

Bronze

A fractured fairy tale by Emily Short

You are Belle and you have stayed with the Beast in his castle for a long time. The Beast has held your father as prisoner there and told him he was free to go if you, his youngest daughter, took his place. The Beast allowed you to visit your family, for seven days. If you would not return in time, the Beast would die.

When the seventh day comes and it is time for you to return to the castle in the forest, your sisters cling to your sleeves.

"Don't go back," they say, and "When will we ever see you again?" But you imagine they will find consolation somewhere.

Your father hangs back, silent and moody. He has spent the week as far from you as possible, working until late at night. Now he speaks only to ask whether the Beast treated you "properly." Since he obviously has his own ideas about what must have taken place over the past few years, you do not reply beyond a shrug.

You breathe more easily once you're back in the forest, alone.

You have reached the castle and you are standing on the drawbridge. Even in your short absence, the castle has come to look strange to you again. When you came here first, you stood a long while on the drawbridge, unready to cross the moat, for fear of the spells that might bind you if you did. This time it is too late to worry about such things.

An iron-barred gate leads north. You shouldn't be able to open it, heavy as it is, but it swings aside lightly at your touch. The Beast said that it knows friend from enemy; and the castle, at least, still regards you as friend.

You enter the Hall. No one is waiting for you here; the air is very cold. Over the gate, the old familiar warning sign is painted. You know the words by heart, but once more you read: 'Those who seek to leave the castle depart at peril of their lives and souls, unless another servant be provided in exchange, or a fixed term of absence be granted by their master.'

The fireplace is unlit, vacant. It is almost as though you are not expected. Somewhere in this castle, the Beast waits; and he should be told as soon as possible that you did return.

You go to the Great Dining hall. It is such a long hall that the soup might get cold between one end and the other. You and he used only the far west end, nearest the kitchen. Once you took to dining together at all, that is; the first few months he brought trays to your room, while you hid.

But then you took to eating here; and at the end of every meal he would stand up formally and ask his question.

"You can leave at any time," he said, when he first spoke to you. You stared at him, surprised that someone with his face and teeth was capable of human communication. "Would you like to go?" Every night the Beast asked the same question.

"I'm surprised you haven't gone home yet," he said very early in your stay.

"I've heard stories," you replied. "As if there weren't enough to see around the castle. I know what happens to your servants who try to leave you."

"Nothing bad would happen to you," he said. But you could not believe him, not with all the captured spirits, not with the stories, not with the evidence around the castle.

On another night he said: "I assure you, no harm will come to you if you do go."

"I only have your word for that," you replied, looking stubbornly into your soup bowl.

He sat. "I am unable to lie to you," he said. "It is one of the conditions placed upon us. We can only tell the truth."

"And why should I believe that?"

He raised his glass. "I'll try again tomorrow."

On another occasion you responded to his question with a question. "Were you ever married?" , you asked, ignoring his question.

"No."

"Then you have no heirs?"

"I have no legitimate sons," he replied. "But I certainly have an heir, somewhere. If I died, somewhere, someone would inherit all this, and the whole system would go on as before, the servants and the contracts. But don't worry: I have tried, and it turns out that I don't die easily."

On yet another night you said: "And you promise I would not regret it? Truthfully."

He coughed. "I don't know your future. And -- since you ask I must answer -- I don't think much of your father, a man who would barter his daughter's service for his own, especially since he had unflattering ideas of what I would do with you."

You sputtered. "Well of course you couldn't-- I mean, being an animal..."

His teeth gleamed. "I assure you I could," he said. "But I won't."

And again he asked his question. "I have become used to it here," you answered, surprising yourself. "There is plenty to read; there is the chessman, and games; and you are good company." He raised his glass with a half-smile.

"You'd rather stay here without me?", you asked him. "No," he said.

On yet another night, you said: "I c-care for you, I am lonely without you, and you make me laugh, and you're nice..."

"Stop," he said. "And remind me never to order the port again."

He picked you up from your chair and your head rested on his shoulder. "But why can I not be in love... Oh, carry me carefully on the stairs: I feel sick!"

"Simply, pet," he said, walking slowly up the steps. "What you offer I couldn't accept. In fact, I'm not sure what you are offering. Do you have some fantasy of marrying me? Being my mistress?"

You could not think of the answer; there was no solution that was not absurd. He set you down carefully on the bed and went away. A moment later he came back, bright crimson bell in his left paw. "When you wake in the morning and are very ill, which you will be, ring this and the servants will bring a tonic appropriate to your condition."

And on another night he asked: "For a visit, if you won't go to stay? We could arrange that too, if you liked."

"And nothing bad would happen to anyone I cared about?" you demanded.

"Nothing bad would happen to you or to your family. There would be no ill health and no spiritual repercussions."

"You're leaving something out," you said, having gotten familiar with the precise way he speaks when hedging around a difficult fact.

"It could be unpleasant for me," he replied, strained. "But you mustn't stay because of my feelings on the matter. Your family misses you, and I am the villain in this piece."

And when he asked his question again, you said: "Don't mention the leaving thing once more, or I will throw a glass at your head."

He sighed. "You are as stubborn as you are honorable," he said. "No doubt the two are related."

He did not ask his question again for a long time.

"You haven't asked me to leave in a while," you said.

"Ah." He looked at his plate of food. "Of course you may go. I'm glad you believe my word about the effects, now."

"I will go to visit my family," you say, stressing the word visit. "On condition that you tell me how to

do it so that I will not harm you. If you won't do that, I don't go."

He looked at you, his expression cloudy. "There is a very good reason why..."

"Those are my terms."

He sighed. "Very well," he said. "If your trip lasts fewer than seven days, it will have no effect on anything here." He looked down at his curled paw. "But if you don't come back -- and I imagine you won't -- I will forgive you."

You look around the Dining Hall once more, with all its memories. Then you walk out, to the enormous kitchen next to it. Unless he has moved everything, the bell to summon the spirits of the chefs should be in one of the rooms upstairs.

You walk out to the servant quarters next to the kitchen. Not a room friendly to visitors, it has the air of resentful, martyred suffering. A decaying ladder leads down. You climb down the ladder.

Though a dim light filters down from the servant quarters, you can see almost nothing of the contents of your current location. You hear some dry sifting from the northeast.

You decide to climb up the ladder again and you go back to the Great Dining Hall. There is an exit to the north, but when you try to go there you find your way blocked by a phantom guard. Somewhere nearby you hear chimes. As soon as you back up, he disperses into smoke again.

You go up to the Scarlet Tower. There is a little hexagonal room, from whose narrow window you can see the moat, the lawn, and the beginning of the forest outside. You look down from the tower.

Beyond a short stretch of clear ground, the forest grows thick and uninhabited for many miles.

On the windowsill, a helmet waits, for the use of the sentry. It's a very old helmet that you have seen the Beast wear (and quite foolish it looked, perched on a head it no longer fits: it would suit your head better). He told you once that the helmet was for night watchmen, scouts, and guards, to increase their vigilance and strengthen their hearing.

Lines of writing arc over each ear, but you do not know the language in question. You settle the helmet over your head, and there is a roaring in your ears at first. But then the sharpened hearing begins to feel natural again.

You go down again and head to the Gallery of Historical Paintings. Here are paintings of historical events from times past: the assassination of King Elzibad in 1248; the arrival of Princess Lucrezia from the Italian State of Medici-Credenza in 1545.

On the painting about the assassination of King Elzibad, you see his pointy-slippered attendants wringing their hands, his wife wiping her eyes on an ermine muff, peasants grieving. Of Elzibad himself, there is only a pair of blackened feet, sticking out from under the elephant.

You continue your walk through the gallery to the east and you end up in a room with a Labyrinth Floor: a mosaic floor of black and white, like that of cathedrals, as protection against the spite of the undead. You go down for a moment, but it is dark down there. You go up again and walk to the Treasure Room.

Locked in an iron cage are the house treasures not in use: the collection consists of a scepter, a puzzle piece, and a pair of cloven shoes, at present -- he showed them to you one rainy day, telling you their many histories. Here and there are marks where someone would seem to have made an attempt to break in.

The scepter was formerly belonging to Queen Ingratitudina the First (so he said), only slightly bent where she used it to strike King Cophetua. It is studded with measly turquoises and semi-precious stones.

On the puzzle piece something shiny has been painted. The shoes are made for something with cloven hoofs. They bear evidence of having been adjusted to their current size by a shoemaker, and perhaps (therefore) could be again.

Nearby a small door leads east. He's not down here, then, in the east wing. Perhaps he's in one of the

side rooms you've not visited yet...?

You try to open the small door, but it's locked. You head back to the Entrance Hall and go out to the central courtyard. It was here that you first laid eyes on the Beast: emerging from the State Rooms, snarling. He seemed angry at you for coming, even though you had had no choice. Or perhaps (you thought) he was simply violent. You did not run.

To the east a helical staircase ascends to the roof. An obscene gargoyle sits where the finial of the banister should be.

You remember the gargoyle well enough. The Beast came up while you were bent over the gargoyle, trying to lift it. "Taking that back to your room?" he asked slyly. "It won't work, but if you're lacking companionship I could find an appropriate servant to see to your needs."

You felt yourself blush. "It's ugly," you said. "I wanted to move it."

"Oh. You can't." He frowned at it. "It is a remnant, left here by an angry soul who managed to take some revenge despite his enslavement. There are a few others around, mostly in the crypt. They're immovable, but harmless."

Upstairs is the private parlor: a sitting room of the family, in old times, and familiar territory to you now as well. There is a bentwood table in the parlor, on which there is a jigsaw puzzle. It was his latest offering: he brings you all the most innocent toys he can find, to occupy your time and make you less miserable. This one is nearly finished, missing only one piece that neither of you could ever find.

You go into your bedroom: the crystal room. A fantasia of gleaming and glittering, chandeliers and mirrors: all that shines or reflects has been moved here, into this room that you inhabit, which he never enters. You learned, long ago, that the mirrors would keep him away. And then, when you had less need to keep him at bay, you kept them anyway, so as not to disturb him by returning them to the rest of the palace.

The south end of the room is most dazzling, because of the daylight from the balcony. You step out into the rain; the fat droplets sound like hail on the surface of your helmet.

It is a ridiculous filigreed balcony that is like nothing so much as a birdcage. From here you can see all the way across the moat, across the forest, the plain, to the edge of the sea, only by staring long enough in any direction.

You go to the Green Bedroom. Having more personality than most of the bedrooms, it was decorated for someone specific and has been left that way: green and white, with a simple rustic cast unusual for the palace. The chief exception is the royal portrait on the wall.

"That was me," he told you. "Before I was changed. Do you think I was handsome?"

You shrugged. Handsome, yes, but proud, selfish, resentful, perhaps cruel. "The painter did not do justice to your personality," you replied.

"You're wrong," he said. "And I put the painting here to punish the woman who slept here. She treated me with justice, and I could not forgive her."

He refused to tell you the rest. "You like me more than you should, and trust me less," he said. "If I told you the rest of this particular story, you would neither trust nor like. There, that's a warning for you."

There is another bedroom on this floor, like a monk's chamber compared to every other part of the palace, just bare walls now. Here your father stayed, when he made his ill-fated journey to the castle. The Beast told you this, on your first visit.

On the wall, as a curio, hangs an open shackle -- sign of the only person ever to have escaped the power of this place.

Your father claims to have been chained up, but the Beast never made the least effort to restrain you with chains or bars. On the contrary-- but that remains a puzzle.

And then there is the guest bedroom, made up for the reception of a guest who will never arrive again. A tapestry recalls the story. It is hard to make out the story from the faded threads, but it appears to show a very small man, almost a dwarf, who holds on a leading string a very large demon,

almost a god.

Still here at the center of the room is the stool you and the Beast used, the time he tried to teach you to dance -- not a great success, but more effective than the experiment with stilts. You take the stool with you. It is an ordinary three-legged stool, like the one your cat at home liked to sleep on.

He's not upstairs, then: there's nowhere in these rooms he could have been hiding, no space large enough to conceal him. He must have gone into one of the more... difficult portions of the castle. The state rooms, or the crypt. One of the places he knows you hate to visit alone.

This does not bode well for his state of mind. Will he be angry? It has been a long time since he was truly angry at you... But you cannot deal with that until you find him.

You go back to the private parlor and open the heavy door in the north wall. You get far enough to glimpse a window before being overcome: you reel back from a smell of roses and death, so powerful that you can't go forward. Until there's a breeze through here, you won't be able to stand being in the place.

You go down the stairs again, to the courtyard. You put the stool in the courtyard and you go back to the Labyrinth Room and go down. Wind chimes ring, muted, from the northeast, competing with an irregular dripping from the southwest. You can also make out your own steady breathing. You go further into the direction of which you hear the wind chimes ring, feeling your way along the walls. You listen intently; the helmet makes your hearing sharper. Now the wind chimes ring, noisy, from somewhere above you. Though a dim light filters down, you can see almost nothing of the contents of your current location. You climb into the pale light... and here you are, in the rose garden. A pleasant cloister is overlooking the rose garden to the north. You have walked it many times, seeking to waste the excesses of time at your disposal.

In the middle of the garden a way slopes into the ground, reminding you of the entrance to a burial mound. Strung up by a chain is a set of iron wind chimes.

You cannot reach the iron wind chimes from your present position; you'd need something to stand on, so you go back to fetch the stool. You stand, a little precariously, on the stool, and are now more or less the same height as an ordinary person. The chimes have been locked to the chain that supports them and you have no key to unlock the chain. You get off the stool again and leave it there.

You walk east, a walk you often made. Lucrezia, they say, died here. It is only a turning point in the corridor, with a bench. On the stone bench are some discarded embroidery materials. The little that is already done is old-fashioned blackwork, like your grandmother's mother might have stitched. A few weeks ago now, he came to you with a quick step. "Look, it took me all morning, but I found this." Holding out the basket of threads, the folded linen. Not in bad condition, either.

"What is that for?" You were never much for sewing things at home, even before your mother died.

"I thought -- since you're so bored here --" He lowered his arm. "When I saw more of the world, I knew a number of young ladies who were very fond of it. My sister liked to make stories with hers." You opened your mouth, looking for something to say.

"I see," he answered. "The world has changed. What do young ladies do now?"

"I don't know," you reply. "My father fell on hard times. We live in the country. I'm more or less a milkmaid, these days."

At the word milkmaid, his mouth twisted a little and he shrugged. "I cannot provide any cows," he said, after a long time.

You put the embroidery materials in your pocket and walk south, to the Scrying Room. A place for consulting with the servants, summoning them by their instruments. Nearby a small door leads west to the treasure room. A small key hangs beside the door. The key is of the sort of delicate design intended to unlock more than one thing. You open the door with the small key and see that it gives access to the Treasure Room. For now you go back to the chimes in the rose garden; maybe the key will fit on the chains too? It does; you unlock the chain and take the chimes down, silencing them and

muting their power. When they are entirely still, they fade from your grip and vanish.

You walk to the Parliamentary Chambers. On each side of the room are two neat oak benches, seating for perhaps thirty men -- and, more rarely, women, and a few characters who could not be called by either term.

You take the exit to the State Rotunda, built for the bureaucratic offices of the palace. Inlaid in the floor is the map of all the lands that once this palace commanded. Since the lands of the Kingdom were once quite dispersed the cartographer has, from indolence, fancy, or an urge to flatter, omitted all the territories that intervened, so that here floating in a cherry-wood sea are the State of Medici-Credenza; the Emirate of Elzibad; the Equine Protectorate of Argos; a goodly portion of Essex; and Malta, the only true island of the lot.

There is writing around the map's edge, not legible in this light.

You go to the Library next to this room. Many books of precedent line these walls, containing every kind of contract that can be made to bind every kind of soul. You can see a great contract book here. The runes are unfamiliar to you, but you know what the book is: a record of all the contracts of all the souls enslaved to the king of this castle.

You caught him staring at you once. "Your clothing is wearing out. I'll look up a seamstress in the contract book for you."

You plucked the erring sleeve back into place. "You needn't," you said. "I don't mind."

"Yes, but I do," he snapped. "I was once a -- the polite term would be a connoisseur of ladies -- and it is not a taste that goes away. So for everyone's sanity it would be best if you went about fully clothed."

You avoided him for three days, after that incident. But your gowns were all replaced.

You take the contract book with you, you go north and enter the Lower Bulb Room.

In this very tall room, like a silo, is a glass of running sand: not an hourglass, or even a day glass, but a timer whose duration you do not know. A whole Sahara has poured into its lower chamber, but the trickle from above continues, very fine. Around the outside of this contraption ascends a wooden staircase. You go up.

In the upper chamber, you find, there is almost as much sand as there is below; indeed for all you can tell the flow might be eternal.

Nearby an ivory door leads southwest. And here the Beast lies, sprawled on the ground as if he'd fallen.

"Nothing bad will happen for the first seven days," he said, when you left. And yet here he is, looking very nearly dead. He looks starved, unwell, near death, in fact. He will need to be given food before he will properly revive -- and who knows what else...

It baffles you to find him in this condition, when he could easily have gotten whatever he needed in the kitchen.

You'll get him something to eat. You head out and get into the Gallery of Still Life. Natural light from the south illuminates a series of still life paintings: one is showing the Wedding Treasure when Lucrezia arrived from Medici-Credenza, the other is rather fancifully entitled Supper with M.

On the wedding painting you see a table tastefully laid with possessions of power or personal worth, brought by Lucrezia as gifts from her father: an inkpot, a helmet, a green girdle stitched with vines, a curious pair of cloven shoes.

Nearby a heavy door leads east. You open it and you get far enough to glimpse a mechanical chessplayer before being overcome: you reel back from a smell of roses and death, so powerful that you can't go forward. Now that both doors are open, a breeze begins to blow through the smelly area.

Now you go to the Records Room, where all the papers and histories are kept. Anything you wanted to look up, you should be able to discover easily.

You skim the annals of 1102-1105, and decide that life has really gotten more interesting since the

twelfth century. However, if you want to find anything specific here, you're going to have to look it up by name.

Then you quickly skim the unpleasant history of Lucrezia of Medici-Credenza, how she brought odd magical treasures with her, introduced new methods of binding and contracting that were previously unknown even to this castle, and maintained a room for her studies in the basement below the rose garden. From this room everyone including her husband was banned.

There are some suggestions that she was the daughter of the Devil himself, sent to the castle to tempt the kings into further folly and destruction. But who knows?

There is a very old scroll that narrates how King Athanasius, first of his line, entered a wager with Mephistopheles, and won the pen that the Devil used to sign contracts for men's souls.

The King retired to this castle, overjoyed with his success, but the Devil flew away laughing.

You try to find information about yourself and the Beast, but can't find any. You are the merest interloper here and as for the Beast, you have never known his true name, and can only guess that he must be the last of the line of kings.

Then you head to the White Gallery. Placed where it will have the most light on the board for the longest time is a mechanical chess player. The chess player wears a turban, and in its wooden fingers grasps the head of the black bishop. Whatever move it contemplates has yet to occur.

The Beast brought it out for you to play against, when other entertainment palled. You lost consistently until he came and roared at it; and afterwards began to win. The suspicion that it was throwing games made you a bit reluctant to make use of it, in the end.

The mechanical chess player is currently switched off. You throw the switch hopefully, but nothing happens -- in fact, the switch flops loosely back into its old position, plainly connected to nothing.

From here you go to the Bell room, the room where bells are kept, conveniently close to where the masters of the house would once have slept. Catching your eye among many other unfamiliar items are some iron wind chimes, a little gold dinner bell, and a silver bell. You examine the iron wind chimes curiously. Each chime is engraved with the staring eyes and exaggerated nostrils of a spirit warrior.

You take a closer look at the little gold dinner bell. It is the dinner summons, and particularly familiar to you. The silver bell bears the stamp of a lamplighter. You ring the bell, but those who might hear and heed it are not close enough. You decide to keep it and the dinner bell as well.

Next to this room is the Apothecary, furnished with a long countertop and the equipment of an apothecary. The books contain assorted disturbing recipes for ways to make your enemies die quickly, or to dispatch them slowly in great pain. The pages most discolored by use and splashed ingredients are those pertaining to swift and pleasant execution.

You walk to the kitchen and ring the dinner bell there. The little gold dinner bell tinkles gaily: as in automatic response, your stomach rumbles. There will be a feast, now, waiting for you in the dining hall. As for the gold bell, it returns to its place in the Bell Room.

In the Great Dining Hall you find a considerable feast set out on a platter as big as a shield. The platter is heaped with -- why, you must this time have woken the chefs of King Yggdrasil the Piscine: it is pickled whitefish and wilted greens, hot soup made from leviathan's bones, and other dishes you do not recognize, made of things that have not grown in this vicinity for many a year.

Perhaps he will feel better when he has eaten, you reflect. He has always had a large appetite -- the result of his change in form, he tells you.

You put the soup bowl on a platter and hurry back to where the Beast still lies. With great care, you feed the soup to the Beast. So much spills that you doubt whether you are making any progress; then he swallows.

"You are ornery," he says. "I guaranteed your return -- you know what that means?"

"That if I had not come back, you would have died," you reply.

"That is only a small part of what would have happened. The other contracts would have unraveled,

the servant souls freed."

You frown at him. "I've been trying to use you to this purpose for years," he says, touching your cheek. "But you wouldn't go. I'm touched that you came back for me -- really, I can't tell you how much -- but you've ruined the plan."

"Is there a way to set them free that doesn't kill you?" you ask.

He looks startled. "Not for me," he says. "There's a room in the basement below the rose garden I can't get into. Lucrezia's room. You'll need to get in, search the crypt, find a way to destroy the contracts book... there are places in the castle I cannot enter, because she sealed them against all her descendants. But you are not one of her descendants, so--" He chuckles weakly at some joke, but he hands you an iron key. "You'll need the shoes."

"Would that lift the curse on you, too, do you think?" you ask.

"Unlikely. That is another matter. Less happy." After a moment he begins to sleep again. Though he has eaten, he looks deeply exhausted, as though something preys on his spirit.

You go to the Translation Room. This room is endowed with a deep power that dissolves into ready vernacular even the most ancient and secret scripts of the Law Library.

It's usually blazing with the captured light of many thousands of candles, but it has been let to go out, and everything is dim.

You can see an ordinary quill pen here. It doesn't look heavy at all, but you can't lift it. You ring the silver bell, to try if it works in here. The silver bell rings once in triumph, and the room springs to brilliant light. The bell itself fades back to its usual place.

You set down the helmet you are still wearing. Now you can read the writing on it. You read:

I call upon you, I summon you, I bind you, daemon of the small bone of the left ear: make my hearing strong. I call upon, summon, and bind you, daemon of the small bone of the right ear: make my hearing stronger yet.

I call upon, I summon, I bind you, daemon of air-that-moves, carry sound swiftly to my ears. I call upon, summon, bind you, daemon of earth-that-shakes, relay noises rapidly to me.

If you daemons do not do this, I will bind you under the earth in darkness and make the worms to crawl upon your head.

You put on the helmet again. You search, search, search in the contract book-- and here is the page with your name at the top. But the contract below, which stipulates your eternal imprisonment here, has been amended with a permission to leave and return within seven days. Then: "Guarantor of this exchange: the king of the castle and all his rights and servants." Which means that if you had not returned, the Beast would have been forfeit and all the servants as well.

Your father's contract is just before your own: a lifetime (and death time) of service in this castle, as the immediate result of setting foot herein. From comparison to some of the other contracts, you see that it would have been easy service indeed, no manual labor but only companionship to the king, and no command-bell to make him come or go.

But the contract has been amended in a small neat hand that says: "Voided in voluntary exchange for his daughter's service." That would be where you come in. And: "Guarantor of this exchange: the king of the castle and all his rights and servants."

Taking the candle with you, you go to the State Rotunda, where the map is with the writing you could not read. You put the candle down and study the map. You read: Here there be Daemons. The Beast had instructed you to go find Lucrezia's room. So you go to the rose garden, to entrance to the burial mound. You go down, to find yourself in the Rooted Room. It is cut as an afterthought through earth and the underside of the garden, and therefore muddy and soil-scented. From there

you go into a room of scrap and refuse. To the east of this room you find a dank storage area, stacked with bars of wax -- perhaps for some casting process? You couldn't say.

When you proceed to the south-west you get to the Zoo, a resting place for an animal: warm but rough. There is little to suggest, from this environment, that he thinks of himself as a man at all, though he is capable of walking upright and eating with utensils, of reading books and even of writing a legible hand.

The only distinguishing mark is a miniature hung on the wall, like a devotional object, or perhaps a reminder. On the miniature is the tiny image of a lady in a green girdle. But it isn't Lucrezia.

You can see a poison vial here, which you take up and curiously examine. You brought it with you; he confiscated it the first night.

"It was a good thought," he said, plucking it from your fingers with a delicacy that should be impossible in one his size. "But if I could be killed by poison -- or by violence, or starving, or leaping from towers, by drowning or by suffocation or by fire, I assure you, I would have found the way by now. That leaves only yourself as a victim, and I did not bring you here to die." And so you didn't. The poison has mostly dried up now; the apothecary who sold it to you did not say anything about whether it would keep its efficacy for long.

You head on and get into the Bear Corridor. This part of the castle is less couth and cultivated than any other part and you have been forbidden to visit this place before now. The walls press close to you on either side. The floor slopes down. Bears with sharp claws are carved into the rock, but they remind you of Him, and you are not frightened.

Then you turn and enter the Rocky Chamber, a tight, rocky corner among foundations of the oldest part of the castle. A slow leak in the south wall admits a little water, but not enough to be very destructive.

Now you turn back and you start into the crypt, but an icy unnatural wind blows against you, as though the spirits resent the intrusion of someone with a light. And yet you have seen the Beast come down here, from time to time, bearing lanterns, torches, whatever he found handy.

There must be some preliminary, a matter of spiritual etiquette perhaps, to establish yourself as the master of those below.

You go back to the Rooted Room and you see that a passage through rock ends here, and begins to tunnel through soil instead where it heads northeast. There is also a sinister door.

A pull cord emerges from the rock just before the walls of the passage turn to mud. There's lettering beneath the pull cord. Unfortunately the words are too worn for you to read. Perhaps if the light were coming in from an extreme angle, you would do better.

You set down the candle on the ground. The light coming in does illuminate the floor sharply, and is at a good angle, but it is a bit too low to show up the lettering halfway up the wall. All you get is the deepest capital letters -- P, L, and D -- and the last line: 'or he will depart again without offering aid'.

You get back to the rose garden to fetch the stool. You put the candle on the stool, aligning it neatly against the wall. The inscription stands out beautifully now.

You read: Pull this cord, then wait in the room directly above to speak with Lucrezia's steward. Do not let more than five minutes pass between the summons and the waiting, or he will depart again without offering aid.

You give the cord a hard yank. Somewhere above you a very deep bell tolls. You head quickly to the parliamentary chambers. There is a scuffle, and a presence unfolds itself from where it was waiting, unseen, on the benches. It comes towards you and circles you, and you have the idea -- more imagination than eyesight -- that this was once a tall, thin man of considerable power.

It says a few words in the bastardized Italian of the state of Medici-Credenza, and you hear the scrape of wood and stone from somewhere below you: a door opening.

Then the presence vanishes.

You go back to the tight passage. The sinister door is now open. You go enter Lucrezia's Study. Little survives here, enough to suggest that a number of books were burned and glass tools smashed. You can only guess at why, or by whom. A single pile of notes remains. But the dominant item is the vast image of Lucrezia at a wardrobe fitting of some kind.

Lucrezia stands, imperiously, in what is now the empty bedroom, while a gnome-like shoemaker at her feet customizes pair after pair of shoes to her misshapen--

You look away, unnerved, towards a less disturbing element, the leather tambourine in Lucrezia's hand.

You study the notes. Spiky, erratic handwriting on a variety of mystical and magical topics pertaining to the castle and the spiritual status of the inhabitants. You look for a note on the shoes. The shoes, according to these pages, symbolize their wearer's right to tread in and be master of the territory of the dead. Some additional function for the shoes is suggested by the papers -- something about the preservation of memory or a connection to those who wore them previously -- but it seems that even Lucrezia did not understand this very well. ("And for this reason I am determined never to let them fall into the hands of another, but to have them burnt on my pyre at the moment of my death, lest those that follow after learn my secrets.") That scheme didn't work out for her, evidently.

You try to find some information about the castle. Whenever she writes about her family or her husband, it is with a kind of weary exasperation. You have the sense that none of them were-- or seemed to be-- nearly as intelligent as Lucrezia herself, and she therefore protected and despised them.

About the pen there is a considerable raving: "Many tests of fire, water, pressure, torsion, acid, and poison have failed; even gunpowder and holy water have not sufficed to ruin it; nor do I now believe that it can be destroyed, but suppose that, being plucked from the wing of the old man my father, it partakes of his same eternal nature. Therefore the arrangement must be dissolved in some other way."

There are some notes about the contract book too. Mostly some speculative notes about the possibility of voiding contracts through some loophole of demonic legalism. You don't entirely follow it. At any rate, to judge by this, she had obtained a kind of mastery over the crypt-spirits by use of her magic shoes. And there is also a reference to a room upstairs, behind the ivory door.

You go to the treasure room, with the treasure locked in the cage. You open the cage and get out all its contents.

For the puzzle piece you go to the Private Parlor. You snap the final piece into place. Nothing tremendous happens, but the picture is complete: the table is set for two: a robed king, and the devil. Between the two of them is a quill pen, jet black, and a huge book. The dialogue of these two characters is written on tiny gilt scrolls that spool out of their mouths, and this is what you could not read before the jagged piece was found: the devil is saying, "TIME IS ON MY SIDE," to which the king replies, "BUT NOT FOR LONG."

Now you try on the shoes. They emphatically do not fit. You will have to find someone to adjust them, evidently.

Since you also saw a tambourine on the painting in Lucrezia's study, you go to where you remember you saw one, in the bell room. You strike the tambourine, but the shoemaker doesn't materialize. And now you think about it, didn't that image in Lucrezia's study show where she was being fitted? Hm. The empty bedroom. You go there and play the tambourine.

A brisk wind fusses about your feet, then does something to the shoes, resizing and slightly reshaping so that they might have a hope of staying on you.

You slip your feet into the shoes, and feel less alone. Mere sentiment, you think; but then there is the brush of a thought other than your own. The crypt. Under the Law Library. There are sources of power there which even I have never understood.

You go to the Central Crypt, through the hole in the floor of the Law Library. The Crypt is a relic-storage place for all the bits of men and women -- and creatures -- bound to the Kings over many centuries. From here you enter the Apprentice's Workshop: a mausoleum for apprentices who perished before their terms of indenture were complete. A decaying ladder leads up. Then you go north-east and come to Virgin's End: the resting place of maidens who died before marrying those to whom they were engaged.

The Beast's thoughts intrude on yours, courtesy of the enchanted shoes: "they died without marrying those to whom they were betrothed, but not all died maidens." Impossible to tell the tenor of that particular thought. "Not all of them are to my account, I hasten to add."

You head south-east and reach Father's Regret: the home of fathers who died before their children were born. Tokens of binding are stored here, in drawers. The drawers are numerous, but there is only one that opens without sticking. You open the drawers, revealing an ivory key and an elephant harness. You can take the key, but the harness does not budge, in a way you associate with the stone gargoyles. Must be associated with quite an interesting contract, this piece.

Now you go south-west. The floor sounds progressively stranger as you walk toward the middle of the room. This is Debtor's Paradise, the graves of men who died before resolving their debts. As you walk out of the room, you notice that your footsteps sound odd.

You go to the Translation room, to get information about this harness. According to the contract book, a worked bronze gong, according to this, controls a shape-shifting djinn of considerable size and destructive power, which resents the terms of its enslavement and would be overjoyed to take revenge. This djinn has taken many forms in the past, but most frequently disguises itself as an elephant.

You remember the miniature in the Beast's resting place, the Zoo. It was not Lucrezia. So, who is it? With some effort, you find the contract, which turns to be one of a large number of contracts involving young women. In fact, this is the very last contract recorded before your father's and yours: a young woman named Yvette, brought to the castle -- though she was betrothed to a lord already -- to "serve" the king. You have the impression that the contract book is leaving out a good deal, such as why Yvette was associated with the girdle, and what she was doing here. Perhaps in the papers there will be something.

You sift through the papers until you find a pertinent entry: that the girdle is to be in some way a device for the punishment or forgiveness of those who abuse the castle's power, "being in the possession of the weakest of its victims".

You go to the Bell room. You acquire the worked bronze gong, and assess it curiously. A heavy thing that you have never seen rung. The upper surface is hammered with the sign of an elephant.

You go to the Gallery of Historical Painting. You hear the Beast thinking, thanks to your shoes: amusement. "Poor old Elzibad. Though I suppose it wasn't so funny at the time. Remind me to tell you-- but I may not have the chance, I suppose."

You head out to the drawbridge. You hesitate. He told you not to play idly with the bells whose purposes were unknown to you, you see... You strike the gong, but to your disappointment, nothing happens.

You go to the Records Room and you consult the papers on Yvette. It takes some searching, but you find it eventually. The king in these parts was accustomed to bring young ladies to the castle when his wooing of them was unsuccessful, whereupon they were under contract and unable to resist him. This he did for many years, snatching away men's brides; until one day he stole Yvette. She was only a humble milkmaid, but so beautiful she was betrothed to a lord, etc., etc., and moreover her great-great-grandmother had been Lucrezia the Enchantress (oh dear), so she possessed a magical girdle of surpassing power.

When she discovered what was about to happen to her, while she was still on the drawbridge of the castle, she cursed the king to become a mere Beast, so that the spell would never be lifted until

someone loved him who was not under magical contract. What was more, this person would need the power of that same magical girdle...

There is even a small woodcut of the grieving Yvette, carrying a cow bell and looking downtrodden.

You look up information on the elephant topic. An entertaining story tells how Elzibad, worse than all the other kings of this palace that had previously been seen, was defeated by one of his own demons in elephant form, when someone who was not contracted to him gained command of the demon. Command of his slaves then passed to his son.

From that day on the castle was so built that no one could even enter into it without becoming contracted to its king, for the protection of the royal family.

You go to the Upper Bulb Room. Nearby an ivory door leads southwest. You open the ivory door and enter a chamber that is damaged by smoke. Though not actually burnt, the walls are stained with smoke, especially at the south end.

The Beast's thoughts intrude on yours: "A spectacular but unsuccessful attempt. My fur was singed and foul-smelling for weeks."

This mess has partly obliterated what was once a detailed mural on the west wall.

Though some of the detail is gone, the mural shows the path through the forest to the castle. At the castle gate, a smiling king with horns has just finished laying down a trail of silver coins leading into his domain; at the other end of the path, a crowd of astonished and eager peasants is collecting them. It is clear enough that in a few minutes they will get to the drawbridge and all be enslaved.

Then you go to the Lie library. Fables, fictions, and falsehoods, arranged by number by type. You hear the Beast's thoughts: "ah, now here's an interesting little locale. Lucrezia had it built. She was always her father's daughter, you perceive. It is so powerful that it makes false the things that are brought in -- I used it once to void a lady's marriage contract --"

The thread of thought stops. "On second thought, that is not a story I am proud of."

You can see a book return stand here. Carvings around the outer edge of the book return stand indicate how one should use it: a small tonsured figure places a book on the stand, then rings a bell; whereupon a librarian, bearing the traditional shackles and sheets of a ghost, appears to take it away.

On the book return stand is a storybook. A collection of fanciful tales "which were once true but are no longer". It is stamped across the front as having been inducted into the Lie Library.

You go east to the Black Gallery, lined with neat rows of inscrutable -- one might almost say pointless -- objects. There's a gold ring (with signet, though you do not recognize the symbol) and a stuffed boar (looking angry); a broken beam, an inkpot, a dark-colored pendant; a white apple, a preserved goat, a cane, a glass leaf, a silver buckle, a copper snake, a homunculus, a parrot perch, and a green cloth swatch.

You acquire the gold ring, and assess it curiously. A very very curious object. And you get the things you can carry with you, like the infernal inkpot and head for the Bell room. Catching your eye among many other unfamiliar items is a cow bell. You take the cow bell, and assess it curiously.

Much like the ones you used on the cows at home. There is also a glass bell, which you take as well. You go back to the Lie Library and put the contract book on the return stand. Then you ring the glass bell. You summon the librarian, who comes and looks at the contract book: you see this as a sort of fog. It frowns at the condition of some of the pages, then searches the front and back of the book; then, grimacing, it takes out a red seal like those used in the empire of the Chan. It is about to mark the contract book property of the Lie Library, when it discovers that its seal ink has dried up: so the stamp has no efficacy. Disappointed, it vanishes again.

Maybe the inkpot can be of help here? You look in the papers for info on it.

About the inkpot, the notes are their most cryptic, and the quality of the handwriting has also declined so that you suspect the author of having been either elderly or sick. "Of this article, which my father gave me, I believe I have finally uncovered some use. For though it will not hold ink of the

ordinary kind, it perfectly contains that which flows beneath the burial ground, consisting of the regret of all inhabitants..." Etc., etc.

You go to the crypt and you head south to the debtor's paradise, the graves of men who died before resolving their debts. You notice that your footsteps sound odd, as though there were hollow space somewhere under the stones -- though you cannot identify a specific part of the floor that seems more vulnerable.

You hop experimentally across the floor, the helmet amplifying your sensitivity to every sound, so that you are able to distinguish the exact flagstone at which the hollow thudding becomes most resonant. On a bit of investigation, this stone turns out to be loose. When you look closer you see a trapdoor. You open it and you descend into a dark room. The air is clammy and unpleasant, and clogs in your lungs. You go north. Liquid squeezed from the surrounding earth here flows out through a fountain, then soaks back into the ground below.

You hear the Beast's thoughts : mostly loathing and fear much stronger than your own, but whatever he knows does not come through to you.

You fill the infernal inkpot from the fountain, trying to get as little as possible on yourself. The liquid is sludge-black where it pours in quantity, but where it runs thin, it appears red.

You go back to the Lie library and summon the librarian again. It takes out a red seal like those used in the empire of the Chan. It inks this carefully from the inkpot, then stamps inside the front of the book:

PROPERTY OF THE LIE LIBRARY
DO NOT REMOVE

...whereupon the contracts inside begin to unravel and dissolve into the merest stories.

You never do discover any final rest or cure for the Beast. But perhaps that is a small price to pay for all the souls you have liberated.

So you freed the servants, but not the Beast. But another end is possible too!

So you don't let the librarian destroy the contract book. Instead, you concentrate on the girdle. This information is in the notes about it: that the girdle is to be in some way a device for the punishment or forgiveness of those who abuse the castle's power, "being in the possession of the weakest of its victims".

You go to the crystal bedroom, your bedroom and you ring the cow bell, and a heavy fog coalesces around you; then at the mirror there forms the image of an exceptionally beautiful young woman, wearing a green girdle.

"It is a long time since I was called," she says, pressing her nose and fingers to her side of the glass and looking at you with interest. You see around her neck the burn of a noose, and guess uneasily at what she did to herself. She looks at you with plain curiosity.

"So you're the one?" she asks. "Did you know that he carried me over the drawbridge into the castle, and made me slave to his wishes even though I was betrothed to another? And that for the breach of contract my father died impoverished?"

You say nothing. You have not known him to be like that; but many human lifetimes have passed since Yvette was alive.

She shrugs one shoulder. "If you can love such a creature, then I will leave the green girdle for you on my grave; you come take it and kiss him," she says. Then she fades from view.

You go to the Central Crypt and then to Virgin's End, the resting place of maidens who died before marrying those to whom they were engaged. You can see a magic girdle here. You take the magic girdle and put it on, securing it around you. It fits unexpectedly well. Then you go to the Beast.

When you look at the Beast this time -- it must be the influence of the girdle -- you see him as more animal than human, though you long ago learned to discern a man's expressions on his face. I was afraid of him, says the memory of Yvette in your head, as though she's trying to justify herself to you. There are other thoughts as well, murkier; but you are left with the impression that she killed herself, in the end, not because of her family's misfortunes or the lord she was separated from; but because she was carrying a child, and feared that it would be born some kind of monster. You kiss the Beast. As you do, you can't help remembering -- because of the girdle -- how many women before you this king imprisoned against their will. And why should he deserve to be forgiven, merely because he has been less cruel to you than to the others? When you lift your head, he is his proper self: a man, about forty-five. Handsome, perhaps, but in the style of the lord mayor, not someone you would have aspired to wed. His face has perhaps softened a little since his youth, but he is still recognizably the same person. He looks ruefully at his restored hands. "I failed to free them," he says. "And now I've dragged you into the trouble with me." You shake your head, and try to calm him.

So now you have restored the King, but not his servant. But another end is possible too.

You have the girdle, but you don't kiss the Beast yet and you go to the Lie Library. You summon the librarian, who comes and looks at the contract book. It stamps inside the front of the book:

PROPERTY OF THE LIE LIBRARY
DO NOT REMOVE

...whereupon the contracts inside begin to unravel and dissolve into the merest stories.

Then you go back to the Beast and kiss him. When you lift your head, he is his proper self. His fingers stretch in experiment. "Dear virgin mother. You did it. The servants are free?" You nod. "Good girl." He touches your cheek affectionately; then freezes. "And you're wearing Yvette's girdle. I suppose you heard her story, in that case." He sticks out his jaw. "You can go now. It won't kill me, this time." You draw a breath and give him your answer.