

Belle

The Mysterious Message



Belle

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Chapter One



*I*t had been another lovely dinner at the Beast's castle. Although Belle did wonder if she'd ever grown used to singing and dancing plates!

Belle sat at the long dining-room table. She held a cup of hot tea in her hands. The Beast had gone off to bed long ago. Most of the dishes and forks and knives and spoons had already been washed up and put themselves away.

Belle took one last sip and set the teacup on the table. It spun around and started bouncing up and down. Its name was Chip. "Tell me the story of how you came to the castle again!" he begged.

Belle smiled at the eager little teacup. She had only been at the Beast's castle for a short while. But she had already told Chip the story four times. Or maybe it was five.

"I lived in a quiet village with my father, Maurice, not too far from here," Belle began. "We lived in a cozy cottage filled with his inventions. My village was a lovely place, but I didn't really fit in. Everyone thought I was..."

"Different!" Chip said.

"Chip," scolded his mother, a teapot named Mrs. Potts. "Let Belle tell the story. It's impolite to interrupt!"

"It's all right, Mrs. Potts," Belle said. She turned back to Chip. "Yes, they did think I was different. Mostly because I love books so much." Belle smiled. "Every time I started a new story, I was off on another adventure. But I still hoped for some real excitement in my life." She paused for a moment.

“And then your father got lost on his way to the fair...” Chip said.

“~~And then my father got lost on his way to the fair,~~” Belle continued. “~~And when he didn’t come home, I grew worried. So I set out to find him.~~” She took a deep breath. No matter how many times she told the story, this part always upset her. “And I found him. He was locked in a cell in the castle tower.”

Chip nodded. “And then the master showed up and you were scared!” he said.

“I was pretty scared,” Belle admitted. By now she had gotten used to the Beast’s fearsome appearance. But at first it had been pretty shocking.

“But then you were very brave and told the master you would switch places with your father,” Chip said.

“That’s true. The Beast agreed and sent my father home,” Belle replied.

“Then you found us!” Chip said excitedly. “And we’re all enchanted! And you were very surprised!”



“Yes,” Belle agreed. “I was very surprised to find a houseful of enchanted objects!”

Chip nodded wisely. “That’s because an old beggar woman came to our house and asked for a place to stay,” he explained. “But the master sent her away. She was really a beautiful sorceress. She turned the master into an ugly beast. And the rest of us into household objects as punishment.” He turned to his mother. “It’s not nice to be mean, right, Mama?”

“It’s always best to be kind to everyone,” said Mrs. Potts briskly. “No matter what they may look like.” She sighed. “Now off to the tub with you, Chip. It’s almost bedtime.”

“Aw, Mama,” said Chip. But he could tell his mother meant business. “Okay,” he said sadly. “See you tomorrow, Belle!” He hopped down the table toward the kitchen.

Mrs. Potts took a deep breath. Belle did not know the whole story. The girl did not realize there was a time limit on the sorceress’s enchantment. There was a magical rose hidden in the West Wing of the Beast’s castle. The Beast had to fall in love—and get the girl to love him. Then he would turn back into a handsome prince. And he had to do it before his twenty-first birthday. That’s when the last petal would fall off the magical rose. If the Beast didn’t fall in love, he and all the household objects would stay the way they were. Forever.

Mrs. Potts was a cheerful, no-nonsense teapot. But she certainly did not want to be a piece of china for the rest of her life.

So Mrs. Potts—and all the household objects in the castle—were hoping against hope that the master and Belle would fall in love. Then the spell would be broken. The two *were* becoming friends. But it seemed nearly impossible that a beautiful girl like Belle would ever fall in love with an ugly beast.

“Good night. See you tomorrow,” Belle said to Mrs. Potts as she stood up.

Lumiere the candelabrum appeared at Belle’s elbow. “Mademoiselle, may I be of service?” He asked with a deep bow.

“That would be lovely, Lumiere,” Belle said. “I think I’d like to read a bit before bed. Let’s go to the library.”

“With pleasure,” Lumiere replied.

Belle picked up the candelabrum and walked out into the hallway.

The Beast had allowed Belle to use his amazing library. There were more books in it than Belle had ever seen in her entire life. It was her dream come true.

She opened the doors to the huge room.

Belle caught her breath as she saw shelf after shelf of books from floor to ceiling. She smiled and began choosing some books. Ten minutes later she had quite a high stack.

“Well, this should do for tonight,” she said to Lumiere.

“*Mon dieu!*” Lumiere exclaimed. “You must be a speed-reader!” Then he noticed the grin on Belle’s face. “Oh, I get it,” he said sheepishly. “That’s a joke.”

Belle began to make her way across the polished floor. She clutched the teetering pile of books to her chest with one hand. Lumiere was in the other. *Crash!* The books scattered all over the marble floor. She placed Lumiere down and began to pick up the books. One had slid across the room and was peeking out from underneath a bookshelf.



Lumiere hopped over to it. “It’s stuck,” he told Belle. She knelt on the floor and gave the book a sharp tug. Then she peered under the shelf. “I think there’s something else under here,” she said. She reached out and grabbed a dusty old book with a torn cover. She blew on it, sending the dust flying.

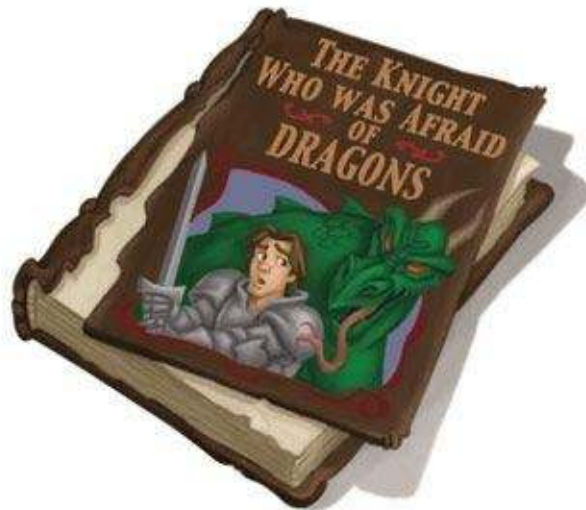
Lumiere sneezed.

~~“Bless you, Lumiere!” Belle said. “But look at this! I’ll bet this has been under that bookshelf for~~ quite a long time.” There was a knight and a dragon on the cover. The knight had a terrified look on his face. Belle laughed and added it to her pile. She picked up Lumiere and carefully headed upstairs.

The hallway was dark and the shadows were spooky. But with the cheerful Lumiere as her guide, Belle was soon safely in her room.



Chapter Two



Belle sat on the edge of her bed wearing a soft nightgown with a pretty pink pattern. Lumiere perched on the night table beside the bed.

“Are you comfortable, mademoiselle?” the candelabrum asked.

Belle settled herself under the goose-down comforter. She plumped up the fluffy pillows behind her. “Why, yes,” she said, “I feel like a princess!” She reached over to the pile of books next to the bed.

“Romance...adventure...fables...which shall I read first?” she wondered aloud. Then the dusty book on the top of the pile caught her eye. She picked it up, flipped open the cover, and began to read.

After a few minutes, Lumiere cleared his throat politely. “Ahem. I hate to be so bold, *ma chère*. But perhaps you could read...out loud?” he asked.

Belle smiled. “How silly of me, of course!” She was delighted that her new friend was interested in books, too!

She started again from the beginning: “Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there lived a handsome young knight named William. He was kind and fair and had a very good sense of humor. He was nice to animals and small children, and he was well known for baking the finest four-and-twenty blackbird pie in the countryside. But there was just one problem. He was terrified of dragons! Even the sight of a small lizard would make him break out in a cold sweat. Luckily for him, he had never had to face one of the horrifying creatures. Then, one day, that all changed....”

Belle giggled. What a fun story! How Chip would love it! Perhaps she would read it to him tomorrow at breakfast.

“Go on,” said Lumiere, leaning forward.

Belle kept reading. “William was out on his horse, Midnight, looking for adventure. It was a beautiful summer day, which quickly became a sticky, hot summer afternoon. William stopped to let his horse get a drink of water.

“As Midnight drank, William began eyeing the cool, clear water. Perhaps he would go for a quick swim to cool off. First, he took off his gloves, or gauntlets. Next, he removed his helmet and breastplate, and then struggled out of the rest. It was tiring work. Finally he was down to his long underwear when he heard a giggle.

“William dove behind a nearby bush. ‘Who goes there?’ he shouted.

“‘It is I, Princess Isabella,’ came the reply.

“The voice was very sweet and pretty. William peered around the bush. A beautiful princess with long golden hair was standing there, her hands on her hips. She looked as if she was trying hard not to laugh. His face burned with embarrassment.



“‘I beg your pardon, princess,’ William said. ‘If you would just hand me my armor, I would be very pleased to make your acquaintance.’

“The princess laughed as she gathered the various pieces of William’s suit of armor. When he was finally dressed, he stepped out from behind the bush and gave a deep bow. ‘Sir William, at your service,’ he said.

“William’s breastplate was on backward, but Princess Isabella was too polite to point that out.

Instead, she thanked him for making her laugh. It had been a long time since she had smiled, she thought to herself.

“I am very glad to have brought you merriment,” said William. “But why, pray tell, have you been so sad?”

“A terrible dragon has been terrorizing my father’s kingdom,” she explained. “My father has promised my hand in marriage to the first knight who can defeat him. But Sir Halitosis is the only knight brave enough to take my father up on his challenge. And I don’t like Sir Halitosis at all—he has a breath worse than a fire-breathing dragon!”

“William felt his knees begin to knock together with fright. His worst fear! Yikes, he thought. But he smiled bravely and said, ‘Dragon? Why, I eat dragons for breakfast!’ Midnight snorted.”

Belle took a deep breath. The handsome young knight was certainly in trouble! She turned to Lumiere. He was leaning forward so far he looked as if he was about to topple off the nightstand. “Shall I keep reading?” she teased. “Or perhaps it’s time for bed?”

“No, no!” Lumiere cried. “Keep reading, *s’il vous plaît!* I am on the edge of my seat, er, I mean nightstand!”



Belle returned to the story: “Luckily, the princess was as smart and brave as she was beautiful.”

She paid a visit to a wizard who gave her a Cap of Invisibility for the knight to wear.” Belle lowered her voice as she read. ~~““Good luck, my brave knight,” Princess Isabella said, holding up the small cap~~

“Sir William put on a brave smile for his princess. He lowered his head, and Isabella placed the cap upon it. *Poof!* Just like that, he vanished.

““William, are you there?” she asked worriedly.

““Why, yes, I am, dear Isabella,” the young knight replied. ‘I am sorry if I frightened you by disappearing like that.’ He reached up and plucked the cap off his head. He immediately reappeared. ‘Perhaps I should postpone this adventure and become visible again...’ His voice trailed off.

““Tarry not, William,” replied Isabella. ‘You have a dragon to defeat today.’

“William gulped. Unless she also had a Scarf of Silence for him to wear, that dragon was going to hear his knees knocking from a mile away. But he smiled bravely at Isabella.

““I have faith in you, Sir William,” said Isabella. ‘Now place that Cap of Invisibility back upon your head and slay that dragon!’

“William took a deep breath. He placed the cap on his head, and once more he vanished.”

“Oh, my goodness!” cried a voice. “What will happen next?” Belle and Lumiere turned their heads. And there was Wardrobe, looking terribly anxious!

Belle laughed. “I didn’t realize you were listening!” she called out.

“I’m on pins and needles!” cried Wardrobe.

“Well, let’s find out what happens next,” said Belle. Just then, she let out a loud yawn. “Excuse me,” she said. Cogsworth the mantel clock may not have been there to tell her the time, but Belle knew that it was getting quite late. But she (and Lumiere and Wardrobe) just had to know how the story ended. Belle smiled and turned the page....

She looked up, blinking in confusion. “That’s it,” she said. “There’s nothing more.”

“That can’t possibly be the end,” said Lumiere. He frowned. “Can it?”

Belle shook her head. “No, the last chapter must be missing. This is an old book. Perhaps the pages fell out.” She closed the book. “We can check the library tomorrow. Maybe the last chapter is still under the bookshelf.”

Wardrobe sighed. “I guess we have no choice. We’ll have to wait to find out what happens,” she said sadly. “Good night, Belle. Sweet dreams, Lumiere.”

“Sweet dreams,” said Lumiere.

“Good night, my friends,” Belle said softly.

Lumiere put his hands together and snuffed out the candles. “Do you mind...?” he asked Belle.

Belle realized that Lumiere could not blow out the candle on his head by himself. “Of course,” she said. And then the room was dark.

Belle lay in bed, her mind racing. What happened to the knight? Did he defeat the dragon? Did he win the love of his princess? Or did she have to marry the mean old knight with the bad breath?

“I’ll never get to sleep!” Belle whispered to herself. But within moments her eyelids fluttered shut. And she was sound asleep.



Chapter Three



*E*arly the next morning, there was a sharp knock on the bedroom door. Belle woke with a start. She was having a strange dream. She and her father were battling a dragon with the help of an invisible princess.

She yawned and stretched. Sunlight streamed through the windows, and the birds were singing. For a moment, she thought she was at home in her own bed. Then she realized with a pang that she was still a prisoner in the Beast's castle. But she wasn't sad for long. For she had just remembered that there was a missing chapter to find.

"Come in," she said, sitting up in bed.

The door swung open and Cogsworth stood in the doorway. He looked a little embarrassed to be disturbing Belle while she was still in her nightgown.

"I beg your pardon, mademoiselle," he said. "But breakfast is served in the dining room." As the head of the household, it was Cogsworth's job to make sure that everything was running just as his master liked. And the master had been up early and already had his breakfast. He had seemed unhappy that Belle wasn't there to join him.



Cogsworth glared at Lumiere. The candelabrum was sound asleep. “Wake up, you lazy ball o’ wax!”

wax!" he cried.

~~"Oh, please don't get angry with Lumiere," said Belle. "It's my fault, Cogsworth," she said in a soothing voice. "I kept him up late last night reading a book."~~

"What, what..." Lumiere leaped up and nearly fell off the bedside table. "Aah, good morning," he said pleasantly to Belle. He scowled at Cogsworth. "Interrupting my beauty sleep again, you overgrown pocket watch?"

"We'll be down in a moment," Belle told the mantel clock, trying to smooth things over between the two. Then she picked up the book on the nightstand.

"I do wonder if we'll ever find that missing chapter," she said out loud. Idly, she began to flip through the book.

Cogsworth was interested despite himself. The book in Belle's hands looked oddly familiar.

Belle noticed him staring. She held the book out. "Cogsworth, do you know anything about this book?" she asked.

Cogsworth walked into the room. "As if I have time for this nonsense," he muttered. "Breakfast is waiting!" But there was a twinkle of excitement in his eye.

"Why, bless my clock springs!" he exclaimed when he got a closer look at the book's cover. "That was the master's when he was a young lad." He shook his head. "But it has been missing for years!"

"What else can you tell us, Cogsworth?" asked Lumiere.

Cogsworth put his hands together, deep in thought. "All I remember is that the master's tutor asked him to read this book and write a report. And all the master wanted to do was play with his toy soldiers." He cleared his throat. "The master was a little, well, short-tempered at the time. Youth, you know."

Belle hid a small smile.

"So the master threw the book across the room and an entire section of it fell out," Cogsworth continued. "The tutor was disappointed and took the book—and the toy soldiers—away. My, was the master angry after that! That's all I remember...."

He shook his head at the memory. "And here it is after all these years! Where on earth did you find it?"

"Under a bookshelf in the library!" Belle said. She opened the book to show him where the missing section was. To everyone's surprise, a slip of paper fell out and drifted to the floor. Cogsworth rushed over and picked it up. Lumiere hopped down from the table and tried to pull the paper out of Cogsworth's hands.

Belle watched in alarm. It looked as if they would rip it in two! "Excuse me!" Belle cried. "I'll take that!" She jumped out of bed and held out her hand. Lumiere let go, and Cogsworth fell to the ground. The mantel clock stood up, brushed himself off, and handed it over, a blush spreading over his clock face.

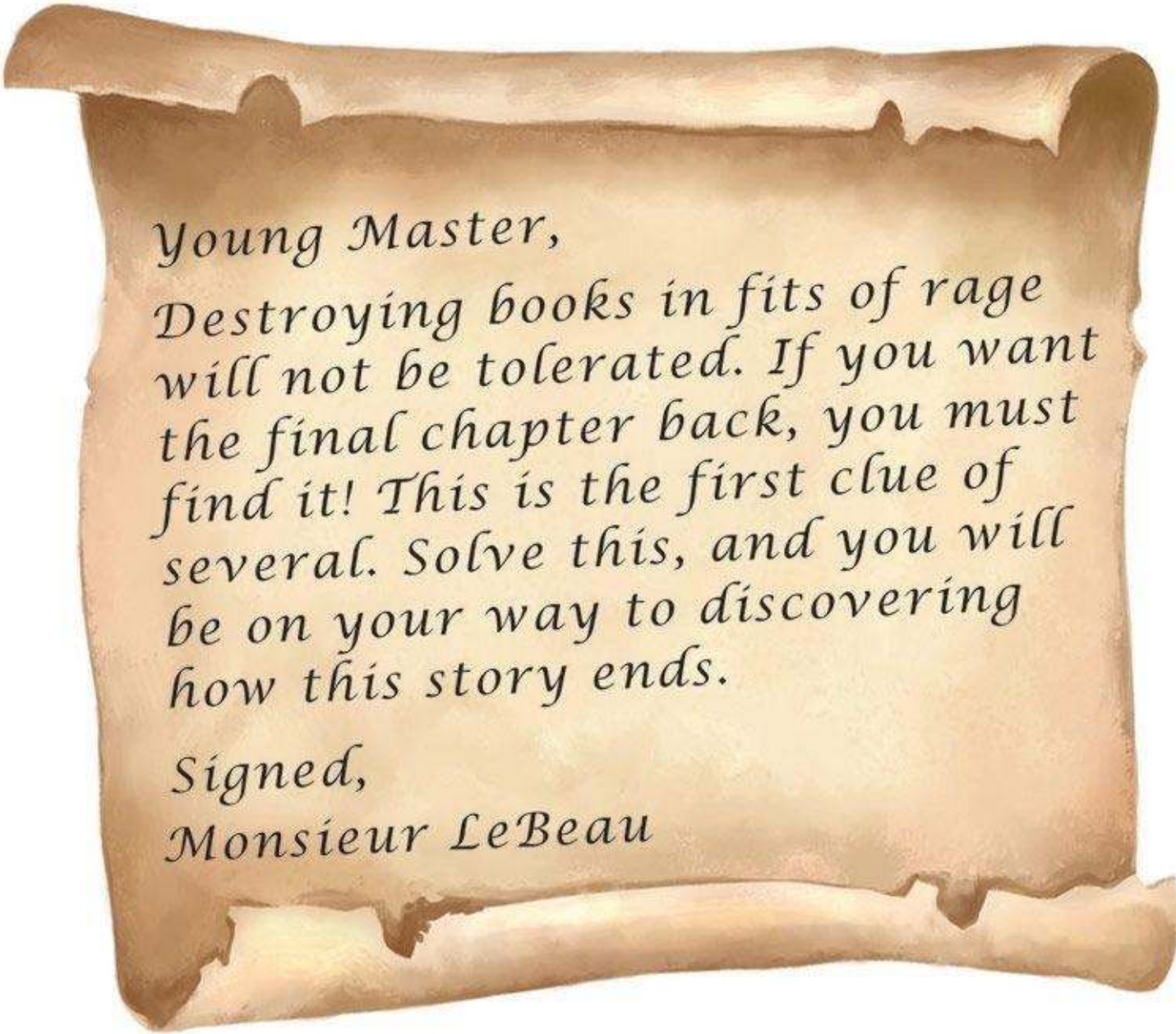
Belle smoothed out the paper and took a close look.

"I think it's a note!" she exclaimed. "Could it be a clue?"

"Read it, mademoiselle, read it!" begged Lumiere.



Belle read the note:



*Young Master,
Destroying books in fits of rage
will not be tolerated. If you want
the final chapter back, you must
find it! This is the first clue of
several. Solve this, and you will
be on your way to discovering
how this story ends.*

*Signed,
Monsieur LeBeau*

She flipped the note over. "The clue is written on the other side!" she said excitedly. Cogsworth cleared his throat. "As head of this household, may I suggest that we meet after breakfast to read the first clue? Mademoiselle, you need to eat. Lumiere and I must attend to a few household duties, then we will be ready to begin the search."

Lumiere sighed. "Party pooper," he said.

Belle smiled at Cogsworth. "I think Cogsworth is right. We'll all think better after a good breakfast," she said.

Cogsworth grinned. He liked it when he was right.

"I'll see you after breakfast," Belle said. "Then the search shall begin!"



Chapter Four



“Good Morning, my dear!” Mrs. Potts said cheerfully as Belle walked into the dining room. “A special of tea for you?”

“Yes, thank you,” said Belle. She sat at the table, unfolded a crisp white napkin, and placed it on her lap. The note was in her apron pocket. Her fingers were itching to pull it out and read it, but she decided it was only fair to wait until everyone was together.

Chip hopped over, a big smile on his little face. “Good morning, Belle!” he cried.

“Good morning, Chip,” said Belle. As she began to eat her breakfast, she told the little teacup and his mother about the mysterious book with the missing chapter.

Chip was wide-eyed. “A mystery!” he exclaimed. “How exciting! I am an excellent detective,” he bragged. “Mama, can I help her? Can I? Can I?”

“If mademoiselle says it’s all right,” Mrs. Potts told him. “But I don’t want you getting in the way.”

“I’d be honored,” said Belle. “I’m meeting Cogsworth and Lumiere after breakfast to read the first clue. Will you join us?”

Chip jumped up so high he spilled a little tea on the tablecloth. But Mrs. Potts was so pleased to see her son happy that she didn’t say a word about it.

After breakfast, Mrs. Potts tidied up. Lumiere, Cogsworth, and Chip gathered on the table in front of Belle.

“This is very exciting, no?” asked Lumiere.

“Yes!” Chip said with a giggle.

Belle pulled out the paper, smoothed it on the table, and read it out loud:

To find this clue
You'll be hard put.
On a dark gray night,
It's underfoot.

Belle read the clue to herself again, then looked up slowly. "What could it mean?" she wondered.

The clock, the candelabrum, and the small teacup with the chip all stared back at her blankly.

Cogsworth cleared his throat. "Hmmm," he said. "This is more difficult than I had imagined."

The mantel clock paced back and forth. "Let's start at the beginning. A clue is hidden somewhere in this castle. It will lead us to another clue, and another until we find the missing book chapter."

He spun around and stared at everyone. "Are you with me so far?" he asked.

"Yes," Lumiere and Chip replied.

Belle nodded, hiding a smile. The mantel clock was taking this hunt very seriously!



Cogsworth continued to pace. “We need to think of something that would be under your feet on dark night,” he said. “Any suggestions?”

“A rug?” suggested Chip.

“A rug!” Cogsworth repeated. He looked at Belle. “What do you think?”

“That’s a good guess, Chip,” Belle said.

“But a rug is always under your feet, whether it’s night or day,” she explained gently.

Cogsworth nodded. “As I thought. It is not a rug!”

“If it is a gray night, perhaps the clue is saying that it is raining!” exclaimed Lumiere. “Could be...a doormat?”

Cogsworth scowled. “We don’t have a doormat,” he said, rolling his eyes at the candelabrum. “Have you ever seen a castle with a doormat?”

“Well, do you have a better idea?” Lumiere asked, poking him in the chest.

Belle stood up. “Maybe if we walked around the castle, we’d get an idea,” she suggested.

Everyone thought that was a good plan.

They left the dining room and began to wander the halls of the castle.

They walked and walked. They passed by big statues, splendid paintings, and beautiful tapestries. But nothing that would be underfoot. On any night, gray or otherwise.

“This is a very big castle,” Belle said.

Finally the four came to a stop in the hall of armor. Dozens of suits of armor lined the walls on both sides.

Belle sighed. “I feel like the clue is so close!” she cried. “Like it is right under our noses!”

The three nodded in agreement. The only question was—where?

Little Chip glanced around the hallway. He loved looking at the suits of armor, imagining the brave knights who must have worn them long ago.

Suddenly he realized something. “Hey!” he shouted. “These knights look pretty dark gray to me

“Chip, that’s it!” Belle cried. “You did it!”

“And if the clue is underfoot...” Cogsworth began.

“Then the clue must be under the feet of one of the suits of armor!” finished Lumiere. “Let’s start looking!”

Belle knelt in front of the first suit of armor and ran her hand underneath one of the feet. To her surprise, the suit of armor began to shake and quiver. She drew back her hand in alarm. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“Enchanted as well,” said Cogsworth with a shrug. “And ticklish, too, it looks like!”

They went up one side of the hallway, peering under the feet of each suit of armor. But there wasn’t a clue to be found. Next, they began searching those on the other side. Finally, they reached the very last suit of armor. They looked at each other.

“This is it,” said Belle. “It’s got to be here!” She felt under the left foot. The ticklish suit of armor began to shake, squeaking away.

“*Hmmm*, needs oil,” said Cogsworth. He never forgot his head-of-household duties.

Belle took a deep breath. Then she reached under the right foot. And there it was! She held it up.

“Hooray!” shouted Chip.

“We did it!” said Cogsworth.



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