

chapter

1

Tale as Old as Time

If Mal had to pick what she liked most about Auradon, it would be hard to choose just one thing. She could probably spend a whole day cataloging everything that didn't stink about her new school. For one, it wasn't housed in a smelly, damp dungeon like Dragon Hall back in the Isle. For another, it was a surprise to find she actually enjoyed learning about a variety of subjects instead of just plotting evil schemes. She was particularly fond of her art classes, where she happily painted canvases full of mysterious foggy landscapes and gloomy dark castles instead of the peaceful sunsets and still lifes of fruit favored by the rest of the class. Why anyone would want to paint something as boring as a bowl of fruit, Mal would never understand.

She was sitting at a long table in the great room in Auradon Prep's library, a cheerful, bright space with high ceilings and banners with the school colors hanging from the ceiling. Mal was trying to do homework for a change, but was too distracted by the people-watching as students kept filing in and out between classes. Plus, her Goodness Appreciation essay was putting her to sleep. So she looked out the floor-to-ceiling library windows

instead, at the manicured lawns where she played croquet (well, made fun of people playing croquet might be more accurate) and the patch of shady oak trees where she and her friends often ate lunch.

Yeah, life in Auradon was good; better than an unexpected makeover before midnight, or an endless feast presented by dancing plates and cutlery; better even, than being invited to a baby princess's christening.

"Happy?" a voice asked, snapping her out of her uncharacteristically dreamy reverie.

She blushed and smiled across the table at the handsome boy who smiled back at her from behind his swoop of golden-brown hair. "What makes you say that?" she asked.

"You look . . . positively delighted," Ben said, tapping his pencil on her nose to show he was teasing.

She raised an eyebrow. "I was just thinking what a scream it would be to glue a fake nose on Pin," she said, meaning Pinocchio's son, who was a nervous first-year.

Ben chuckled, his eyes shining. He was a good sport.

Okay, so if Mal had to pick what she liked *most* about Auradon, she would probably have to admit it was the boy sitting across from her. Ben, son of Belle and Beast, was not only the kindest person she had ever met, but was easy on the eyes (um, make that *very* easy) and smart too. More importantly, while Mal was the polar opposite of Auradon's many perfect princesses, he liked her anyway. This made her feel as warm and cozy as her favorite beat-up patchwork leather jacket, which was much more

her speed than ruffles and sequins. While she'd rocked a ball gown for his Coronation, she was glad she didn't have to wear one all the time. Talk about itchy.

Ben smiled and went back to doing his homework, and Mal tried to do the same, except she kept getting interrupted by friends who came by to say hello when they saw her in the library.

"Hey, Mal! Love your outfit today!" said Lonnie with a big smile. Ever since she'd learned the truth of the villain kids' deprived childhoods on the Isle of the Lost, Mulan's daughter was especially sweet.

"Mal!" cried Jane. "Will you stop by later and help me with my Fair Is Fair homework? I can't get the equation right." Jane was often nervous about doing things correctly, especially after the disaster she'd caused at Ben's Coronation. It was a lot to live up to having Fairy Godmother as your mother, especially when she was also the headmistress of your school.

"Thanks, and sure!" said Mal. "Anytime!"

"Look who's so popular," teased Ben, when the girls were out of earshot.

Mal gave a dismissive wave. "Everyone's just glad my mom didn't turn them all into dragon toast." She nodded toward the guarded, double-locked doors at the end of the room that led to Maleficent's new prison. "Not that I blame them." Joking helped assuage some lingering guilt about her mother's behavior; not all transfer students had to deal with things like having their parents try to destroy everyone at their new school.

Where was the new student manual for that?

“All thanks to you,” Ben said with a serious look on his face. “We didn’t stand a chance otherwise.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll figure out how you can all pay me back later,” Mal said airily. She couldn’t help but smile. “Although another rousing vocal performance in front of the entire school where you happen to mention your ridiculous love for me might just do the trick.”

Ben smiled broadly. “Done! There’s a tourney game this weekend for Castlecoming. I’ll practice my dance moves.”

“I can’t wait.” Mal laughed, tucking a strand of her bright purple locks behind her ear.

“Sure you won’t be too embarrassed to be my date at the dance after?” he asked, beginning to hum the catchy melody.

“Yeah, I’ll probably have to hide my face behind one of Mulan’s masks,” she said, then the floor underneath their feet suddenly began to vibrate and the whole room began to shake. Mal grabbed her books before they fell to the floor, and Ben gripped the edge of the table, trying to keep it steady.

“Another earthquake,” Mal said. “That’s the third one this week!” Out of habit, she looked over her shoulder again at the door to Maleficent’s prison. Until recently, Mal had only felt the ground rumble like that when a great big dragon stomped around during the Coronation attack, so Mal couldn’t help but associate earthquakes with her mother.

“Heard it’s happening all over, not just Auradon City,” said Ben with a frown. “But it’s a natural phenomenon, don’t worry.

Tectonic plates rumbling underneath the ocean and all that.”

“Well, I wish they’d stay still,” said Mal. “They make me queasy.”

“At least they go away quickly,” said Ben.

Unlike some people, Mal thought, forcing herself not to look back at the prison door.

There were no aftershocks to this one thankfully, and an hour later Mal had already forgotten about it. Ben began to put his books away in his satchel and she glanced at the clock. It wasn’t time for the dinner bell yet. “Leaving already?” she asked. “King duties?”

“Yeah, I have to cut the ribbon at the opening of the new Sidekick Recreation Center. Don’t want them to feel overlooked.” Ben shrugged into his blue blazer with the embroidered royal beast-head crest on its right-hand pocket.

“Don’t you mean kick the ribbon?” Mal teased, but Ben didn’t laugh back. She knew he took his royal responsibilities very seriously, and he meant to be a king for all of Auradon—sidekicks and villainy offspring included.

“Text you later?” Ben tugged at a lock of her hair.

“Not if I text you first,” she promised.

Mal did a little more work, but stopped when she heard her phone buzz in her backpack. Thinking it was Ben, she picked it up, but it was a text from an unknown number instead. Strange. She clicked it open and read the message.

Go back where you belong.

Excuse me? she sent. *What's this all about?* She looked around suspiciously, but the library was full of Auradon students diligently working on their Virtues and Values term papers on computer terminals or else absorbed in their Kindness and Decency reading. This week's assignment was Snow White's *How to Keep a Happy Home for a Family of Seven (Dwarfs Optional)*.

Mal looked back down at her phone, waiting to see what would happen next, a pit growing in her stomach. There was no reply for a long time, then the little wand at the bottom of her screen began to show sparks, which indicated that the recipient was typing a reply. Finally it appeared on her screen:

You must return to the Isle of the Lost at once! Before the new moon rises!

Who is this? she texted back, more irritated than scared.

You know who I am.

I'm M . . .

There was no more. Just "M." Who was M? Mal stared at the screen. Who demanded that she return to the Isle of the Lost? And why did she have to return before the new moon rose? And when would that be, anyway?

Mal could think of a few M's in her life, but there was only one M that mattered the most. The big one. Maleficent. Could her mother be communicating to her through text? She might be sitting in her lizard-size prison right now, but she was still the greatest evil fairy who had ever lived. Anything was possible, she

supposed.

Of course Maleficent would want Mal to go home. Her mother had only planned to escape the Isle of the Lost because its invisible barrier kept her from her magic. She despised Auradon and its pretty forests and enchanted rivers. If Maleficent had succeeded in her vengeful plot, the entire kingdom would be as gloomy, dark, and wretched as the Forbidden Fortress by now. In other words, darker than anything her friends at Auradon Prep could imagine. . . .

That was not something she could ever let happen.

Mal read the mysterious text again, apprehension making her heart beat faster. She collected her things, determined to find her friends so they could help her figure out what was going on.

Mal had a feeling that her sweet life in Auradon was about to turn rotten.

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