

Once upon a time.

Once upon a time, a beautiful girl was forbidden to look at her reflection. In the castle in the forest, mirrors are cloaked by dust and disuse and years of bad luck plague those who dare look in them. To all who enter, the castle is a place of change and development to all who leave, it is a place quickly forgotten. Inside the castle in the forest, there are beginnings, and there are endings. The crumbling stones represent the end of childhood and the beginning of something new to the weary travellers who come through the forest to reach the spiralling towers. The wilderness outside encroaches on the peace of a building that could be a masterpiece and the girls inside shiver and reflect and wait to be pronounced adults.

Her father had told her that the experience was nothing to be afraid of. He had said that she would return in every way different, and yet in every way the same. Her sisters had smiled and nodded and agreed; behind his back, they had warned her of the goblins in the gardens and the wolves who stalked the trees. Their soft whispers sang in Belle's subconscious as she walked up the remnants of a broken path.

You won't survive.

You won't grow up.

You won't come back.

In the castle in the forest, girls wait and sit and stare until they are pronounced adults and are allowed to leave. Belle was happy being a child. She didn't like the idea that she would walk inside a girl and leave some weeks later as a woman. But soon she would reach her eighteenth year and it was imperative that she underwent the transition before that time. Her father had cried as he handed her into the carriage. She was the youngest, the sweetest, his beauty. Her mother had just stared.

They said wolves stalked the forest but Belle feared them less than the building in front of her. Even as the wind rustled the leaves, like a phantom sneaking closer and closer, she stood and shivered on the threshold with her hand raised ready to knock. The door groaned, creaked, moaned - and opened.

"You're late."

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