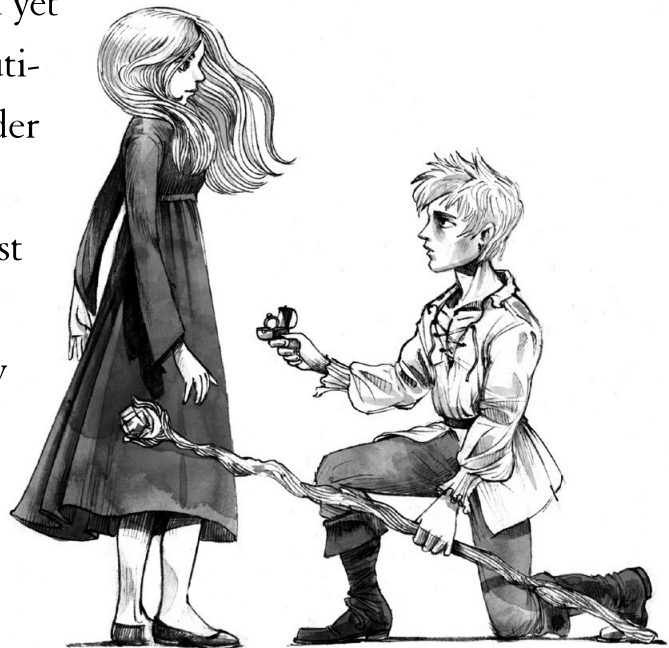


The Master and the Queen

It is natural to doubt your true love when you do not know if he is young or old.

He certainly looks young, Sophie thought, peering at the lean, shirtless boy as he gazed out the tower window, bathed in faded sunlight. Sophie studied his hairless white skin and snug black breeches, his thick spiked hair the color of snow, his tight-veined arms, his glacier-blue eyes. . . . He didn't look a day more than sixteen. And yet somewhere within this beautiful stranger was a soul older than sixteen—much, *much* older than sixteen. For the last three weeks, then, Sophie had refused his ring. How could she bond herself to a boy with the School Master inside of him?



And yet the more Sophie looked at him, the more she couldn't see the School Master. All Sophie could see was a fresh, ethereal youth asking for her hand, with sharp cheekbones and full lips—more handsome than a prince, more powerful than a prince, and unlike Prince You-Know-Who, this boy was *hers*.

Sophie reddened, remembering she was all alone in this world. Everyone else had abandoned her. Every desperate effort to be Good had been punished with betrayal. She had no family, no friends, no future. And now, this ravishing boy in front of her was her last hope for love. Panic burned through her muscles and dried out her throat. There was no choice anymore. Sophie swallowed and slowly stepped towards him.

Look at him. He's no older than you, she soothed herself. *The boy of your dreams.* She reached shaking fingers for his bare shoulder . . . until she suddenly froze in her tracks. *It was only magic that had brought this boy to life,* she thought, pulling her hand back into her sleeve. *But how long does magic last?*

"You're asking yourself the wrong questions," came the smooth voice. "Magic thinks nothing of time."

Sophie lifted her eyes. The boy didn't look at her, his focus on the sallow sun, barely a force through the morning fog.

"Since when can you hear my thoughts?" Sophie said, unnerved.

"I don't need to hear thoughts to know how a Reader's mind thinks," he replied.

Sophie took her place beside him in her black cloak, feeling the chill off his marble-colored skin. She thought of Tedros' skin, always sweaty and tan, with the warmth of a bear's. A hot

flash bolted through her body—rage or regret or something in between. She forced herself closer to the boy, her arm brushing his pale chest.

He still didn't look at her.

“What is it?” Sophie asked.

“The sun,” he said, watching it flicker through the mist. “Every day it rises weaker than the one before.”

“If only you had power to make the sun shine too,” Sophie murmured. “Every day could be a tea party.”

The boy shot her a sour glare. Sophie stiffened, reminded that unlike her once Good best friend, her new suitor was neither Good nor friendly. She quickly looked back out the window, shivering at an icy breeze. “Oh for heaven's sake, suns weaken in the winter. Don't need a sorcerer to know that.”

“Perhaps it takes a Reader to explain this too,” he replied, sweeping to the white stone table in the corner, where a long, knife-sharp pen, shaped like a knitting needle, hovered over an open storybook. Sophie turned to the book, glimpsing the colors of the last page: her painted self kissing the School Master back to youth as her best friend vanished home with a prince.

The End

“Three *weeks* since the Storian wrote our Never After,” said the boy. “Within days, it should have begun a new story with love on Evil's side now. Love that will destroy Good, one fairy tale at a time. Love that turns the pen into Evil's weapon instead of its curse.” His eyes narrowed to slits. “Instead it

reopens the book it just closed and *stays* there, hanging over The End like a play whose curtain won't *shut*."

Sophie couldn't look away from Agatha and Tedros on the page, embracing lovingly as they disappeared. Sophie's gut twisted, her face searing hot—"Here," she croaked, slamming the cover down on them, and shoving the cherry-red storybook next to *The Frog Prince*, *Cinderella*, *Rapunzel*, and the rest of the Storian's finished tales. Her heartbeat calmed. "Curtain shut."

Instantly the book ricocheted off the shelf and smashed into her face, knocking her against the wall, before it flew onto the stone table, swinging open to the last page once more. The Storian glimmered defiantly above it.

"This is no accident," spoke the boy, stalking towards Sophie as she rubbed her stinging cheek. "The Storian keeps our world alive by writing new stories, and at the moment, it has no intention of moving on from *your* story. And as long as the pen does not move on to a *new* story, the sun dies, day by day, until the Woods go dark and it is The End for us *all*."

Sophie looked up at him, silhouetted by the weak light. "But—but what is it waiting for?"

He leaned in and touched her neck, his fingers frigid on her peach-cream skin. Sophie recoiled, jamming into the bookshelf. The boy smiled and drew closer, blocking out the sun. "I'm afraid it has doubts whether I'm your true love," he cooed. "It has doubts whether you've committed to Evil. It has doubts whether your friend and her prince should be gone forever."

Sophie slowly gazed up at the black shadow.

“It meaning *you*,” said the School Master, holding out his hand.

Sophie looked down to see the ring of gold in his cold, young palm and her terrified face in its reflection.

Three weeks before, Sophie had kissed the School Master into a boy and banished her best friend home. For a moment, she’d felt the relief of victory as Agatha silently disappeared with Tedros. Her best friend may have chosen a prince over her, but there was no such thing as a prince in Gavaldon. Agatha would die an ordinary girl, with an ordinary boy, while she basked in Ever After, far, far away. Wrapped in the arms of her true love, soaring towards his silver tower in the sky, Sophie waited to feel happy. She’d won her fairy tale and winning was supposed to mean happiness.

But as they landed in his murky, stone chamber, Sophie started to shake. Agatha was gone. Her best friend. Her soul-mate. And with her, she’d taken a boy who Sophie had grown close to in so many forms: when she was a girl, when she was a boy, when he was her true love, when he was just her friend. Agatha had won Tedros, the only boy Sophie ever truly knew; Tedros had won Agatha, the one person Sophie never thought she’d live without. And Sophie had won a beautiful boy of whom she knew nothing, except the dark depths of his evil. As the School Master moved towards her, young as a prince, with a cocky smile, Sophie knew she’d made a mistake.

Only it’d been too late to turn back. Through the window, Sophie glimpsed Agatha’s vanishing embers, the castles rotting

vulturous black, boys and girls smashing into vicious war, teachers firing spells at students, at each other. . . . Stunned, she'd twirled to the School Master—only to see the frost-haired boy on one knee before her, ring in hand. Take it, he'd said, and two years of war would cease. No more Good versus Evil. No more Boys versus Girls. Instead, only indisputable Evil: a School Master and his queen. Take the ring, the beautiful boy said, and she would have her happy ending at last.

Sophie didn't.

The School Master left her alone in the tower, sealing the window so she couldn't escape. Every morning when the clock struck ten, he came and asked again, his young, sinewy body inexplicably clad in different clothes—one day a lace-up shirt, the next day a draping tunic or tight vest or ruffled collar—and his cloud-white hair just as fickle, whether sleeked or tousled or curled. He brought gifts too: exquisite jeweled gowns, luscious bouquets, lavender perfumes, vials of creams and soaps and herbs, always anticipating her next wish. Still Sophie shook her head each time and then he'd be gone without a word, scowling with teenage sulk. She'd stay there, trapped in his chamber alone, with the company of his fairy-tale library and his old blue robes and silver mask abandoned like relics to hooks on a wall. Food would appear magically three times a day at the moment she felt hungry, and precisely what she was craving, in perfect portions on plates made of bone—steamed vegetables, steamed fruit, steamed fish, and the occasional bowl of bacon and beans (she couldn't shake the cravings from her time as a boy). When night fell, a giant bed would materialize in the

chamber, with velvet sheets the color of blood and a white lace canopy. At first, Sophie couldn't sleep, petrified he would come in the dark. But he never returned until the next morning for their silent ritual of ring and refusal.

By the second week, Sophie began to wonder what had happened to the schools. Had her rejections prolonged the war between boys and girls? Had she cost any lives? She tried to ask what had become of her friends—of Hester, Dot, Anadil, Hort—but he answered no questions, as if the ring was the price of moving forward.

Today was the first day he'd even spoken since he brought her here. Now, standing beside him in the glow of a dying sun, Sophie saw she could no longer delay without consequence. The time had come for her to seal her ending with him or slowly fade into death too. The gold ring sparkled brighter in the School Master's hand, promising new life. Sophie looked up at the bare-chested boy, praying to see a reason to take it . . . and saw nothing but a stranger. "I can't," she breathed, shrinking against a shelf. "I don't know the first thing about you."

The School Master stared at her, square jaw flexing, and put the ring back into his breeches. "What is it you would like to know?"

"For one thing, your name," Sophie said. "If I'm going to stay here with you, I need something to call you."

"The teachers call me 'Master.'"

"I'm not calling you 'Master,'" Sophie snapped.

He gritted his teeth about to fire back, but Sophie wasn't cowed. "Without me, your Never After doesn't exist," she

preempted, voice rising. “You’re nothing but a boy—a well-built, virile, obscenely handsome boy—but still, a *boy*. You can’t lord over me. You can’t scare me into true love. I don’t care if you’re gorgeous or rich or powerful. Tedros had all of those things and la-di-da, didn’t *that* turn out well. I deserve someone who makes me happy. At *least* as happy as Agatha and Agatha doesn’t have to call Tedros ‘Prince’ for the rest of her life, does she? Because Tedros has a name, like every boy in the world, and so do you and I will call you by it if you expect me to actually give you a chance.”

The School Master swelled crimson, but Sophie was breathing flames now. “That’s right. *I’m* in charge now. You might be the Master of this infernal school, but you are not my Master and you never will be. You said it yourself: the Storian won’t write because it is waiting for *my* choice, not yours. I choose whether I take your ring. I choose whether this is The End. I choose whether this world lives or dies. And I’m happy to watch it burn to dust if you expect a slave instead of a queen.”

The School Master glowered at her, veins pulsing beneath his ghost-white neck. He bit his lip so hard Sophie thought he was about to eat her and she stepped back in horror, only to see him slacken with an angry pant and look away. Then he was quiet for a very long time, his fists clenched.

“Rafal,” he mumbled. “My name is Rafal.”

Rafal, Sophie thought, astonished. In an instant, she saw him anew: the callow milk of his skin, the adolescent sparkle in his eyes, the erect puff to his chest, matching the storm and youth of a name. *Rafal*. What is it about a name that

gives us a story to believe in?

She suddenly felt the blush of desire, craving to touch him . . . until she remembered what choosing him would mean. This was a boy who'd butchered his own blood in the name of Evil and he believed her capable of the same. Sophie held herself back.

"What was your brother's name?" she asked.

He spun, eyes aflame. "I don't see how that will help you get to know me any better."

Sophie didn't press the point. Then behind him, she noticed the fog abating, revealing a greenish haze over two black castles in the distance. It was the first time in three weeks he'd unsealed the window long enough for her to see through. But both schools seemed dead quiet, no sign of life on any of the roofs or balconies. "W-w-where is everyone?" she sputtered, squinting at the healed Bridge between the castles. "What happened to the girls? The boys were going to kill them—"

"A queen would have the right to ask me questions about the school she rules," he said. "You are not a queen yet."

Sophie cleared her throat, noticing the bulge of the ring in his tight pocket. "Um, why do you keep changing clothes? It's . . . strange."

For the first time, the boy seemed uncomfortable. "Given your refusals, I assumed dressing like the princes you chase would move things along." He scratched his rippled stomach. "Then I remembered the son of Arthur wasn't fond of shirts."

Sophie snorted, trying to ignore his perfect torso. "Didn't think the all-powerful were capable of self-doubt."

“If I was all-powerful, I could make you love me,” he growled.

Sophie heard the petulance in his voice and for a moment saw an ordinary boy, lovesick and striving for a girl he couldn't have. Then she remembered this was no ordinary boy. “No one can make anyone love them,” she hit back. “I learned that lesson harder than anyone. Besides, even if you *could* make me love you, you could never love me. You can't love anything. Not if you embrace Evil as a choice. It's why your brother is dead.”

“And yet, I'm alive because of true love's kiss,” he said.

“You tricked me into it—”

“You never broke your grip.”

Sophie blanched. “I'd *never* kiss you and mean it!”

“Oh? For me to return to life, to return to youth . . . the kiss had to go *both* ways, didn't it?” He looked into Sophie's stunned face and grinned. “Surely your best friend taught you that.”

Sophie said nothing, the truth extinguishing her fight. Just as Agatha once could have taken Tedros' hand before she chose Sophie instead, Sophie too could have sent the School Master back to the grave. But here they were, both beautiful and young, victims of a kiss she was trying to deny. Why had she held on to him that night? Sophie asked herself. Even once she knew it was *him* she was kissing? Looking up at the porcelain boy, she thought of everything he'd done to win her, across death and time . . . his unyielding faith that he could make her happy, beyond any family, friend, or prince. He had come for her when no one else wanted her. He had believed in her when

no one else did. Sophie's voice clumped in her throat. "Why do you want me so much?" she rasped.

He stared at her, the clamp of his jaw easing, his lips falling open slightly. For a moment, Sophie thought he looked the way Tedros did when he let down his guard—a lost boy playing at a grown-up. "Because once upon a time, I was just like you," he said softly. He blinked fast, falling into memory. "I tried to love my brother. I tried to escape my fate. I even thought I'd found—" He caught himself. "But it only led to more pain . . . more Evil. Just as every time you seek love, it leads you to the same. Your mother, your father, your best friend, your prince . . . The more you chase the light, the more darkness you find. And yet still you doubt your place in Evil."

Sophie tensed as he gently lifted her chin. "For thousands of years, Good has told us what love is. Both you and I have tried to love in their way, only to suffer pain," he said. "But what if there's a different kind of love? A darker love that turns pain into power. A love that can only be understood by the two who share it. That's why you held our kiss, Sophie. Because I see you for who you really are and love you for it when no one else can. Because what we've sacrificed for each other is beyond what Good can even fathom. It doesn't matter if they don't call it love. We know it is, just as we know the thorns are as much a part of the rose as the petals." He leaned in, lips caressing her ear. "I am the mirror of your soul, Sophie. To love me is to love yourself," he whispered. Then he raised her hand to his mouth and kissed it like a prince, before he gently let it go.

Sophie's heart wrenched so sharply she thought he'd torn

it out of her. She'd never felt so naked in her life and huddled tighter into her black cloak. Then little by little, staring into the harsh symmetry of his face, Sophie felt her breath come back, a strange safe warmth flooding her core. He understood her, this dark-souled boy, and in the sapphire facets of his eyes, she suddenly saw how deep they went. She shook her head, rattled. "I don't even know if you're really a boy."

He smiled at her. "If your fairy tale has taught you one lesson, Sophie, it is that things are only as you see."

Sophie frowned. "I don't understand—" she started . . . but somewhere in her soul she did.

The boy looked out at the sun, frail and hazy over his school, and Sophie knew that the time for questions was over. As he slid his hand into his pocket, Sophie could feel her whole body trembling, as if pulled towards a waterfall she wouldn't escape.

"Will we be as happy as Tedros and Agatha?" she pressed, voice cracking.

"You must trust your story, Sophie. It has come to The End for a reason." He turned to her. "But now it's time for you to believe it."

Sophie looked down at the gold circle in his hand, breaths growing faster, faster. . . . With a shudder, she pushed him away. He reached for her and Sophie shoved him against the wall, pinning her own palm flat against his frigid chest. He didn't resist as Sophie moved her hand over his sternum, eyes wild, panting hard. She didn't know what she was looking for until she found it beneath her fingers and froze. Her hand rose

and fell on his chest, rose and fell, his heart throbbing between them. Slowly Sophie looked up at him, drinking in his strong, hopeful beat, no different than her own.

“Rafal,” she whispered, wishing a boy to life.

His fingertips caressed her face and for the first time, Sophie didn’t flinch from the cold. As he drew her in, Sophie felt the doubts melt out of her, fear giving way to faith. Black cloak pressed to his white body, like two swans in balance, Sophie raised her left hand into the sunlight, steady and sure. Then Rafal slipped his ring onto her finger, the warm gold sliding up her skin inch by inch, until it fit tight. Sophie let out a gasp and the snow-white boy smiled, never breaking his gaze.

In each other’s arms, Master and Queen turned to the enchanted pen over their fairy tale, ready for it to bless their love . . . ready for it to close their book at last . . .

The pen didn’t move.

The book stayed open.

Sophie’s heart stalled. “What happened?”

She followed Rafal’s eyes to the red-amber sun, which had darkened another shade. His face steeled to a deadly mask. “It seems our happy ending isn’t the one the pen doubts.”