

What If? A Betwixt World Tale

by Deidre Lockyer

Beauty bent over the prone figure of her beloved, her Beast, and the rain soaked through her dress, staining the front of her skirt, her stockings. She knew nothing of this, only the hot tears that welled in her eyes, falling soft as caresses onto the furred cheeks of the one she loved; his hair matted with dirt, his claws bleeding, his clothing ragged where he'd torn them in his grief.

"Beast..." she whispered, and her heart shattered as the word dropped from her lips. "Come back to me; I love you..."

I love you.

In the seconds that followed, she would remember the sun exploding, remember lifting her arms to shield her eyes from the light, recall the glare slowly receding, fading away until the gentle twilight ruled once more.

Beauty glanced up.

A golden figure stood there, a Prince of wealth, resplendent in satins and velvets, impossibly radiant. His eyes held hers, and he reached out his hand.

Beauty would remember hearing his voice in a stream of words, explaining his story, assuring her, "I am he..." Yet gone were the lush, velvety tones of her Beast. What spiced this voice? Perhaps an inflection of victory, of vanity, an echo of the same flaw that had first seen him cast in fur and claw.

"Beauty?" He spoke, but the sound of her name was wrong on his tongue.

Declining the hand, Beauty stepped back.

"No," she heard herself say.

His brow creased; a small flame of anger began to dance in his eyes.

Beauty tilted her head to one side, listening to the sizzling stars as they whispered in her ears.

"No. You are not my Beast."

She turned... and walked away.

Behind her, the spirit of her Beast stirred inside the Prince. Hearing her retreat, the spirit fought, clawed free from the radiant shell, let it fall to the ground. Across the wild garden of night, it flew, swooping to catch Beauty in its arms, and she turned, laughing, sending his name flying into the wind.

"Vincent!"

"Catherine..." the familiar, velvety voice whispered low as they fled, escaping the ink, the page, the old, known story with its ending never wild enough, real enough to be theirs.

Free to be together, at last.

Once, upon a time.