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## The Prince in the Meadow

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## The Prince in the Meadow (Excerpt)

In the village there is safety. There is family and food for most, a sense of security for all. Love and friends are reserved for the lucky ones, but there are many more who are unimaginative enough to be content without those, unaware of what they are missing. And though the village itself is thoroughly mundane, its ability to endure unchanging could be mistaken for an enchantment in the right light.

Everyone knows not to go into the woods. Witches live in the woods, hairy beasts and poisonous mushrooms. The woods loom dark in the east and cast shadows as the sun rises. When children are shooed out of doors by parents who don't want them underfoot during morning chores, they dare each other to see who will get closest to the murky darkness. But even the youngest know the woods are dangerous.

The meadow enjoys a gentler reputation. Done up in sepia with small dots of pink flowers, it sits serenely past the western edge of the village. Once a day as the sun drops behind the horizon, the meadow catches on fire, long grasses lighting up and flowers turning to flame. People do not fear the unknown so much if it casts light instead of shadow, but at least the woods are honest. There is no difference between endless sleep and death, but the meadow is the one to lure anyone into believing they have a choice.

The bastard, self-sufficient as he was, knew better than to go into the meadow, and yet he did. Knowledge and desire are not always in accordance.

Counting his breaths, one-two, the bastard strode through the meadow, and yet the edge of the village never seemed farther behind him than a few hundred yards. The waning moon shone down enough light for him to see where he stepped, but the sky remained the same inky blue midnight. Still the singing endured, high voices and dinky melody drawing him on, though it seemed to the bastard that the very movements of the heavens had stopped.

It had been more than a day since the bastard had slept, assuming time still existed, and the bastard's body was beginning to make its displeasure about this fact known. Convincing himself it was not a sign of defeat, the bastard turned around and peered through the darkness for evidence of the village. There—that had to be smoke from the baker's great ovens. The sight taunted him with its proximity, and the bastard closed his eyes and let out a long huff of frustration.

As soon as he heard the silence, his eyes flew open to a blinding brightness. Later the bastard would realize that he could no longer see any hint of the village, that the grasses now seemed to go on forever in all directions, that the sun had risen without any warning.

In the moment, the only thing he could see was the man, a young man so beautiful that the only thing the bastard could think to call him was prince. The prince was encased in a glittering dome amongst the flowers, his figure lithe and strong looking. His hair appeared gilded—was gilded, for all the bastard knew. Magic was certainly at work here in a hundred other ways. The strands of crystal that arched over the prince were so refined that the bastard could clearly see blond eyelashes resting on his cheeks through the glass.

There was no sign of the prince's breathing, but it seemed impossible that he should be dead. The bastard held his own breath as he approached, terrified of marring the perfection in front of him, but he had taken only a few steps before the crystal began melting away. If he had not been so used to suppressing his own emotions, the bastard would have cried aloud at the loss.

He took another step toward the prince anyway.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, the words made easier by the deafness of their object. Nothing about the prince changed. The bastard let his gaze wander from the unlaced collar of the rich tunic up to the golden curls that fell in perfect arrangement around the prince’s porcelain face, and down to where his hands lay at his side, inert and yet somehow graceful even in their motionlessness.

A hazy memory surfaced in the bastard’s mind, a memory he didn’t even know he had, of cream rising in a pan, and a woman—a mother—telling him he musn’t touch it, or it would be spoilt. But, oh, it was so inviting, and the bastard had so little beauty in his life—

His fingers whispered down the back of the prince’s hand, and the bastard drew back immediately, sure he had ruined it and that the prince would disappear as soon as he blinked.

Nothing happened. It occurred to the bastard for the first time that perhaps he was meant to find the prince, that maybe this wasn’t somebody else’s dream in which he was trespassing. As gently as if he were picking up a baby bird, he slid his hand under the prince’s. The bastard rubbed his thumb across the prince’s knuckles, and the skin was so soft against his calluses that he wondered if the prince was even a human as he was a human. And yet the prince was here, here and tangible in front of him. The bastard brought the prince’s hand to his mouth and kissed it, holding it against his lips for one breathless, timeless moment, then set it down and stepped back, feeling that he would be content to stay here and simply gaze on at the sleeping prince forever.

Everyone knows what they say about true love’s first kiss. Magic is a tricky thing, fluid and capricious, but it is built on certain irrefutable rules—faerie magic only has power within their own realm, spells cast during a full moon will have no effect on the night of a new moon, and true love’s first kiss can break every enchantment in this world or any other.

The prince’s eyes fluttered, and he sat up.