

## The Gardner and the Ladies Maid

### A Beauty and the Beast short story by K.M. Shea

When Elle returned from her weeklong trip she found Severin in his study. “I’m home,” she announced, bearing a bouquet of flowers in one arm and Jock the fat Papillon in the other.

“Madame Elle, what a delight it is to welcome you home,” Burke said, bowing extravagantly. “You must be famished after your journey. Shall I send for refreshments and your favorite tea as well as a vase for your flowers?”

“I would much appreciate it. Thank you, Burke, you are a noble man,” Elle said, plopping down on the sofa Severin had acquired in his study since marrying Elle.

Severin looked up from the book he was reading. “Where have you been?” he asked Elle after Burke left the study.

“What do you mean, ‘where’? You know perfectly well that I was visiting Mademoiselle Cicilly. I told you so several times before I left. She’s the only one I can stand in the entirety of your family’s festering court,” Elle said, setting Jock on the ground.

“That is where you *said* you were going. The small squad of soldiers I sent after you lost your trail several miles from Cicilly’s lands. It is anyone’s guess where you *really* went.”

“You sent soldiers after me? I find your lack of trust hurtful.”

“Don’t bother pretending you didn’t know. The captain said you went through extraordinary efforts to ditch them during your journey.”

Elle tapped her fingers on the armrest of her chair. “Your men are smart. Too smart.”

“I’m very thankful they are, else they wouldn’t be able to keep up with you.”

“Don’t they complain that you regularly use army forces to babysit me?”

“No. You have become something of a test of courage. They see guarding you as the ultimate challenge,” Severin dryly said.

Elle sighed in aggravation and was silent for a few moments. “I’ve been thinking about Emele and Marc. We really ought to do something about them.”

“What.”

“Emele has been positively pining over Marc. It’s time for someone to point that out to him so he can do something about it or gently reject her—and if he does that he’s a proper fool,” Elle said.

“It is in times such as this one that I am forced to remind myself that I actually *like* your somewhat indecent sense of humor and curiosity,” Severin said, returning his attention to his book.

Elle shrugged before she rearranged her armful of flowers. “What do you think of this bouquet?” she asked, standing and setting the purple-blue, star shaped flowers on his desk.

Severin studied the flowers with interest. “They look hardy; I can’t say I recognize them. Where did you get them?” he asked, sifting through the flowers. His left eye twitched when he found a flower with flattened petals.

Elle leaned across Severin’s desk and kissed his cheek. “Here and there. I brought back some seeds in case you wanted to try growing some. And you are right, they are hardy. Supposedly they bloom before tulips, sometimes even when there is still snow.”

“Interesting,” Severin said. “I wonder what their frost resistance is.”

Elle smiled. “So we agree then, someone needs to talk to Marc and Emele?”

Severin looked up from the flowers. “Even with this bribe I am not going to agree to you meddling in the romantic affairs of our staff.”

“It’s hardly meddling. I think of it as more of an intervention,” Elle said.

“It’s meddling. It would take a falling star to hit Marc before he would notice Emele’s attentions.”

“Exactly.”

“What are you planning?”

“I thought you and I could cultivate flowers arranged in letters to spell out an explanation. Marc notices all plant life, after all.”

“You would have better luck knocking him out, gagging him, and plainly telling him,” Severin said.

“What a fantastic idea!”

“I wasn’t being serious.”

“That does not mean it’s not the best option,” Elle pointed out.

“You cannot knock out the chief gardener. What will you do if you hit him too hard and he is addled for the rest of his life? The gardens will suffer.”

“You’re starting to sound like Lucien.”

“Do you not know me at all? I was being sarcastic.”

“So cultivating a message with plant life, then?”

Severin leaned back in his chair, folding his hands across his stomach as he thought.

“Talk to Bernadine. She will have a better idea.”

Elle had a triumphant smile on her face, as if Severin had said exactly what she wanted to hear. “What a divine idea. Thank you, husband!”

“You’re welcome,” Severin suspiciously said.

Elle plopped back in her couch and waited for tea. Severin did not dwell much longer on the subject, and hardly thought twice when he was told that Elle spent a great deal of her free time in the kitchens with Bernadine for the next few days.



Several days after her conversation with Severin, Elle strolled through the gardens, arm in arm with Emele. Elle twirled a parasol above her head and scanned the gardens with the eye of an eagle. Emele chattered naively at her side.

“Madame Beaumont wishes for me to tell you that your dress will be finished in time. She’s made it out of a splendid shade of rose pink silk and reports that it was no small feat finding a shade of pink that agreed with your eyes, hair, and skin tone.”

“The skirts are not cumbersomely wide, are they?” Elle asked, leaning forward to glance up a walking lane before dragging Emele a different way.

“If you mean to ask if they are as wide and hooped as my wardrobe, they are not,” Emele tartly said.

Elle affectionately patted Emele’s arm. “I did not mean it that way and you know it. I cannot hope to wear those fashionable skirts for I move like a hobbled horse in them. It is all because I haven’t your grace.”

“Do not speak to me of grace. You have the ability to run on rooftops.”

“Only because I’m not wearing dresses like yours. Ah, here we are. Good afternoon, Marc!” Elle said, trumpeting her greeting.

Marc turned from the green hedge he was trimming and bowed. “Greetings to you, Your Highness and Mademoiselle Emele.”

“Good heavens, Marc. I have told you before, I’m not a princess,” Elle said, shuddering with horror.

“You married a prince, Your Highness,” Emele pertly said. She smiled prettily when Elle eyed her.

Elle turned away from her ladies maid to interrogate the gardener. “How are you doing this fine day, Marc?” Elle asked.

“Fine, thank you, Your Highness,” Marc said with another bow.

“Isn’t it splendid weather we are having?”

Emele shifted in the following silence before adding, “It is wonderful growing weather, isn’t it Marc?”

Marc bowed.

“I suppose so with the sunshine and everything,” Elle said, briefly squinting down the lane. “Doesn’t Emele look gorgeous this day?”

“W-what?” Emele sputtered, turning red.

Marc bowed.

“One would be hard pressed to find a lady more beautiful and elegant than Emele. Wouldn’t you agree, Marc?” Elle asked twirling her parasol.

“*Elle*,” Emele hissed.

Marc bowed.

“Emele very much admires you, if you haven’t noticed,” Elle shamelessly said.

“Your work! She means your work. I find your gardening abilities awe inspiring,” Emele hastily added, jabbing her elbow into Elle’s side.

Marc bowed. “The mademoiselle is too kind.”

“If you’ll excuse us, Marc, but we must be leaving,” Emele said, starting to pull Elle away.

“Really? What for?” Elle asked.

“We have several things we must attend to,” Emele said.

“No we don’t.”

“Yes, we do. Good day, Marc,” Emele said, curtsying to the burly gardener.

The gardener bowed.

“Good bye, Marc,” Elle said before Emele swept her away.

“Have you lost all sense?” Emele hissed when they were far enough away that Marc would not hear the heated exchange.

“No, but I grow bored of the way you two dance around each other,” Elle said.

“Then ignore us!”

“Impossible. Your love affair is the only one the kitchen maids have to gossip about,” Elle said.

Emele groaned and covered her cheeks. “I am utterly embarrassed.”

“Consider it payback,” Elle said, twirling her parasol.

Emele frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Come now, you can’t really have thought Severin and I would allow you to have manipulated us for so long when he was a beast without any sort of repercussions,” Elle said.

“You were married earlier this summer. You couldn’t have gotten your revenge sooner?” Emele protested.

“Perhaps. But it is so much more fun right now,” Elle chuckled. “I’m sorry, though. I did not think you would be so mortified. I should have chosen my words better.”

“You shouldn’t have said anything at all! What will I say the next time I see him?”  
“Why don’t we go back and find out?”  
“No, thank you, Your Highness.”  
“As you wish.”



Later that day Severin found Elle and Heloise standing in the dining room, holding some sort of diagram between them.

“Elle, a squadron from the First Cavalry has just arrived. Do you have any idea what they are doing here?” Severin asked.

Elle stared at the diagram. “No. Why, should I?”

“No, but I thought it was best to ask. You have a strange line of communication with His Majesty the King. If he chose to interfere with army affairs I thought you might know.”

“By His Majesty do you mean your father?” Elle sweetly asked.

Severin frowned. “Yes,” he said, his voice lacking any warmth.

“To achieve this ‘strange line of communication’ as you call it, all I did was send him a thank you note for his wedding gift. The man gave us the chateau, it was the least we could do. And as far as I know he had no such plans to poke his nose in your affairs,” Elle said.

“It must be a paperwork mix up, in that case. I shall have to start looking for a paper trail and find where our orders went wrong,” Severin said, rubbing his eyes.

“Leave them,” Elle advised, nodding when Heloise tapped something on the diagram.

“They might be here for your brother. Isn’t Lucien visiting in a few days? Maybe he decided to send some soldiers ahead.”

“Perhaps. I shall speak to the squad captain and find out,” Severin said, turning to go. He paused briefly. “What on earth are you two doing?”

“It’s plans for Emele and Marc. What to see?” Elle asked.

“No thank you.”

Heloise raised her eyebrows and looked up from the diagram. “Feeling flighty, Your Worship?”

Severin ignored the question. “Enjoy your planning,” he said before quitting the room.

“That was close,” Heloise observed.

“Too close. But if we act like we have something to hide he’ll realize something is up,” Elle said, rolling up the diagram.

“You’re a smart girl, Elle. I’m happy His Greatness met you.”

“Thank you, Heloise. I am too.”



The following evening Elle winced as she splayed out over Severin’s massive bed.

“Do you have a headache?” Severin asked, pausing by the bed to tenderly brush some of Elle’s hair out of her face.

“Unfortunately.”

“Do you want me to call for Duval?”

“No, I’ll be fine. I just need to rest my eyes for a bit,” Elle said, catching Severin’s hand and squeezing it. “Thank you, though.”

“You’re welcome. Is something wrong?” Severin asked, returning the squeeze before he pulled away. “You seem burdened.”

“No, I’m fine. It’s just silly little things,” Elle said, waving a hand in the air.

“Your plans for Marc and Emele aren’t succeeding?” Severin asked, hanging up his waistcoat.

“That too.”

“Anything new on the romantic front?”

“Emele just about scalped me after I told Marc Emele admired him,” Elle said.

“I thought that happened yesterday. You haven’t managed to achieve anything new since then?” Severin asked, making the bed creak when he sat on the edge.

“No,” Elle carefully said. “Because I am putting the next part of my plan into practice tomorrow.”

“And that is?”

“Talking to Marc again. This time without Emele.”

“I see. Will you be able to achieve that? I assume Emele is on her guard now, or is that what you and Heloise were planning yesterday? A distraction to keep Emele occupied.”

“Yes, that was our plan,” Elle lied, scooting over so she could place her head on Severin’s chest when he laid down next to her. “You aren’t worried I’m going to push them too far?”

“Marc and Emele? Hardly. I’m sure you’re having fun, but you aren’t the type to be entirely pushy,” Severin said, combing his hand through Elle’s glossy hair.

A smile curled across Elle’s lips. “I love you, and I’m very happy that you understand me.”

Severin kissed the top of Elle’s head. “Of course, that’s why I love you.”



Elle cornered Marc at the small pond near the flower gardens. “Marc, I thought I might find you here. How are the gardens coming?”

Marc bowed. “Very well, Your Highness.”

“Great. Let me know if you need anything. Also, I wanted to thank you for all your help with the flowers. I cannot tell you what a help it is that you will be cutting and arranging them for tomorrow.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” Marc bowed.

Elle tilted her head and stared at the burly gardener.

“Anything else, Your Highness?” Marc asked.

“How can you not acknowledge Emele?”

“Pardon, Your Highness?”

“For heaven’s sake, even Jock knows Emele is sweet on you,” Elle said.

“I do not know what you refer to, Your Highness.”

Elle narrowed her eyes. Marc steadily met her gaze.

“Emele is very dear to me,” Elle finally said. “I care greatly for her.”

“I am aware of your friendship, Your Highness.”

Elle’s next words surprised the gardener. “I like you Marc. Severin greatly esteems you, and I admire your loyalty.”

“...Your Highness?”

“I want you to be happy. You and Emele both. Please remember that, and please make a move soon.”

Marc was silent for a long time. “Yes, Your Highness,” he finally said with a bow. “But I am not certain there is a move to make.”

“You underestimate yourself.”

“I doubt that, Your Highness.”

Elle ruffled her skirts. “In any case, the issue has been addressed. In the meantime I shall do my best to keep Severin out of the gardens today.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

“Take care, Marc. And thanks again,” Elle said before she turned on her heels and left the gardens. She had a lot to finish and only a short time to achieve it in.



The following morning found Severin grudgingly dressed. “I question your reasons for eating breakfast in the dining room,” he said, fussing with the cuffs of his waistcoat.

“We always eat breakfast in our bedroom. I thought the change of scenery might be nice.”

“It might be if we didn’t always eat lunch and dinner in the dining room,” Severin said.

Elle checked her reflection in Severin’s magic mirror, twirling the skirts of her rose pink dress. “Saying always is an exaggeration. How do I look?”

“Ravishing,” Severin said, walking up behind her to kiss her brow.

Elle blushed pink in her pleasure. “Thank you. I want to be sure I look nice today for your brother’s arrival.”

Severin frowned. “You could look slightly less entrancing,” he suggested.

“No, I want to look my best. Last time I saw Lucien he referred to me as ‘the peasant girl Severin rescued from poverty,’” Elle said.

“I could choke him with a silk scarf,” Severin suggested.

Elle laughed. “You would do no such thing, you love him too much. And I did provoke him,” Elle admitted. “Are you ready to go to breakfast?”

“Yes,” Severin said, offering his arm.

The two left the master suit, walking the length of the oddly empty hall.

“What is it?” Elle asked when Severin persisted in glancing over his shoulder.

“It just occurred to me I have seen neither Burke nor Emele since they woke us this morning and helped us dress,” Severin said.

“Perhaps they had things to complete,” Elle said as they drew closer to the threshold of the main hall.

“Maybe. But both of them are too cunning to—,” Severin fell silent when he and Elle left the hallway for the hall.

The main hall was a flood of flowers, colors, and people. There were officers from the Cavalry, Farand—leader of the Rangers—army officers, all the chateau servants, and Prince Lucien and his sister Princess Sylvie.

Prince Lucien smiled widely as Princess Sylvie—an exuberant girl on the cusp of becoming a young lady—shouted, “Happy birthday, brother!”

Noise rolled through the room in a thunderous wave of congratulations, greetings, and well wishes. Grinning, Elle stood on her tip toes to kiss Severin on the cheek. “Happy Birthday, my love,” she said.

“How did you...?” he trailed off, looking at the crowd of beaming faces.

“Lucien told me,” Elle said. “I suggested we do something special this year to celebrate. He agreed,” she said before she tugged on his arm. “Come, let’s greet our guests.”

Elle and Severin descended the stairs and were swallowed in the mass of well wishers.

The cavalry commanding officer Severin had served under as a boy was there. He greeted Severin with a large smile and a firm handshake. “Happy Birthday, Your Highness. You’ve become a great man.”

A general Severin was on close terms with greeted him next, slapping him on the back. “Enjoy the day, Commander. Me and the boys are proud to be here and we’re proud to serve under your flag!”

Princess Sylvie caught Severin after that, hugging him tightly. “Brother, I’m so glad this birthday is better than the last one when you were still a beast, and I’m happy I have a sister now,” she said before she threw herself at Elle, dislodging her from Severin’s grasp with her bear hug.

Severin set eyes on Lucien next. His half brother saluted Severin with a glass of wine. “Congratulations on another year, brother. I am glad you were born into our family.”

Severin briefly frowned before he stared at the wine. “Where did you get alcohol this early in the morning?”

Lucien shrugged. “Elle promised. How else do you think she managed to get me here at this ungodly hour?”

“Blackmail.”

“That too,” Lucien admitted before he stepped aside, letting the next guest greet Severin.

After a long line of Severin’s friends and close acquaintances in Loire’s military forces, the Chanceux Chateau staff assembled before him.

“Happy Birthday, Your Highness. We wish for you many, many more happy years,” Burke said, heading a column of male servants.

Bernadine and Heloise stood side by side in front of all the female servants. “Happy Birthday, Prince Severin. I do hope you like the cake,” Bernadine beamed.

“Well wishes to you, Your Grace,” Heloise gruffly said. “We’re lucky to serve a man like you, and to stand with you we’d do the curse all over again if we had to.”

The wishes and compliments went on for the better part of an hour before a late breakfast feast was served. It wasn’t until after the party guests were pushed outside so the tables could be cleared off that Severin found Elle.

She was hidden in a copse of trees, sitting on a bench and letting the sunshine warm her face.

“Why did you do it?” Severin asked.

Elle opened one eye. “I beg your pardon?”

“Why the celebration?”

“You didn’t enjoy it?” Elle asked, opening both her eyes.

“It was unexpected and... pleasant,” Severin admitted. “But in all my life I have made it a point *not* to celebrate my birthday.”

“Darling, you aren’t yet old enough to be sensitive about your age,” Elle said.

“That’s not what I meant,” Severin said, sitting down next to her. “My birth was a shameful event. I am *illegitimate*. My very existence is a blemish on the royal family. There is nothing to celebrate.”

“Severin, the King officially accepted you into the royal family. I became a *princess* when a married you. What your father did was wrong, but that does not reflect on you,” Elle argued. “And I *want* to celebrate.”

“Whatever for?”

“Because I am happy you were born. Because I am thankful you are alive, I’m happy I met you, and because I am deeply in love with you. I want to celebrate your day of birth because you mean so much to me, and I cannot fathom a future without you. That’s what everyone at this party is saying, Severin,” Elle said, placing her hand on Severin’s cheek, forcing him to look at her.

“You are happy I was born?” Severin asked.

Elle laughed. “Severin I *love* you. I am overjoyed that you were born!”

Severin smiled slightly, and Elle continued. “And I am not the only one that feels so.”

“The guests?”

“Yes, and one more person,” Elle said. She reached under her skirts and pulled out a carefully rolled letter, which was sealed with the crest of the royal family. It was a correspondence from the King of Loire, Severin’s father.

Severin took the letter and stared at it.

“He made a mistake, Severin. Just like you and I did when your curse was broken. You need to forgive him,” Elle said, placing her hand on top of Severin’s.

Severin was silent as he broke the wax seal and unrolled the letter, carefully reading it. He read it twice, and when he finished the second time he lifted his gaze to the sky.

Elle rested her head on his shoulder and squeezed his hand, offering her silent support.

They stayed like that, resting in the sunlight, listening to the faint laughter and chatter of the guests, for some time.

In fact, they only stirred when someone on the other side of the copse of trees they were nestled into ran past, fleeing a familiar, bear-like voice.

“Mademoiselle Emele!”

“Leave me alone, Marc.”

Elle swiveled on the bench, her eyes bright and head perked as she listened with great interest.

“Mademoiselle Emele, stop,” Marc said, his voice just on the other side of the trees.

“Please, let me go,” Emele said, her voice anguished.

“No.”

“What is there to say, Marc? Princess Elle might have the subtlety of a bear, but it’s only because everyone in the Chateau knows how I feel for you and you ignore me. The least you could have done was tell me you don’t feel the same way!”

Elle felt momentarily outraged. “I am far more subtle than a bear,” she hissed.

Severin whispered into his wife’s ear. “Clearly this is meant to be a private conversation. We should go.”

“Are you nuts? After all the spying Emele did on us this is the least she owes us,” Elle said.

“Do you really wish to witness this?” Severin asked.

Elle bit her lip, but clung to the bench when Marc spoke again.

“You’re wrong,” Marc said.

“About what?” Emele asked, her dress rustling loud enough to be heard through the trees.

“About how I feel,” Marc said.

Emele laughed. “Marc you’ve done nothing but avoid me since the curse was broken months ago! I would have thought I deserved more than your silence but it’s been abundantly clear that you do not feel like you owe me even words. Not that I blame you, I was a selfish, silly girl before the curse. But I thought that, I thought...”

“Yes?”

“Never mind,” she said, her footsteps pulling away from the trees.

“Please, don’t let it end here,” Elle breathed, closing her eyes.

“Emele!” Marc shouted. “You are wrong. I avoided you because I was afraid. Yes, I knew how you felt, but I thought that when the curse was broken... you are so beautiful. It wouldn’t be fair to saddle you with a *gardener* when you could do so much better. Your family is good, you deserve more. You can marry someone who has more to offer.”

“Someone *better*? Marc, you were the only man to defend me against my father when you didn’t even **like** me! You are noble and kind, it’s I who don’t deserve you.”

“But that was then. Now that the curse is broken things have changed.”

Emele’s voice went high pitched as she yelled at the gardener. “No they have not! Do you really think I am that fickle?”

“No.”

“This is ridiculous; I should have become a nun.”

“Emele.”

“What?” Emele growled.

“I love you,” Marc said, blurting out his declaration.

“You what?” Emele said, sounding bewildered and hopeful.

“I love you. I have ever since you came outside to help me in the gardens three years ago and got dirt smudged on your nose.”

“I love you, Marc,” Emele said.

“Can we walk... and talk some more?”

“It would be my greatest pleasure.”

When the pair left Elle clasped her hands to her heart. “I honestly didn’t know Marc could talk that much. Wasn’t that sweet?” she asked.

“It was inevitable,” Severin said, rolling his eyes.

Elle eyed her husband. “Don’t tell me you are going to claim you’ve known all along that Marc fancied Emele.”

“I didn’t know all along,” Severin said.

Elle nodded in satisfaction.

“I’ve only known since our wedding.”

“What,” Elle said, mimicking Severin’s way of stating the word more than asking it.

“In our wedding there were several kinds of roses in your bouquet. Do you remember?”

“Yes. Most of them were from bushes you had helped Marc grow.”

“Correct, one of those was a strain of rose Marc is credited with creating. The yellow rose with the hint of pink in it.”

“Ah, yes I do recall that one.”

“He named it *Elegant Emele*.”

“...And you couldn’t have told me this earlier?” Elle said.

Severin shrugged. “You haven’t brought up their love affair since our wedding. I was wondering why it suddenly was a topic you had a great passion for.”

“It was the decoy so you wouldn’t get suspicious when you found me discussing secret plans with servants. I just about died the day you found Heloise and me in the dining room. We were working on the seating chart for tonight’s dinner,” Elle said.

Severin shook his head, chuckling under his breath.

“What?” Elle asked, blinking.

“Nothing,” Severin said, leaning close. “I love you, Princess Elle.”

“And I love you, Prince Severin.”

The pair shared a deep kiss before Lucien bellowed from deep in the gardens. “Severin? I’m lost in your blasted gardens. Send someone to come find me! Severin!”

Severin growled as he pulled back, ending the kiss.

Elle said, “I have mixed feelings about your family, though.”

“He has the worst timing,” Severin said.

“Well, he’s still your brother. He grows on a person, much like a fungus. Shall we find him? He’s going to disrupt the other guests at this rate.”

“Eeeeeelle! If you don’t come find me I’m going to keep yelling all day. Eeeeeelle!”

Severin winced. “Yes, let’s.”