

The Cinders of Burnt Bridges

Father is dead.

Scrub the dishes.

Mother doesn't want me here.

Mend the ripped curtains.

Lucy and Jemma say they do.

Prepare lunch.

As a sister?

Get rid of the mice (she put them in the attic).

Or a servant?

Tend to the garden.

It could be worse.

Maybe throwing herself into work after first hearing the news hadn't been the best idea. It gave the wrong impression. "Ella will do it!" became a household catchphrase. Perhaps they thought she wanted to do everything for them. Because it was so common for someone seventeen years old to love chores. Dull thoughts like that faintly passed through her mind as she swept. If she tried hard enough, she could pretend the broom was a sword, and the entrance hall was the field where she practiced sparring with an invisible opponent with only the woodland creatures watching. Surely, she could find solace in fencing at such an uncertain time. Yet it had been months ago that she last wielded her weapon, before the sickness but after the marriage.

"Elizabeth!" Lucy rushed down the staircase, nearly tripping over the train of her unflatteringly green dress. It made her look like a pickle, Ella decided. A clumsy, sheltered, spoiled pickle. "I have the best news for you!"

"If we're siblings," she said carefully. "I think you should call me by my shortened name."

"Lizzie," her stepsister began. "I convinced Mom! You will *not* have to go to some stinky orphanage. Or the streets. Isn't that wonderful!"

"Don't call me—wait, truly?" She paused her sweeping for a moment. "Actually, I find the fact that she needed convincing ominous. Mother only loved Father and you two." The last bit wasn't meant to slip. Lucy was five years younger than her and understood exactly nothing about the situation.

It was easy to tell, comparing them. The oblivious girl with wild brown curls, shining olive green eyes, and luxurious gowns. The hardened girl with golden hair, muted blue eyes, and simple yellow sundress. The one who belonged, and the one who didn't. Ella didn't hate Lucy. She was just an annoying reminder of the person Ella could have been, *should* have been, *was*.

She knew the mistake she made. They were all sitting as equals at the dinner table. The messenger came with the quiet news of his death. Mother—*that felt so wrong*—sobbed quietly, Lucy doing her best to comfort her. Jemma stared blankly at her soup, her face crumbling even

though she did her best to hold it together. And that was when she snapped. They knew him for eight months. Try a lifetime. She regretted everything she said that night. Training with a sword somehow made her feel more powerful than the timid girl she once was. It made her feel invincible enough to throw out such horrible words. To burn the bridges she worked so hard to build.

“No, that isn’t true!” Lucy cried. “She loves us all the same. Now, I need your opinion. Jemma won’t help me, and I can’t figure out which gown I should wear to the party—ball, whatever—Prince Edrick is throwing in honor of his grandmother’s birthday. She’s dead, so it doesn’t make much sense to me. Anyway, Jemma is sure Mom’s gonna try to marry her off to some rich guy now that she’s eighteen. But I said…”

Ella tuned out to senseless rambling and thought for a moment. The balls were of little interest to her, but she had an eye for fashion, and her sister’s giant wardrobe was promising. If not, she could recycle some of the fabric into a new outfit.

“*Cinderella!*” A snooty voice echoed through the large hall, declaring her other sister’s presence. Jemma was already in her pristine white nightgown and her severe braid and thick glasses were absent. The source of the irritating nickname was the cinders that stained the edge of Ella’s dress after she swept the fireplace. Not very creative, if you asked her.

“Yeah?” Ella said. “If this is about the ball, I was just thinking about the perfect thing for you. Here me out, a silvery gown, maybe metallic looking, not as long as usual with ripped sleeves and a jagged bottom. A different sort of look, you know?”

“I… Actually, that sounds sort of cool, Cinder. Um, sorry you can’t come?” She offered the apology, which was a great improvement from the silent treatment they exchanged four weeks ago. “Uh, Lucy? Remember how Mom was going *on* and *on* about me catching the prince’s eyes? Well, she decided my glasses would ruin that.” She snorted. “Awesome. But she now still wants that money to help launch the business further. Like more advertisements? I told her nobody is into buying her *sneakers*. She didn’t listen, and now her heart is set on it. So, it is now up to *you* to get a royal date.”

“W-what?” Lucy squeaked. “I’m twelve! That’s not—you can’t—don’t let her—*Lizzie!*” She pathetically begged for help with her eyes.

“What do you expect me to do?” Ella asked. “I’m staying out of your family drama.”

“It’s *your* drama too,” Jemma reminded her. “As much as you wish otherwise.” Was there a trace of bitterness in those words? It was hard to tell.

“You want me to marry the prince?” She widened her eyes incredulously. “There is so much wrong with that.”

“Look, Mom is going to have to give up on her *exercising* shoes at some point. You would just have to distract him and make it seem to her that you’re trying.”

“The money would go to me, I think? That’s not what she wants.” Her mind began to consider something a tiny bit like a plan. An idea struck her, as they typically do, out of the blue. “Lucy, do you have a spare gown? And maybe an elaborate mask?”

“W-why?” She was still trembling a little bit, maybe from some sort of shock.

Jemma's eyes glinted. "Those won't fit you, but I have some ones that match with them for photos and all. As for a mask, I have a pretty nice gold one that your dad gave me for a gift. My frames are too big, so I could never wear it." She gestured to her giant glasses. Surprisingly, the mention of Ella's father didn't taint the mood or cause a fight.

"Okay, that's a start. You both will owe me *so* much for this," she said.

"I'll just take it as payment for me saving you from being homeless," Lucy said, *just* when Ella was thinking they could get along. Unless she was overthinking it and it was actually a joke. Which, considering what everyone said her sense of humor was like, was very likely.

"Time to make a plan, then."



Ella had never felt so out of place. Guests twirled and chatted, all showing off in their finest clothes and bragging about how rich they were. The ballroom was huge, with dangling diamond chandeliers and polished marble ground. The orchestra switched from one boring song to another; she hated classical music. Not that she could hear it very well through the strange head and face covering she donned. It was gaudy and bright, with a shawl that covered her hair and a fishnet veil shielding her face. The orange and pink clashed horribly with the pastel purple dress, but it was the only thing that both she and Lucy could wear. Her sister had accompanied their mother in the carriage while she and Jemma paid for a ride, under the guise that Jemma wanted to go privately with some friends. Once they arrived at the castle, Lucy fled into the community garden and Ella replaced her, doing her best to drift near the prince and stay away from her mother. She mostly followed him like a stalker for the last two hours, occasionally snatching a bite of food or a strange fizzy drink that tasted like mint leaves.

Her clothing helped catch the prince's attention, since he was already greeting all the guests.

"Hello." He leaned against the empty table where dessert would likely be brought out later, maybe once the clock inched forward and struck midnight. She immediately realized that everyone pining after him simply desired his money. His nose was crooked, and his black hair was oily, and his grey eyes betrayed his pleasant act with the way they dulled in boredom.

"Prince Edrick," she said, politely curtsying.

"You are one of Lady June's daughters, correct?"

"Yes."

"My condolences for the loss of your father. He was a wonderful man."

And you never met him.

"Thank you." How was she meant to continue this conversation, again? Jemma has switched into her *I don't like you very much even though you're helping me but I'm trying to act nice so please act nice back* mode and instructed her specifically on what to do. Somehow, all of

that vanished from her brain. “And you have my condolences for your grandmother.” *Wait, where did that come from?*

“Oh, she was a nasty old lady. Founded that filthy garden, as if the community needs one. I host this ball in hopes of pleasing my parents. I normally don’t volunteer that information. However, you look quite nervous here, frankly. It’s nice, seeing someone despise this as much as I do. Did you hate her as well?”

She scrambled for something else to say. He was looking at her searchingly in evaluation, a strange gaze she decidedly didn’t like. Noticing all her flaws and pondering how he could correct them. The music continued, one screechy violin rising above the rest. Everyone danced around them, perfectly at ease.

DONG! DONG! DONG!

One hand of the huge clock on the wall moved to twelve o’clock. The room was too warm, too stifling, too full of people she didn’t want to be with. Without thinking, she bolted. Past the guards, through the crowd, into the crisp night.

As her heart pounded in her head, her feet pounded down the long staircase to the driveway where carriages pulled up. Ah, she wished she had a sword with her. Just to grab the hilt and let the blade swish through the cool air. To feel in control. It was what gave her the courage to get to know her family, to make an effort to like the people her father loved before the lung cancer defeated him. The ones he told the stories he told her, the ones he shared their private inside jokes with. It hadn’t been easy, but she *tried*. And she succeeded, really! They were *friends*, before—before—

She even had tea and spoke with her stepmother. They discussed her education, future, likes and dislikes, and found they had much in common. They both preferred electric music and other modern things. Margarine over butter. Stormy days over sunny. Zippers over buttons. Even her newly invented athletic shoes!

Ella spared a glance at her feet as she stumbled down the steps. She had the sneakers on, the electric green ones. The laces were untied on one, she vaguely noticed. If she stopped to fix them, it wouldn’t have fallen off. She didn’t bother to retrieve it. When she reached the pavement, it was cold and that felt good. The grass she bounded onto was slightly damp from the earlier showers. Could she run all the way home? Probably not, but she kept going. The scenery around her blurred, and she noticed the fancy manors of the annoying aristocrats surrounding her. Sighing, she sat down on the side of the road to recollect her thoughts.

That was when the rain decided to start again. No lightning, no thunder. Just an angry downpour, like the sky didn’t like her either. She didn’t cry, that was pointless. If she wanted to be sad, she would have done that earlier. Instead, she was just mad at herself. She let them talk her into this. Was her father talked into loving a wealthier family? She would never know. It didn’t seem right for them to act related to her “mother” and new sisters. It could have been a mistake. The rain was cold and stung, and she almost savored how distracting it was. Like all her thoughts could just be drowned out until a magical fairy would come save her.



Ella frustratedly stomped down the road, not going in any particular direction. Even if she wanted an omnipotent being at her beck and call, it wouldn't happen. Her feet led her hobbling towards a familiar park. To a familiar gravestone. She sat on the tree trunk that had been there for nine years—it fell in a storm after the first. It didn't seem right that her parents weren't buried in the same place.

“*Suspended in the love of those living*” were the words carved into the smooth stone. She didn't know who chose them and wondered if she was the only one still living and suspending her mom. Still loving, even if the memories were faint and not always full of happiness like they should have been. She took a moment to recall them and dwell on the details. If she forgot them, it wouldn't be like they ever truly existed.

She squeezed her eyes shut, and just in that moment, it must have happened. When she opened them, the rain had eased, and the lights were there. Shimmering and glowing and pulsing with magic, hovering above the ground and untouchable. They merged and formed the outlines of people, the record of an event.

“It's been so long!” The ghost of two young boys stood near each other. Hesitantly, they embraced. “I wish I hadn't—”

“It doesn't matter anymore.”

An elderly man and woman sat side by side under a different tree. “I didn't mean it, really. Now they're gone...”

“Some things are more important.”

A lady with puffy hair gazed into the distance. “I know you forgave me.”

There were so many of them. The voices had the hollow quality of a record but held a heavy weight within them. Ella blinked a ton, and saw green splotches in her vision when she opened them. The lights were gone. What was the *point* of that?

She knew what it was, sort of. *Mom, you always said you wanted to guide me... after. Is that what this is?* The witchcraft, if that was correct, was unknown to her. But unless it was a hallucination, she had received the promised advice. Which wasn't really instructions or suggestions; that was for her to figure out. And she had a clue of what to do.

Ella brushed the crumbly asphalt off her dress—it had stuck from when she was sitting by the road. It looked so much like cinders. *Fitting*. She knew what she would do.

Maybe the bridges could be repaired.