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TYME #2

DISENCHANTED

The Trials of Cinderella



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ELLA

WHILE her roommates dressed for Prince Dash's return to Coterie Prep, Ella Coach waited for her moment.

"Not like *that*." Dimity Gusset smacked her maid's hand away from her complicated upsweep of red hair. "That's last month's fashion. Skies, isn't it your job to know that?"

"If your girl isn't good, you should get a new one from Lady Trim's school," said Tiffany Farthingale, who applied a deep red stain to her lips while her own maid buttoned her clinging white dress up the back. "That's where Mother hired mine, and she's so current and clever."

"Father says I'm on the List for a fairy godparent from the Slipper," said Dimity with a sigh. "He's paid them an absolute fortune, so I *should* get my contract any day. Until then, I'll just have to put up with Miss Mediocrity here."

The maid plaited a tiny, perfect, gold-threaded braid and wound it into place around Dimity's tower of hair. The girl's plump fingers didn't stumble, but her blush told Ella all her feelings. Ella looked down at the woolen slipper she was knitting and started another row.

"I'm just so glad that Dash is back!" said Chemise Shantung, Ella's third roommate. "It's been so long, and there are so many rumors — do you really think he's bald?"

"I heard the witch cursed his hair off," said Tiffany. "Poor thing. He'll need comfort after all he's been through."

"You're dreaming if you think he wants your comfort," said Dimity. "You know he's Lavalier's."

Tiffany rubbed a bit of red stain off one front tooth. "They're not betrothed."

Dimity rolled her eyes. “Hurry up,” she said to her maid, who now knelt at her feet, buttoning up her high-heeled shoes. Dimity kicked at her, striking her fingers with a jewel-encrusted toe. The maid yelped in pain and cradled her hand against her chest.

Ella gripped her knitting needles with sudden force. “Button your own shoes,” she snapped.

Dimity swiveled on her stool and pinned her narrow green eyes on Ella. “*You* look like a slum that someone set on fire,” she said, raking her gaze over Ella’s unfettered curls, her homemade clothing, and her battered black fishing boots. “You’ll never get near the prince if you look homeless.”

“Perhaps that’s for the best,” said Tiffany, wincing as her maid plucked an errant hair from between her brows. “Dash is used to a certain quality of company.”

“The kind who can’t put her own shoes on?” Ella retorted.

Dimity smirked. “Buttoning shoes and tatting socks, or whatever you’re doing there, is servants’ work,” she said.

“Tatting is lace,” said Ella. “This here is knitting. Your whole gown’s covered in lace, and you don’t know the difference?”

Dimity and Tiffany exchanged glances, and then both of them laughed — little tinkling laughs that made Ella want to shove her knitting needles right up their noses.

The assembly bell tolled. A general squeal of excitement arose both within the room and outside it, and Ella unclenched her fists. She didn’t have to live with these people anymore. Chemise threw the door open. Ella’s roommates squeezed themselves into the crowd outside, and Tiffany’s maid slipped out through the servants’ door at the back of the chamber. Ella was left alone with Dimity’s maid, who still knelt by the vanity, clutching her kicked fingers, her face turned to the wall. Ella heard her snuffle.

“Is your hand all right?” Ella asked gently, kneeling beside her. “Can I help?”

The girl wouldn't look at Ella. "It's fine, Miss," she whispered.

"Call me Ella, hey? I'm no quint." Ella smiled, but the girl did not respond. "What's your name?"

The maid wiped her tearstained face and got up from the floor. "Excuse me, Miss," she mumbled. She curtsied and fled through the servants' door.

Ella looked down at her hands. Rough and worn. Funny how Dimity and her kind never missed that Ella was working class, but the servants couldn't see it. To them, Ella was just another rich quint they had to serve. They couldn't trust her, and she didn't blame them — but it left her nowhere, with no one to talk to.

She had to go home.

She grabbed her old knapsack from under her canopied bed, shoved her knitting into it, and slung it over her shoulder. She put her ear to the door and listened until she heard no more stragglers, and then she left the dormitory room and headed for the building's exit. She could catch the day's second coach to Salting if she hurried. All the school guards would be busy overseeing the prince's safety. Nobody would see her bolt.

She'd reached the top of the back stairwell when a loud rap behind her made her tense, and she turned. Mother Bertha, matron of the girls' dormitory, stood in the corridor, looking ominous, tiny and hunched though she was. "Make your way to the assembly," she croaked.

"Need the infirmary," Ella lied. "I'm going to retch."

"Don't give me any of your crass southern lip, Elegant Coach," said Mother Bertha. "Turn around and do your duty, or I will call a guard and have you dragged."

She would, too. She'd done it before.

Ella gave the stairs a longing glance, but for the moment she was beaten. With the tip of Bertha's cane against the small of her back, she proceeded to the welcome breakfast for Prince Dash.

❧ DASH ❧

CHARMING men broke hearts, and everybody knew it.

Nobody blamed them. It wasn't their fault. The Charming Curse had shackled them for seven generations, thanks to Great-Great-Great-Great-Grandfather Phillip Charming. One hundred and fifty years ago, Phillip had broken the heart of the witch Envearia, and she had sentenced him and all of his descendants to be unhappy in love. Under Envearia's curse, every generation of Charmings bore one son, and every son broke the heart of anyone who fell in love with him. Some Charming kings neglected their spouses; others were cruel, insincere, or unfaithful. Each drove his partner into misery, and for a century and a half there was nothing they could do about it.

But Envearia was dead now. The Charming Curse was broken. Prince Dash Charming was glad that it was broken. He'd wanted to be free. More than that, he'd wanted his mother to be free. And in a few hours, Queen Maud *would* be free — of his father, of the palace, of this city.

As long as nobody caught her.

Dash ran a hand over his shaved head as he searched for what to say to her now. She sat beside him in the royal carriage, her jeweled fingers twisting in her lap, and she stared out the window as the horses brought them through the silver gates of Coterie Preparatory School. C-Prep gleamed at the heart of the city of Quintessential, a vast collection of impressive stone buildings, its torches and windows alight against the pale dawn sky. It was famous, this place, for educating the monarchs of Blue and all of their advisors — and today it would gain new fame. Today, Queen Maud would vanish from these buildings.

The carriage drew near the dormitory, and Dash's mother began to bite her nails — a distinctly unqueenly habit that she rarely

indulged. She was afraid. She had a right to be. And Dash couldn't summon up a single word of comfort. He worked his jaw, but his throat was tight, and nothing would come.

"It's all right," his mother murmured, as though she could feel his distress. She stopped biting her fingernails and laid one cool hand on his. "It's a good plan."

Dash still wasn't sure. And since the plan was mostly his, if anything went wrong, he'd never forgive himself. "Maybe you *should* leave from the palace," he said for the hundredth time. These words came readily enough. Far easier to discuss strategy than emotion. "Our servants wouldn't stop you."

His mother shook her head. "They'd see me," she said. "They'd notice my direction, and your father would make them confess. Best that I slip away here, in the middle of the city, where I can be quickly lost from sight." She squared her shoulders. "It will work," she said. "Everyone is so mad to see *you* this morning that no one will pay attention to me. It's my best chance to go unnoticed. You were right about that."

Everyone *was* mad to see him. Dash swallowed hard. His classmates hadn't laid eyes on him since before Envearia had turned him to stone. Before the curse had been broken. He wasn't the same Prince Charming they all remembered, and he had no idea how they would respond to him now that he was just himself. Just Dash. No fancy speeches. No flattery.

"I'll keep their eyes on me," he managed, and he gripped his mother's hand. "You'll get away. I promise."

The carriage came to a halt in front of the boys' dormitory building. Footmen helped Queen Maud down to the pavement and Dash followed, his stomach in wretched, writhing knots. Every guard who worked at C-Prep stood in a great square around the dorm. His mother would need extraordinary luck to get past them. Extraordinary luck, an excellent disguise, and a little extra help.

He slipped his hand into the pocket of his satin breeches to make sure the Ubiquitous acorns were still there.

“Your Majesty. Your Royal Highness.” Madam Wellington, C-Prep’s headmistress, greeted them with a deep curtsy. In spite of a strong breeze, her two great, stiff wings of silver hair did not stir. “How glad I am to see you safe, sir,” she said to Dash. “It gives me great joy to welcome you back to Coterie.”

Dash bowed but did not reply. The curse had always forced him to flatter Madam Wellington, though he’d personally never liked her. He relished having the power to say nothing.

“Dash is delighted to be here,” said his mother, giving him a side-long look. “But he has been through a great ordeal.”

“Of course — I understand. Will you honor us with your presence at the reception, Your Majesty?”

Queen Maud shook her head, and her circlet of sapphires twinkled in her golden curls. “This breakfast is for Dash and his friends. I am only here to settle my son into his rooms. If you will excuse us.”

They proceeded into the dormitory through a private door. The queen’s bodyguards flanked Dash and his mother as they climbed the steps to Coterie’s royal apartments. The guards checked the rooms, then took up their positions outside the chamber.

Dash closed the door, shutting out the guards. He bolted the servants’ entrance and untied all the chamber’s curtains, which fell shut, obscuring the windows. His mother was already examining the parcel that sat on his school desk. A week ago, Dash had wrapped the parcel, marked it *Do Not Open*, and sealed it with wax that he’d stamped with his ring for good measure. Then he’d packed it in one of his school trunks, and his servants had brought it here.

With one fingertip, his mother traced the Charming crest, stamped into the bright blue wax.

“I’ll miss him,” she said quietly. “I know how weak that sounds. But he wasn’t always like this. At first he was so wonderful —” She

stopped short. Her eyes grew bright with sudden tears. "It will devastate him," she said. "Me leaving like this, without warning. No matter how he behaves, Dash, your father has a vulnerable heart. I don't know if I can do this to him in good conscience —"

"Leave," Dash blurted.

His mother stared at him. His new way of speaking still startled her.

It startled him too.

"Go," he corrected, but that was no better. He gritted his teeth to summon kinder words. "You need to get out." No. Wrong. He gave his head a sharp shake. "I mean — I think —"

He stumbled to a halt and looked at his shoes, perplexed. His heart was pumping too hard, making too much noise inside his head; he couldn't hear his own thoughts. Before the Charming Curse was broken, he would have spewed a sea of lovely, empty words, because the curse had made him a fount of insincere flattery. As charming as his name and as miserable as his ancestors.

His mother spoke gently. "You don't want me to be unhappy."

Dash exhaled and nodded. It had been nearly three months since the witch's death, and without the curse to speak his words for him, he found certain things difficult to express. But now when he spoke, the words were his own.

"You're so different." His mother chewed her thumbnail as she studied him. "So quiet and sincere. No pretty compliments, no platitudes. How can you have changed so much, and your father not at all? I can almost believe him when he says that he's still cursed —"

"The curse is broken," said Dash, emphatic.

"For you it is. But for him . . ."

"It's broken."

For twenty years, the Charming Curse had excused his father's famous unfaithfulness. King Clement had always sworn he *would* be

true if he ever had the chance. But now the witch was dead. The chance had come. And still the king had gone off with Exalted Nexus Maven, just like he'd gone off with countless women before.

"We don't know everything about how witch magic works," said his mother. "I've consulted the Exalted Council and the House of Magic, and no one can tell me for certain if a witch's curse is always *entirely* broken when she dies —"

"He doesn't love you!"

Dash's mother recoiled as if he'd struck her. He clamped his teeth together. He hadn't meant to say it like that. Even if it was true.

His mother turned away from him. "I'll get ready," she murmured, and she took the parcel into the privy chamber and shut the door. When she emerged, Dash stepped back, alarmed. A dark wig and servants' clothes had transformed her entirely. For the first time in his life, Dash could envision his mother as the commoner she had once been: Maud Poplin, a serving girl in a southern tavern.

She packed her queenly attire into one of his trunks.

"I'll leave through the servants' door," she said. "After you head down to the reception."

"We should've done this at night. It would be easier for you in the dark."

"Ships leave by morning," his mother replied. "And we agreed that the Olive Isles is the best place for me to go. Your father will assume I've run to my sister, or farther south to Orange to stay with the Magnificents. He won't guess I'm on Balthasar. Not for a long while."

Dash pulled the Ubiquitous acorns from his pocket and pressed them into her palm. Her hand was moist; her nails all but gnawed off. "Take these," he said. "Ubiquitous Instant Fog. It'll hide you, if you need it."

His mother nodded and stuffed the acorns into her apron pocket.

"If I'm caught, it will only mean scandal. Your father would never punish me, not really."

But he'd watch her. Set guards on her. Make it impossible for her to try again. Either she got away now or King Clement would make sure that it was never.

She crossed the chamber and took Dash's hands in her own.

"I won't write for a while," she said. Tears glistened in her eyes. "Trust that I'm safe."

Dash nodded, and his voice jammed in his throat. He wanted to tell her how much he would miss her, but it wouldn't come.

"Safe journey," he managed instead. "Maybe you'll even find Prince Syrah."

"I wish I would, for his mother's sake. To have a child missing — oh." She looked into his eyes. "I'm grateful every moment that Envearia is dead. That you're home safe." She kissed his cheek, let go his hands, and adjusted the shoulders of his jacket. She smoothed his royal sash and ran her fingers over the top of his shaved head. "Do grow out your hair while I'm gone," she said with a wet little laugh. "It looks so much nicer, darling." She hugged him with sudden fierceness, wrinkling his smoothed sash completely. "I love you," she said.

"Love you too," he mumbled.

She closeted herself in the privy.

Dash waited a moment until his eyes felt dry again and his emotions were under regulation. He pulled open the chamber door. The guards saluted him as he quickly shut the door behind him.

"Her — Majesty." Dash stopped. Swallowed. Tried to push past the lump in his throat. He had to keep speaking, had to say the rest of the lie and make sure that the guards did not go inside the room for any reason. "She — isn't. She doesn't —"

"Is Her Majesty unwell?" asked one of the guards sharply. "Does she require assistance?"