She flicked her other wrist and a tiny bow

appeared, already fitted out with an arrow. Aiming more with instinct than with her eyes, Bella shot the small but powerful arrow directly between the wolf's eyes this time. It sank into his forehead, exactly where she'd intended, and the great beast reared up, then fell down dead in a heap at her feet.

She stood over its body for a moment, just to make sure the job had really been completed.

She'd half thought the disembodied sounds of party-goers would have disappeared, as well as the torch light and fire, but all remained the same.

The food, what the wolf hadn't touched, was also still on the tables, its smells tempting to Bella as she now was able to focus on how hungry she was. She wondered, of course, if eating such food would leave her enchanted somehow, changed into something different, like this wolf had become. Despite her fears, she couldn't stop herself from approaching the heavily laden tables.

Reaching the table on the floor, the one the wolf had not been seated at, she grabbed the nearest plate and began piling it high. No bells of alarm clanged, the great hairy beast did not rise from the dead with a snarl and leap at her, and the food did not vanish at her touch. All of which she was extremely thankful for, as she really was terribly hungry.

Much of what she found was unidentifiable to her, but it smelled wonderful, and tasted even better.

## Chapter 6

Cenek was a man who liked to talk, odd for an explorer who spent much of his time alone. For as dearly as he loved to converse with his fellow man, he felt the need to see over the next mountain top, to explore beyond the bend of the next road, to take the fork that looked less traveled just to see if he could discover something no one else had ever seen before – or at least hadn't seen in a very long time indeed.

That's why the legend of the Forbidden Fortress had so intrigued him, calling him from his aging father, from the comforts of their cottage by the sea, driving him into the Wiley Wilderness. The way had been long and treacherous, he had spent so much time wandering in the forest that he was sure he had become forever lost and would never see home again. Until the day he'd stumbled upon the great fortress rising into the air. It was unmistakable. This was the very castle he had been looking for.

At first he hadn't gone inside, bedding down in the forest near the rampart and being satisfied with studying the stones in the walls. This soon grew tiresome though, and Cenek could only think of getting inside. He'd assumed the task would be impossible, so imagine his surprise when the drawbridge fell open to him, and the portcullis rose without even a single challenge.

He didn't remember much after that anymore, it was all so fuzzy.

Suffice it to say that since that fateful day he'd been locked in the castle tower, tied by a chain to a large metal ring fastened to the far wall of the round room.

He knew the moment she stepped in to the castle, though he didn't know who she was or why she was there or where she'd come from. She was different than the others. Her fear smelled different, left a different taste in his mouth. It wasn't the fear of utter panic, but a focused one. Not one that would leave her without her senses, but more than likely one that would make her even more deadly. She wielded it like a weapon in front of her instead of allowing it to push her from behind, like most fear does.

He hoped she would eventually find him, though this would be an incredibly difficult task. Perhaps she was the one who would succeed. He could only pray.

## Chapter 7

She ate until full, being sure to remember her manners as the sight of the wolf so voraciously attacking what was in front of him had been sobering indeed. Once done, she looked around to see the wolf, and much to her surprise found his body gone! He had not moved, and there was no one in the castle to have come and dragged the body away. Plus she would have noticed such a commotion. She had no idea what sort of enchantment could be at work here. The wolf could not have gotten into, and out of, the castle on his own, and where had all that food come from?

Suddenly she had the distinct urge to get herself out of that castle. Moving as quickly as she could, Bella headed to the front doors – only they weren't there. Stopping short before she ran headlong into the wall, Bella could only stare at the bare stone that should have been wooden door planks. She put her hands on the stones and felt their hard, gritty surface. Craning her neck back, she looked up and up at the tall, narrow arched windows above. There was no way she could reach that high.

Then in the shadows of a far corner a new door appeared. She eagerly reached for its handle, only to have the entire thing disappear before she touched it. With a growing panic in her chest she turned again to scan the Great Hall. Heading for the stairs, she raised a foot to ascend, only to have it plop down on the stone floor again, no stairs in sight.

As she wandered, the floor bucked and rolled, marbled walkways twisted and turned, then disappeared right before her eyes. She ran through halls that hadn't been there before, passing windows that winked in and out of existence. Light played across stone in front of her, and then was cut off like a giant hand had passed in front of the sun. Time must have passed but Bella had no understanding of how long it had been since her strange ordeal began.

The only things in their proper places were the Great Hall with its raised dais, tables and chair in front of it, and the door to the little room behind. Nothing else was where it had been before. All of this confusion was exhausting, but she dare not lie down to rest.

Worse yet, Bella was terrified.

She'd rarely been afraid her entire life, so for her this was uncharted territory. She had no way to combat it, no opponent to fight. Her daggers made no dent in the delusions, and her bow and arrows were useless.

Finally, exhausted and distraught, Bella found herself before the little door that had led her to the passageway from the dais room to the second floor. The room spun, and she wasn't even sure how she'd made it in there in the first place. Something compelled her to open the passageway again though, and she was too weary to question the compulsion.

Stepping inside the passageway, suddenly everything grew quiet. The knot of apprehension in her gut loosened, she could breathe again, and the walls didn't expand and contract like a great set of lungs. Such peace she found in the tunnel that she sank to the cool floor and closed her eyes. A small smile found her lips, and her eyes closed, finding rest in the dark.

## Chapter 8

Bella woke with a start, banging her head on the cold stone wall behind her. Everything was still pitch black around her, but somehow it felt different. She suspected she had been asleep for several hours, but she had no real way of knowing until she left the secret passage.

Swiftly she made her way up the stairs to the second floor again, hoping to start, and finish, her search.

One sweep of the castle to find the elusive Cenek, and then she was gone from this strange place forever, with or without him. Part of her wished she could just give up, but another bigger part of herself had seen the attempts of the castle itself to foil her attempted rescue as a challenge – and she could not back down from a challenge easily.

She emerged from the secret passage to find the castle as solid and unmoving as it had been the day before when she'd first arrived. Had it only been one day?

Having no idea how long this peace would reign, Bella began her search in earnest. Room after room proved empty except for dust, until finally she came to another stone staircase leading up to a third floor.

Following it around and up into new darkness, Bella felt a sudden pull somewhere in the region of her heart. That had never happened before, but the unusual seemed to be the normal for this castle.

The rooms on that floor were as dusty and empty as all the others, until she came to the far northwest corner, hidden around a bend in the hall. There she stopped, for before her rose a set of double doors unlike any she'd seen before.

The closer she came, the more she felt drawn to those doors. Tall and solid, they were formed from a white wood that seemed to glow on its own. Strange carvings and symbols surrounded the edges, but the strangest of all was the large, ornate glass tree embedded directly into the doors.

Formed with thin, multi-colored glass, its spreading branches and leaves intrigued her. Tiny slivers of black and brown glass formed the thin trunk and wispy branches, while larger wedges and triangles of red, orange, blue, gold, purple, and green formed spots of leaves or fruit. The glass tree spread over both doors, floor to ceiling, and Bella wanted to stare at it for hours.

When she was close enough to touch it, Bella realized the glass glowed and shimmered, pulsing as if alive, making it seem to sway in a gentle, invisible breeze.

Knowing it couldn't possibly be that easy, Bella reached out and touched the wood, feeling the cool of the stained glass and the warmth of the white wood under her fingertips. She stepped back in shock as the doors immediately and silently swung inward and open in front of her.

Just like the drawbridge had.

Just like the portcullis, and just like the outer castle door.

Before her was a great room, high beamed ceiling, tall arched windows following the rounded curve of the north tower. Ornate sconces punctuated the spaces between the windows, and held tall candles ready for a flame. Sunlight streamed through the windows in great beams, illuminating a riot of color in the bright mosaic tiles of the floor.

More than anything else though, her attention was drawn to a lone figure sitting in the middle of the room, a thick black chain attached to his ankle by a heavy clamp. The chain was bolted to an iron ring on the wall opposite the doors. The man looked like he belonged in this room, but the heavy chain looked out of place.

He kept his head down as he sat crumpled on pillows, unmoving so Bella wondered if he were actually alive.

Dark hair, a thin face, slightly pinched nose, but a strong square jaw...he was handsome, but not astoundingly so. He wore the simple brown leather jerkin, over a white shirt, and dark leather trousers of an explorer.

She took one step into the room, hand on her sword, and said, "Cenek I presume?"

Only then did he raise his head, staring at her with dark brown eyes full of confusion. Sitting up he nodded, then raised a hand to his eyes as if trying to rub the apparition that was surely Bella away from his mind.

"Yes, I'm Cenek, but how do you know my name?" He shook his head before she could answer. "No, it doesn't matter. You're probably no more real than the others have been. Doesn't matter – even if you were real you'd be stuck here, too. I thought at first you could save me – but no. Surely it is hopeless. . ."

Bella frowned, a spear of dread lancing her insides. Escape couldn't be impossible. She'd come too far, seen too much, to be defeated now. There must be a way out.

Without another word to the man, Bella circled the room, studying the walls, searching the view out each window, and even peering up into the massive fireplace. Then she examined the iron ring holding the chain that kept Cenek where he was.

"It's no use. Don't you think I've looked as well?" he said. "There's no way to unchain me. You may as well try to escape on your own." Then he sighed deeply. "If that's even possible."

His foul mood was affecting Bella, and she scowled.

"Aren't you even going to ask my name? How I came to be here? Why I'm looking for you?"

His dark gaze met hers, and they both stopped.

## Chapter 9

Cenek looked at the girl long and hard, his eyes narrowed. She looked serious, red-brown hair pulled back into a no-nonsense ponytail, her clothes that of a warrior-for-hire, very unusual for a woman. Still, despite the scowl, the clothing which did nothing to flatter her, the glint of metal daggers and swords hidden about her person, there was something very feminine about her.

She hadn't even told him her name, yet she seemed familiar, an ease which could be because she acted as if she knew him already. Still, the hope within him had died long ago. . . or so he thought.

"Fine, what's your name?" The lady looked at him, startled as if she'd forgotten that she'd wondered why he hadn't yet asked.

Then she remembered and a light of amusement glinted in her eyes. "Bella, that's my name. Though why my mother chose such a winsome name for one such as myself I'll never know."

Cenek believed he knew. Her red hair, caught in one long braid thrown over her shoulder, gleamed with multi-toned gold and honey streaks in the beams of sunlight streaming through the window behind her. Blue eyes searched the space before her, making him hope she wasn't merely an apparition created by his own mind. She had a face and form that reminded him of the legends of fairies and pixies. Seemingly dainty and fine, yet a hint of inner steel that he would most likely choose not to challenge.

He watched as Bella studied the thick iron ring in the stone wall of his room. "What's the use? There's no way you can break such a thing. I don't believe the sword has been forged that will free me of this chain." Cenek knew his voice sounded harsh and hopeless, but that was how he believed.

Bella straightened and looked him straight in the eyes again. The peace shone from her eyes suddenly made him wish his words weren't quite so true. He felt the little niggling rise of hope, and did what he could to tamp it down. It would do him no good to let his hopes rise after all this time in this impossible prison.

Instead of continuing her futile attempts with the chain, she walked to his side and lowered herself to the floor.

"Tell me your story, Cenek," she said.

He opened his mouth to answer her, then shut it slowly as he realized he had no answer. His mind was filled with only gray images, shadows that he didn't recognize, blank spaces he couldn't see beyond. Then one image from what seemed like forever ago stepped out from among the others.

"Father," he murmured.

Bella's brow crinkled in concern. "Yes, your father is the one who came to me for help. He is afraid for you, you know." She searched his face, as if trying to find the answers she needed there.

Cenek shook his head. "Surely my father has forgotten all about me. He hasn't heard from me in so long, surely he believes me to be dead. How long has it been? How many years?"

Her hand reached out and touched his shoulder. Cenek wasn't sure she even realized she had moved, as earnestness shone from her face. "No Cenek, I'm not sure how long it must have felt to you, but you've only been gone two cycles. Your father has not given up hope. His plea to me for help was so overwrought that I agreed to come just to placate him. I thought surely it was a fool's errand, but he paid me well. Now I wonder if that gold was all he had. Even if many years had passed, I'm sure that a father like yours would have waited and hoped for the rest of his life."

Bella's brow wrinkled again. "And to think that I regretted coming at first, sure that the old man was crazed with grief, or had surely been given false hope." She shook him gently by the shoulder, still gripping it, as if unwilling to break their connection now that it had been made.

"You must not give up, Cenek, for your father has not given up on you. Even after all this time since my search began, I'm sure of the fact that your father waits for you."



## Chapter 10

Bella watched the man before her, seeing a tiny glimmer of hope flame to life in his eyes. She flinched only once at fanning that flame, wondering if she were offering a hope of something she couldn't possibly give him – his freedom.

Yet something made her stay. She sat near Cenek and told him about his father's visit to her, how he had found her, what he had looked like. She was heartened to see Cenek rouse enough to ask after his father's health, and even to give her hints of his experiences in the fortress.

He told her of the days he'd spent there, light from the windows flashing over the colors on the floor, and deep dark nights where all he could see were stars in the squares of night sky visible from three sides of the tower. He had eventually grown tired of staring out those windows, seeing nothing but never-ending forest.

He didn't tell her what he ate or drank, how he could seemingly live here with no sustenance, as no other being besides the wolf seemed to roam the halls. And surely the wolf wasn't bringing food to the man.

Bella was sure that his boredom with the local scenery was the only reason his eyes tracked her everywhere she went. In fact, he seemed to drink in the sight of her like a thirsty man who'd found an oasis in a desert.

All through the day, Bella pulled and pushed at the iron ring, or clanged away at the chain with her sword until she thought it would surely break.

Finally, exhausted, she sat down next to the great doors and stared at the glass tree blooming before them.

"It looks so peaceful," she said, sighing.

Cenek nodded. "It's all a lie, of course. The tree gives off such peace, yet there is nothing but turmoil all around."

Bella let his words wash over her. She turned them over and over, sure there was a message of some sort in them, but unable to figure it out right then. Instead she sat and stared at the colorful glass pieces, watching how the changing sunlight made the colors shift and fade, glow and darken in its turn.

How could something be so brilliant and foreboding all at once?

Exhausted from her adventuring, her eyelids grew heavy, and finally, Bella slept.

.....

She woke with a start, immediately aware that hours had passed. All was dark, she couldn't even see a hand in front of her face. The air around her was cool, not even the breath of a breeze moved anywhere, but there was sound.

With a flush of dread heating her face she realized she could hear the same mealtime revelers from the night before. It was happening again, though how she couldn't tell. She had hoped beyond reason that by killing the wolf she'd broken whatever spell existed in this strange fortress, that she'd somehow be able to break Cenek's chain and lead him to freedom.

But here she sat somewhere in the castle hearing the rumble-mumble of unseen diners once again.

Then with another start she realized she couldn't possibly be sitting in the great upper room with Cenek anymore. The space around her felt too closed in, the air just a bit damp, the surface too soft to be a marble floor. She was in the dais room again, on the bed.

Arms outstretched, she reached out to find the bed's curtains had been drawn around her. Rather alarming as she knew she hadn't pulled them closed – not even the night before when she'd first fallen asleep there.

Pushing them aside, she saw the tall rectangle of light that outlined the door to the Great Hall, telling her the phantom torches had also been lit, just like before.

Perhaps the ghosts of revelers past haunted this place, but surely the great beast could not have resurrected, so without much further thought she shoved the door open and stepped onto the dais overlooking the tables laden with food.

Impossibly the gleaming white fur of the great beast caught her eye as the wolf turned to stare at her. He was too close and far too alive for comfort. She had burst out upon him unaware, but merely feet away. Staggering back, she tried to retreat and regroup in the room behind her, but he locked her in his glowing green gaze and held fast.

The wolf was not going to back down.

Stopping her retreat, she planted her feet, pulled her sword and held the shining point directly at the creature's heart. He let out a growl and snarled, his lips peeling back to show great white fangs. Food stuck to his chest hairs and his claws curled around great fistfuls of meat, until he threw it down and tramped through it. He leaped at her, teeth flashing, claws clattering against the stone floor.

Bella swung the sword with all her might and was satisfied to see her blade leave a mark on the beast's shoulder. Shoving thoughts of wonder at his survival, she swung again, making the wolf take a step back.

He circled to the right. She swung as he tried to advance. The wolf saw an opening and swiped with his great paw. She felt the searing pain of the talon's damage on her bare arm.

He circled to the left. She swung but smaller this time, not leaving an opening. The beast charged at her, spittle flying now, and she lunged in close. Her sword caught him in the chest.

The beast's motion plunged him forward, the sword went deeper. His bulky form shoved her backwards until she lay on the floor, her head smarting from the pounding it took as she slammed into the stones.

She held her sword steady though, and felt the wolf shudder as it died, this time she hoped for good.

## Chapter 11

Once again Bella found herself staring at the hulk of the wolf's dead body lying on the floor while she ate the food he'd abandoned moments before. The wisdom of eating such food wasn't at all sure to her, but it was all there was, and she was starving. Better to eat and find it enchanted than to starve when the food was perfectly harmless.

For a brief second she wondered if her logic were perfectly formed in this matter or not, then shrugged as she continued the feast. Perhaps Cenek would like some of the food too. She gathered up some bits that were easily carried and turned toward the wide staircase once again.

It was gone. Instead rose a tower of rubble. The stairs were there, but in such a pile of broken stone and rock that there was no way she could climb them. Then everything shifted, the floor rose up to meet her, the arched windows wove a pattern before her eyes, the walls danced a little jig. Bella was forced to sit even as she looked with dismay at the balcony far overhead. Strange shadows crept along its expanse, doors opened and shut, the black of night had an ebb and flow as if it were alive.

The whole thing was too terrifying to deal with, too strange, and Bella wished she could solve the riddle of the castle once and for all. Somehow realizing the only quiet space she'd found so far had been the secret passageway, Bella fought her way back into the dais room and shut herself back into the little tunnel leading up to the next floor.

She slid down to the stones at her feet until she sat, back up against the wall, staring into blackness, muscles crying out against the strain of the last two days. She slept, but her sleep was not restful.

Once she opened her eyes again, knowing it was dawn, she ran straight up to the rooms above, hoping Cenek's glass tree and door was still there.

It was. All in the room was as she had left it, though this time Cenek knew who she was.

.....

For five more days this went on. Each night Bella found a new way to kill the wolf. Once with all three of her daggers straight to his heart, yet each time she found the wolf at the table the next evening after she left Cenek's tower room.

Those days she spent with Cenek though were among the strangest and most wondrous she'd ever known. They talked of his travels. He had seen so many things. He talked of lands far away, people who spoke strange languages and at strange foods, the tales they told of odd and terrifying creatures. Then he spoke of his mother, how she'd died when he was but a schoolboy, and how he missed her gentle spirit and loving hand. He also spoke of his father, the man who had often been away on his boat, working for their livelihood, but all he'd known as a boy was that his father was often not there.

His mother's death had happened while his father was at sea, and the boy Cenek had been alone for nearly a fortnight before he returned. The father had tried to make it up to the son, but there had always been a rift afterward.

Bella's heart went out to Cenek, even though his tale of sorrow had been many years in the past. That had been at the end of the fifth day, and Bella found herself wishing she didn't have to leave the tower room. It had become her refuge from the bewilderment of the outside castle. Her entire world had shrunk to the size of that room.

But each night she knew she must leave, though she never remembered exiting the doors...never even opening them with the intent of leaving. On this the fifth night, Bella sat next to Cenek, as he huddled against the wall opposite the doors. His arm was around her shoulders, as if he were trying to keep her in the room, even as she felt herself drifting away in the first sleep of the evening.

## Chapter 12

Upon waking in the midst of that night, Bella sighed deeply. The phantom revelers were loud that this time, she could almost distinguish real conversations. Almost.

And she was sure the wolf would be seated at his customary spot, but her heart was not in the fight this time. She was so tired of the recurring fight. Surely he'd expect her this time. Surely he'd remember the girl wandering the castle. Surely he'd be better prepared.

She cocked her head, realizing something. He wasn't more prepared each night, though he wasn't nearly as surprised as he'd been that first time. The wolf's eyes glowed with an intelligence, and she was far past the point where she assumed him to be anything like a wild animal. The wolf was something else, something more which she couldn't yet explain.

There had to be a different way.

This night Bella made her way to the secret passage and the wide balcony overlooking the Great Hall. She was so weary of the struggle that instead of interrupting his meal, she sat and watched the wolf as he devoured the food. Peering at him through the balustrades, she did her best to stay hidden, though he had to suspect she was somewhere nearby. She'd never before failed to show up.

As she watched, he finished the food on the first table, and then leaped upon the second. His appetite was voracious, and much to her astonishment he finished off the food on that table as well. Then he stopped, dropped to all fours, raised his head and looked out the tallest arched window high above.

A full moon shone through, three stars flanking it, and the wolf threw back his head, opened his great jaws, and let out a wild and terrifying howl that seemed to go on forever.

When he was done, the room was silent. Torchlight still danced, the invisible fire still crackled, but the eerie invisible diners had ceased to make their sounds.

Bella's voice grumbled loudly. From her perch on the uppermost landing, she watched the wolf's ears twitch her direction, then his whole head turned her way. His glowing green eyes met hers, and he snarled. Bounding faster than she'd thought possible, he landed at the bottom of the stairs. Bella did not wait to see if he'd make it to the top in record time.

She ran.

Bella had never run from a fight before, and she reasoned that she wasn't really running from this one either. She was just trying a new tactic. What would happen if she avoided the beast all night? Or just let the beast kill her for a change?

She ran down the shadowy halls, hearing thuds and clacking nails from the wolf chasing behind her. He ran panting and growling, as if his appetite was still not sated. Just as he was about to reach her, Bella leaped over the balcony rail, landing on the solid table below, took a running jump onto the floor, and then through the Great Hall to the rooms beyond, where she hadn't yet explored.

Before she could gain much ground she heard the wolf leap down as she had, and she ran again.

Her breath came fast, her heart pumped wildly as she tried to keep going, the wolf only a few steps behind.

Was it a useless attempt to get out of killing the wolf again? Would leaving him alive do nothing more than add her to the throng of invisible eternal guests at the wolf's nightly meal table when he eventually caught her and killed her?

Bella's thoughts drove her to a desperate burst of energy, and she managed to duck into a room beyond, slamming the door in the wolf's face. She bolted it with a heavy wooden bar, then scanned the room she'd entered. It was dark, though a dim light from the full moon shone through more of those high arched windows far above her head. Shelves lined the walls, laden with thousands of dusty books – a scholar's dream come true. Surely Cenek would want to know of this place, if they ever escaped.

Surely in the library there could be a secret passage just like in the dais room. Hopefully its entrance wasn't triggered by too secretive a fashion.

Then she saw it, a doorway set into a small wall space between two bookshelves. It wasn't hidden, just set flush into the wall and unadorned so it didn't draw immediate attention.

Better to try that door than the one behind her. Even now the wolf was scratching and pounding on it. There was a chance he'd break the wooden bar holding it shut. He was quite the brute.

Bella ran for the plain door, pulling it open only long enough to hurry inside and pull it shut behind her.

Again she was plunged into complete darkness, this time the cold quiet peaceful sort of darkness she'd come to recognize as her refuge in this tiresome place.

Without knowing where she was going, Bella held out her hands and searched the new location. It was a hallway of sorts, the same old stone under her fingertips as before, and an empty space ahead of her. Knowing she was safe in the quiet dark place, she settled against the wall and waited for the night to be over.

## Chapter 13

Waking up hours later had become almost commonplace to her. She could hardly comprehend that it was only a few days since she'd entered the fortress. With the confidence that nothing would be different this time either, she approached the hallway where Cenek's door hid his room.

But this time something was different.

The white wolf stood in front of Cenek's door, his green gaze glowing as fiercely as ever. Bella crouched low as the wolf saw her, growling and snarling. He started to circle around her, hulking as if undecided how he would finish her off this time.

She had not even time to draw her sword or the beast would be upon her, but she quickly palmed both of her wrist daggers and let them fly. They hit their mark, but the wolf acted as if they were merely little pinpricks, hardly worthy of his notice.

Bella circled opposite the beast, searching her mind for any of her other weapons. They were all within reach, but could she bring them out before the animal struck? She doubted it.

Then suddenly she saw something else that was new – a heavy thick mace leaned against the wall next to the Glass Tree Door. She knew it hadn't been there before, but Bella was not going to question her good fortune from God now.

In one swift move she grabbed the sturdy handle of the mace and swung it up at the bottom of the wolf's jaw. His head snapped back and she heard him grunt in pain. She'd landed a solid, satisfying blow.

Not stopping to give him a chance to regain his footing, she swung the mace again, this time smashing the big metal ball into the wolf's side. He staggered, she swung again, and the wolf lay still. Taking her sword out, this time she cut off the wolf's head, hoping that would be the last of him that they'd see.

Trying not to stare, she stepped over the wolf's body to push Cenek's doors open.

There he stood, no doubt having heard the commotion in the hall, his hair looking wild as if he'd run his hands through it in agitation. The look of relief on his face upon seeing Bella alive made her heart race again as if she were still running through the halls from the beast.

Then his eyes were drawn down to the mace she'd picked up again on her way through the door. A light of hope dawned on his face, and she immediately got his meaning. Maybe the mace would provide a sufficient battering ram to finally break the chain once and for all.

She pounded as hard as she could, knowing the chain had held fast through all their efforts before.

Finally she uttered, "Please God...give me strength."

At that moment the chain cracked. The next blow opened the crack farther, and finally at the third blow the chain gave a mighty groan and fell apart.

Cenek was free!

He grabbed her hand and pulled.

"Come on, let's not waste any more time here."

Together the two ran out the door. Bella was relieved to see the wolf's body still lying headless on the floor. Down the stairs they went and to the front doors of the castle.

Cenek pulled at the door – but it didn't move.

“No, what's wrong?” Bella cried. This was the first time she'd been able to even approach the doors to the outside world, much less have a chance to pry them open. To find them locked was nearly more than she could bear.

Suddenly something slammed into the great wooden doors from the outside. Scratching and snarling came to their ears, and something hit it again, and again. The doors rattled with the force of the hits. Bella turned to Cenek, and he looked at her, all of his heart in his eyes.

Together they ran back the way they had come. Bella was terrified, but not surprised, to see that the wolf's body was now gone.

What was happening?



## Chapter 14

The rest of the day the two of them talked, wandering the halls of the castle, staring at the glass tree in the tower room door, searching the Great Hall and the environs beyond for another way out. Nowhere did they find another door to the outside, and when they returned to the main doors, they would shake again, the fearsome growling and roaring outside striking fear into both their hearts.

Still, things were different.

As they walked, they talked. Through fear they grew together, both trying to ignore despondency as it knocked loudly on the door of their hearts. That day seemed to stretch into weeks, though Bella was sure it had only been hours.

Long into the grey dusk and as the stars began peeking out from the sky above, they continued talking of things far and wide, past and present and things to come.

How they were able to talk of a future Bella didn't know. She only knew that if there was a future for her it was here, or wherever Cenek was, for now she knew she could no more escape without him than she could escape without her soul.

Sitting at the main table this time, in the Great Hall, Bella fell asleep again, this time propped up against his shoulder, his arm around her, his head leaning upon hers.

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Again she woke with a start, nearly falling off the chair. The invisible crowd was there again. The phantom fire crackled, the strange impossible torches illuminated the mysterious food spread upon the table once more.

It had all come back again. Nothing was changed.

Would it ever end?

A snarl behind her made her leap to her feet, sword immediately drawn from its sheath.

There the wolf stood, staring at her once more.

Only then did she realize that Cenek was nowhere in sight. He'd been right there at her side when she'd gone to sleep. Now he was gone.

Suddenly a great roar sounded, and Bella realized the sound was coming from her own mouth. The wolf stepped back in surprise, and Bella used the few seconds given her to strike the wolf once more.

This time he fell to the ground at her first blow, but his chest still rose and fell slowly. She had only knocked him out.

Quickly she turned and ran to the stairs, taking them two at a time to the second floor balcony overlooking the Great hall. There she stopped and turned to look once more on the strange sight that was now so familiar to her.

In a few moments the wolf grunted, then stood shakily to his four paws and shook himself. He looked around, but the food at the table was apparently too great a temptation, and he sat down at his customary spot and began to eat.

Then something came to her mind, something she hadn't thought of in many years. Her mother used to make a sound each night, a lilting tune that made the child-Bella want to sway and twirl at times, and at others made her eyes droop in pleasant relaxation. Her mother called it...singing...but since her mother had died Bella had never heard another person make such sounds.

Once Bella had asked her what the sounds meant. Her mother had shaken her head sadly and told her that in years gone by nearly everyone sang. It was a different sort of storytelling – one of joy, sadness, peace, love. She spoke of great singers who told many stories in song, and could bring their listeners to their knees with sadness, or lift them to the heights with great swelling joy and love.

That memory is what decided Bella's next step, for it was obvious that merely killing the beast was not going to win this battle. Something different must be done.

Bella stood at the top of the stairs where she'd first seen the amazing banquet in the Great Hall. Again the noise of hungry, unseen, revelers reached her ears, the flickering light of invisible torches danced on the walls, and the crackle of the great phantom-fire warmed the room.

The beast sat at his table, shoveling food into his maw as he had every night before. Bella closed her eyes and opened her mouth – willing herself to remember the lovely sounds of her mother's singing. What first came out sounded more like a croaking frog than a lullaby, though. Startled, Bella opened her eyes to see the beast stand, pushing his chair back against the wall so it bounced and then crashed onto its side.

He saw her, green eyes glowing as if to devour her.

Bella knew she must succeed or all was lost. She could not keep going on like this forever. Tonight she must either conquer the beast and live, or give in and never find her way out. This was her last chance.

Tilting her head up once more, staring at the windows high overhead and the little snippet of starry sky she could see out there, Bella tried again. Thinking of her mother's voice, but not only her voice, Bella thought of her mother's love. The joy she saw in those mother-eyes, the love that poured out whenever she looked at her daughter, the sense of peace that Bella had in those moments – all of it she let pour out of her mouth like a waterfall of sound.

And she sang.

Her tune wandered at first, until she settled upon the old melody that had seemed to be her mother's favorite. It rose and fell like an ocean wave, creating its own life in the air, finally filling her own being until she felt as if ...she were just a vessel being used to carry this song, as if someone else had put the song in her heart and she was only a tool. . . a vessel to carry an important message.

## Chapter 15

As the last note of her song hung in the air, she opened her eyes and looked around. The banquet noises had stopped. The eerie torch light did not flicker against the walls, and she shivered in the cold absence of the phantom fire in the great fireplace.

The wolf was still there, lying at the base of the stairs, but asleep again. It was a different sleep than when she'd knocked him senseless. This sleep left him sprawled like a pup, tongue lolling to one side, all four paws in the air. What an extraordinary sight.

She shuddered once at the thought that finally something was happening that hadn't happened before. She turned toward Cenek's room, his wellbeing never far from her mind anymore.

Rushing to the tower room, she was astounded to see the doors already flung wide open. Cenek stood in the middle of the room, the chain around his ankle looking as if it had shriveled and died.

Before, with the mace, she had destroyed the iron ring at the wall, but that was whole once again. Now the chain had shriveled up and come off his ankle, unlike anything she could have done on her own.

With a cry of joy and relief she launched herself into Cenek's open arms.

The two could only celebrate for a moment. Hand in hand they ran back down the stairs to the Great Hall. There they stopped before the hulking form of the white wolf.

Bella could not understand why Cenek stopped. She tugged on his hand, trying to get him to walk quietly forward, but instead he stood there. The wolf seemed to hold him captive even in its sleep.

Bella nearly despaired at that moment of ever leaving the castle again. Through all of this terrible adventure some part of her had always determined she would win in some way, but now, now she wasn't sure.

"Oh great God, please help my Cenek. Help us leave this great beast behind and go." She prayed with all the fervor of her mind that they would be saved.

Then the beast stirred.

"Cenek, we must go, now! Before it wakes again!" Bella whispered, frantic.

Yet Cenek stayed.

"Bella, there is something you must first know." Cenek looked up at her again, his brown eyes now filled with sorrow and hope and longing...and fear. "I'm the only one who can really conquer this beast. You must go out without me."

She shook her head, but at that very moment the white wolf awoke once more with a mighty roar. Cenek shoved Bella away and sprang between her and the animal. "Run Bella! Now!"

She ran, but only as far as the door that led outside. It was silent now, none of the snarling that had happened outside earlier. She reached out and shoved the doors opened – they did not open on their own as they had so many days before.

No matter how afraid she was though, she couldn't go any farther than the door way. She turned and watched a mighty battle between man and beast. Cenek

circled warily, the wolf moved with all the fluidity of a wild animal, head slung low, shoulders relaxed, tail sweeping behind. Yet suddenly it was as if she were watching a man warring with himself.

Finally Cenek charged, gripping the thing around its neck and holding on. The wolf whipped him around like a rag doll at first, and she was sure he'd lost the battle. Then he gained a foothold on the wall and shoved, toppling the beast over for just a moment. He vaulted from a crouch to the wolf's back, riding the beast like a horse. The wolf roared and lunged, unable to dislodge the man. Cenek flung him to the floor, against the tables, and crashed into the walls. The wolf rolled, crushing Cenek beneath him, but still he held on. Finally with a great wrench, Cenek pulled a long knife from his belt and buried it to the hilt between the beast's shoulder blades.

The wolf fell down at his feet, Cenek stood, and the castle began to tremble.

Once more, Bella ran.

In the castle yard stood her old friend Diablo, rearing and plunging as he was frantic to leave the castle grounds. She leaped upon his back and together they galloped through the open gates and arched castle entryways, into the forest beyond.

She pulled him up short, wanting to go back for Cenek, as Diablo's headlong rush had given her no chance to wait for him.

As she turned to look, the fortress began to rumble and shake as if being torn apart by an earthquake.

As she watched, tears streaming down her face, the fortress crumbled, stone by stone falling aside in great leaps and bounds, the rampart dissolving, the moat evaporating in a great hiss of steam.

She screamed Cenek's name as the last of the gray walls collapsed and she saw the castle walls in a heap inside.

Finally, after a final terrible rumble, everything was still again. Mountainous heaps of stone and wood lay all over the forest floor where the fortress had once reigned supreme.

Bella continued to wipe the constant stream of tears that would not stop falling from her eyes. Frantically, and hopelessly, she scabbled through the rocks, looking for even his body so she could bury him properly.

Then, just as her last glimmer of determination dissolved, she heard a great growl and groan, and a stone rolled away behind her. Surely the wolf hadn't survived.

Slowly turning around, she stood astounded as the dark eyes of Cenek looked back at her, holding her gaze as only he had ever been able to do.

With a cry of relief and joy and love, Bella leaped to him, wrapping her arms around his middle and holding on for dear life.

His arms came around her and he gripped her so she almost couldn't breathe, but she didn't care. He was alive. She didn't need to breathe on her own anymore.

## Chapter 16

Later, after they were well on their way out of the great wilderness, Cenek gradually told her everything he knew.

He had wandered into the forest looking for the fabled castle. He had never found it.

When she looked at him in astonishment and confusion, he shook his head and laughed sadly.

“I had lain down one night, determined to turn for home and my father the next morning, but instead, when I woke, that great fortress had risen around me...all in one night. I lay shackled in that room, just as you found me, unable to escape, unable to fully explain what had happened.

I knew the wolf existed, after awhile I'd even guessed that he was a part of me, a part I'd never wanted to acknowledge lived in me before. I was there for so long, only able to eat when the wolf ate in the strange banquet hall below. Only able to move about when the wolf was stalking the corridors of the castle. I saw through his eyes much of the time, even catching glimpses of you as you searched the rooms, or as you fought with him.” Cenek bowed his head in guilt at that declaration, and Bella reached over to grasp his hand. He smiled at her gratefully and continued the tale.

“All this time my mind had been only partly able to grasp the truth, but once the walls fell down everything cleared. All the confusion was taken away. I understand now. The chain holding me to the wall was of my own making...not by my hands, but by my heart.”

“But Cenek, how could you be searching for a fortress that didn't exist until you went looking for it?” Bella couldn't understand.

“I don't know – perhaps it's the forest itself that draws one in, preying on a person's darkness and creating a prison of their own making. Perhaps there's another fortress somewhere – someone else's prison – and I never found the one in the legend, but instead created my own.”

“I wonder how I came to find you – the exact person I was searching for then.”

“That, my dear, is the miracle. You found me. You forced me to feel again. You made me understand that I needed to kill the wolf myself, and you gave me the chance to do it by putting the wolf to sleep rather than killing him. The peace of his sleep gave me the strength to break the chain, and once I was out, I saw that I couldn't keep you bound in the castle. You needed to be free; I couldn't shackle you to my prison any longer.”

“Even if I wanted to stay?”

“Even if you wanted to stay.”

“But how did you know that killing the wolf wouldn't also kill yourself?”

“I didn't know. You were more important to me than my life – you *are* even now.”

Bella smiled, squeezed his hand, and wiped another tear from her eye, this time one of happiness unlike anything she'd known before.

“But how were you able to get the strength to kill that wolf? To kill the darkest part of your own self?”

“I remembered the tree, the glass tree on my door. It reminded me that the most fragile things in life are the dearest. And I could never let anything that dark touch the dearest thing to my heart.”

He looked at her and smiled again, this time with such peace and love shining from his face that she could not doubt his words.

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Cenek and Bella rode together for weeks through the Wiley Woods until finally they arrived back in his village. There came a joyous reunion with his father, and a simple wedding as well.

Cenek’s father was glad to have a daughter, as Bella came and lived there with them from then on.

No longer was she alone.

And no one ever again went in search of a Forbidden Fortress in that wilderness. Sometimes it’s better not to find what you’re looking for.