

TALETELLER

HOPE

DIES

LAST

THE STORY BEHIND THE ALBUM

Hope Dies Last

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“The music enchanted the air. It made everything spacious and colourful, the dark stream of life seemed pulsing in it; there were no burdens any more, no limits; there existed only glory and melody and love...” (Erich Maria Remarque)

Prologue

He was wandering alone deep in the forest looking for the Prophet no-one has seen before. He was separated from his companions long ago, and he didn't know where to continue. He was starting to doubt this Prophet existed at all.

He walked slowly trying to find a way in the thick forest. Suddenly, he heard a branch breaking in the silence. He stopped for a moment to look around. He didn't see anything but the darkness of the woods that surrounded him. Then in the dark he saw a distant dim ray of light. He pulled himself together, and pushed forward towards the light. He made it. He found his way out of the woods.

He was standing in a small light glade. In the middle stood the silhouette of a man with his back towards him. He ventured closer. He tried to sneak towards the silhouette as quiet as he could, when all of a sudden a deep but gentle voice greeted him:

“Hey, you, wanderer! You seem rather exhausted. Come, rest here for a bit. Come now, have a seat.”
He walked closer, and threw his heavy backpack to the ground.

“It is better now, isn’t it? It seems like you have taken a long journey. Where are you from? Well, it doesn’t matter. Look, the sun is going down. Stay here and I’m going to tell you a tale. A tale about hope. Hope vitalizes all of us. It gets us through mountains and valleys, in health and in illness, through ages and life. Listen to me and you surely will find treasures.”

He took a deep breath, then he said:

“Once upon a time, there was a boy. His life...”

(Please listen 01. Once Upon A Time and 02. Shameless)

Chapter I.

The camp fire offered calming warmth in the cold night. While they were resting the man continued his tale.

”You see? Never ever mix with others like that.”

He cleared his throat and continued on with his story.

”Even though the boy chose the bad path, he has never had a wicked heart. He deeply regretted his deed, but he couldn’t change what has happened.

He was brought to justice. By then he already knew that he cannot avoid judgment. The whole town gathered at the court awaiting to hear the verdict. Everyone knew the judge well. He was strict but righteous. The murmuring of the people were halted by the deep voice of the judge.

”Order in the court!” he said hitting the stand with his gavel.

After the room came to an order he looked at the Boy strictly:

”I see that you are not unrepentant, but you have committed a sin. A sin that we cannot overlook. I made my decision.”

”Guilty!” his voice and his gavel were thundering. “We exile you to the Island. But we give you one last chance. If after 25 years you are still untainted by evil, a ship will

come for you, and you can come home. But if you do not hold on, you will stay there until your last day!”

When the boy heard these words, he sank in himself. He knew that he disappointed his beloved ones, and he cannot undo what he had done.

Before he was taken to his cell, he told his wife, Sarah:

”Sorry! I’m so sorry! Can you ever forgive me?”

”Oh, sweetheart, I’ve already forgiven you, but please, do not ever give up! I’ll be waiting for you until the end of time.

She smiled and pulled out a beautiful rose head from her pocket.

”Here, I give you this rose so that you will always remember me, in whatever hardships you face.”

The Boy took it in his hand. The touch of the silky rose was as if it was Sarah’s hand touching his skin. It shone bright red in his palm.

”I love you so much!” he said, forcing a slight smile.

”We must go!” a guard interrupted grabbing the boy’s arm and he began pulling him away.

Sarah hugged the boy in haste and said:

”I love you, too, darling. I will be waiting for you, I promise, but please do not ever forget: Hope dies last!”

(Please listen 03. Hope Dies Last)

Chapter II.

I was caressing its petals in my palm, all the while pondering over my memories with Sarah We were so happy. Why did I ever let this happen?

I know there is hope for return.

"I just have to be different, better than the others there. I cannot let myself lose hope, I will always tend you," I said to the rose.

I kept thinking about this as we arrived at the Island.

A ferocious thunder cast a bright light on the wild sea shaking the boat and its crew. The captain gave one order after the other to the crew:

"Keep the direction! Or we will smash into the rocks! Brace the sails!"

He stopped next to me, turned to me saying:

"Boy, we'll be arriving soon. Are you ready?"

"As ready as I can be."

"You'll have to get used to the weather. I'd been sailing around the Island a thousand times, but I've never seen the sunlight."

"I hope this time it'll be different."

"Ha ha. I like your attitude. Preserve it and we'll meet again."

The captain took us as close to the shore as he dared. He gave the order to moor the ship, then the crew put me in a boat. As the crew begin lowering the boat the captain said:

„Boy! Never give up! Fight until your last breath and we will come for you. I promise!”

As I grabbed the oars I nodded towards him, then began paddling, then I began paddling. It was hard to progress among the waves. Luckily, the shore wasn't far from me.

I took a last glance at the ship. I could only see its outline, as it disappeared into the storm. This is when I felt that my oars hit something firm. I pushed my right oar further into the water to see how deep it was. I estimated the level would reach my thigh. I jumped out of the boat, and I walked the rest of the way to the shore. As I got closer, I noticed the great number of boats, ships, and their remains that were pushed against the rocks by the waves.

“Maybe I'll also end up here?”

I stopped these thoughts and started running. The outline of a castle began to appear before my eyes. I ran as fast as I could, as a sudden bolt of lightning illuminated the castle. I reached a rusty iron gate. I opened it. The castle opened its mouth with a creak, and I reached the heart of the Island.

The gate closed behind me with a huge bang. I found myself on a corridor that was consumed by darkness. My hands were constantly touching the wall to navigate myself

as I was walking carefully, my steps echoing in the darkness. Suddenly, I felt something soft under my fingers. When I touched it again, it moved and started fluttering. I threw myself on the ground and I felt swarm of bats flew over my head. When their noise grew silent I carried on through the deserted corridor.

I've been walking for minutes when I heard rumbling noises. I continued walking towards the sounds that got louder and louder. The meaningless noises gradually became comprehensible words. The closer I got the more I understood of it: "Finish him, finish him, finish him!" they chanted.

"How did I end up here?" I sighed.

As I walked on, this sentence was burning in my mind, becoming louder and louder, deafening my ears. I pressed my hands on my ears so that I couldn't hear the roar. Though the noise got dull, it was replaced by the sound of the beating of my heart that beat quicker and quicker. A little bit later I reached the source of the sounds. I stepped through a wide open gate to a dimly lit hall. I saw a big crowd, about 200 to 300 people. They were standing in a circle around a pit with a ring, an arena in the middle, where two men were fighting. Some people noticed me as I got closer to them. The news of my arrival spread like wildfire, and it caused a big uproar. Time stopped. As if the present

itself ceased for a moment and something exceptional came about: harsh, tense, cruel reality.

Then the crew split in the middle, and a shadow stepped closer. He was strong-bodied and tall, at least a foot taller than me. His face was lifeless, his eyes sank deep in their sockets. He wore a mass of gold chains on top of his torn grey shirt, signet rings on his fingers.

„Welcome to the Island, Stranger! Let me introduce myself. My name is Pellax. You arrived just in time. The show has just started,“ he extended his hand towards me.

„Thank you, but I would rather not,“ I turned away from him.

Maybe I distracted him for a moment, but he instantly continued.

„Hah. Come on! Stop pouting! Let’s watch the games. Come, I see you’ve been exhausted in the long journey. We give you cakes and ale, and we’ll see who’s going to be the winner,“ he said putting his arm on my shoulder, inviting me closer.

„Let’s clarify something right now... I WILL NEVER BE INTERESTED IN whatever you offer!“ I answered, getting his hand off me.

The crowd gasped. I couldn’t read Pellax’s face. He then looked deep in my eyes and began laughing hysterically.

„I can’t believe it, listen,“ he looked to the others “he still believes in the returning.”

Everyone laughed around me. This is when I looked at the individuals in the crowd. Men and women lived on the island stripped from their dignity. Almost like they weren't humans anymore, they transformed into something else, something horrible.

"Why do you want to go home?" Pellax continued "THIS is the REAL life... Nobody has a say in when and what you do, you are the captain of your ship. There is only one thing that matters: YOU!" he hissed.

"And what about family, love? What about peace? Hope?" I asked.

"Hope? Who needs hope?" he looked at me with contempt. "Do you know what we got here? FREEDOM! We got rid of all the miserable lies that is called virtue or notion. They don't shackle our lives any more."

He stepped closer to me. I heard all the jewelry jingle on him as he moved.

"Look at the arena! That's Murdarh, he has a scar on his face," he pointed at a burly fighter in the middle of the arena. "He was a nobody until he got to the Island. And look at him now, who has he become? Guys? Who's Murdarh?"

"The king of the sword!" the crowd roared.

"That's right," he sighed deeply. "Boy, there's no one and nothing that could give you more than this. You can be

anything you've ever wanted and you can get anything you've ever wanted."

"Everything that I've ever wanted is at home. I don't want anything, only my fa..."

"Family?" Pellax interrupted before I could finish. "Oh, poor naive child, even the dead are forgotten over time. What makes you think that you are better than them?" he stepped one step closer. "I can see the rose in your hands... a tiny memory from home, isn't it? But believe me, just as the rose drops its petals, your memories will fade, too." he circled around me slowly. "You'll forget the past, the people, the faces, the love because it does not exist anymore... Be reasonable: this island is your new home and we are your new family!"

"NO! NEVER!" I shouted.

"I must say you're brave," he clapped, the rings clinking on his fingers. "Take all my appreciation. But will you be so steadfast after years have gone by? Just think of it: as you grow older and older, you will regret not starting the REAL life sooner. Don't throw away the opportunity."

He looked deep in my eyes with his yellowish lifeless eyes, and with an odious smile on his face he whispered:

"This is our World, taste my friend, tomorrow our life will end..."

(Please Listen 04. One Of Us)

Chapter III.

The arena was covered in thick blood. The smell of death spread the room. A thousand horrible faces laughed hysterically at a man's death. I didn't understand what was going on.

"Well.. this one's gone," a voice said.

"You have been weighed in the balances and found lacking," another one laughed.

I couldn't just watch this anymore:

"How can you be so disgusting!" I shouted. "He is your human being! I won't participate in this bloodshed!"

I began walking in the opposite direction. The crew grew silent. A ruthless voice broke the silence.

„STOP!" Murdarh bellowed, drawing his sword from its sheath.

The clang of the sword was a roar in the complete silence. It's dreadful sound stopped me in my tracks though I knew I must not halt. I prepared myself for the worst and made the first step. I heard as the huge warrior began walking towards me. But suddenly Pellax stood between us, placing his palm on his chest.

"Don't! Leave him! He is too committed. He is not under our control... for now."

This sentenced echoed in my head. I started running, just away from everything. What I saw scared me. The measureless evil, blood, violence, scoffing. I've never experienced any of these things in such an overwhelming presence ever in my life. Are they right? Is it really not worth resisting? Should I just let the Island whirl me?

I stopped for a second. Whenever I looked at the rose, I saw Sarah in it. I saw her beautiful face, her warm smile and her sparking eyes. That renewed my strength a bit, so I continued my journey. I continued my journey. I've been to places in the castle I think no one has ever been to. As I walked from room to room, I glimpsed at a big black box. I went closer to have a better look. It was a piano. I dusted it off, opened it, put the rose on the top, then I placed a chair in front of it and.. I pressed the first key.

The sound of the key filled the room with warmth. I started playing a ballade that I wrote a long time ago. There were so many things swirling around in my head, I felt like I could no longer tell the difference between reality and imagination, I no longer knew if the things that have happened to me are real or just a bad dream.

"You still play so beautifully," said Sarah. I halted. I looked around in the room but there was no-one around.

"I must be imagining," I thought.

I continued playing. The notes answered one another painfully as they brought life's pleasures to life. Sarah loved this song dearly. I often played it for her for hours.

Suddenly I felt somebody hugging me.

„You know it's my favorite," Sarah whispered.

"You can't be here!" I jumped from the piano as my whole body started to tremble.

"But it's me, look!" said Sarah.

She stepped forward and I saw: it truly was her.

"How did you get here? Where have you been so far?"

"Guess," she laughed then disappeared.

"Where are you?"

"My love... Isn't it obvious? In your memories" she said.

"Then you're not Sarah!"

"It's complicated... I am her, in a sense, but only in your imagination."

"Fantastic," I huffed. "I'm already going crazy..."

"No, honey, don't worry, I won't let that happen. Hope sent me to take care of you. You know what? Let's get out of here," she took hold of my hand and pulled me to follow her.

"From here? To where?" I stopped.

"Come, I will show you."

"But darling, we can't move from here."

"Why? Have you tried it yet?"

"No. But it's impossible!" I shouted, confused and in disbelief.

"Don't be so unbelieving! We are talking to each other, is that not unbelievable in itself? Then what would it take to get out of here?"

She led me to the piano. I sat down and looked up at her. Sarah's gorgeous smile welcomed me.

"Please, play my favorite song," she asked.

"All right," I sighed. Where are we going, anyway?"

"Home."

(Please listen 05. Sweet Piano)

Chapter IV.

I played my favorite accords quietly in the dim light. Sarah was sitting next to me. A wonderful sense of peace and warmth pervaded me. It was like being at home again.

“Are you still here?” I asked.

”Yes, darling, of course...”

I noticed that Sarah wanted to tell me something but she hesitated to do so. Finally, she gathered her courage.

“Darling?”

“Yes?”

“I just wanted to say that you cannot always run away to your imagination. You have to face your fears, the Island. This is the only way to hold on,” she said.

“But I want to be with you!”

“I know. And I want to be with you. But sometimes you have to stop playing. I can’t be with you all the time. If you constantly play the piano, you will be enslaved to the world of imagination.”

“I would rather be enslaved there than here!”

“You don’t know what you are talking about!” she exclaimed.

“Sarah, I can’t live without you! At least in my imagination we can always be together!”

“That's not true! Eventually it's going to be your imagination that separates us!”

“But it's the only way to stay together!”

“Please don't do this!” She pleaded.

“I will never stop playing the piano! We will always be together!”

Suddenly, I felt as a mighty hand grasped us. I felt the room shrink, and the sounds became lights, the colours notes. Suddenly, the ground disappeared from underneath our feet and we started falling into the abyss. When I reached the ground it didn't hurt as I would've expected. But my mouth and eyes were full of strange soft sand. As I got up, I immediately looked for Sarah.

“Oh my god... Sarah! Sarah! Where are you?”

“I'm here. This way.”

She fell on the ground not far from me. I was relieved to learn she wasn't hurt, but I could see the fury in her eyes. I looked around. Dunes of sand as far as the eye could see.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“In the desert of imagination” she replied then started walking. “Follow me and I will take you out of here.”

I followed Sarah wherever she led me. We wandered around the sand dunes. It was dreadfully hot. Everything was desolate as though all had dried out a long time ago.

“Is it far?” I panted in the hot air.

“It's not too far, we will get to the Oasis soon.”

“Aren’t you thirsty yet?”

“Honey, I am your imagination.”

“Oh, right...I’m still getting used to this.”

Suddenly, I had a bad feeling. Like someone was watching us. I couldn’t decide if this was real or I was just imagining things. I saw faces flashing before my eyes on the way. I heard as they laughed at me, mocked me. Then I realized these were the people I saw on the Island. A familiar voice interrupted the laughing:

“Boy, even the dead are forgotten over time. What makes you think that you are better than them?” Pellax’s voice echoed.

Then Murdarh the champion appeared. Blood was dripping on the sand from his sword leaving long red bloodstreaks after himself. The bloodstreaks started coming to life forming snakes, crawling my way.

“Choose the easier path, follow us” Murdarh hissed.

Finally, Sarah intervened and drove away the snakes.

“What are these?” I asked in despair.

“Mirages! Don’t believe them! They want to lure you away from the right path!”

I thought that this was the end of everything. I closed my eyes and I let Sarah lead me on through this horror.

(Please listen 06. Dream Land)

When I opened my eyes, I was in a beautiful garden. I was sitting under the rich foliage of trees beside a small pond. Colourful birds were flying from one branch to the next while singing to each other. Sarah walked towards me from the pond holding a small cup.

“Here is some water, honey. Drink a bit!” she gave me the cup.

“Thank you.” I said, drinking a sip from the cold water. I felt better already. I was refreshed and I slowly started collecting my thoughts.

“See? We reached our destination,” Sarah sat down next to me.

“Yes... everything is so calm here. Peaceful.”

“Our life could have been like this if you haven't gotten involved in all this,” she said with sadness.

“I know but I had to do something! I couldn't let us live under those circumstances!”

“Oh, I wish we could still live under those circumstances! It would be very hard... but at least we'd be together.”

“I regret what I've done, you know that too, right?” I said.

“I know... But still, it would be good.”

“Yes, it would.”

We looked at each other silently. I forced a small smile on my face. When Sarah saw it she stoked my cheek and

she started smiling too. It was wonderful. I knew she has forgiven me. I was happy despite all my problems. I don't know what kind of world this was that we were in but we were there for each other. Suddenly I started feeling tired.

“Come have a little rest darling,” Sarah said. “Sleep in my arms.”

I laid my head down in her arms. She gently embraced me with her arms and I quickly dozed off into a dream.

Chapter V.

I saw a strange dream. I was in a tidy little house somewhere far from the desert. I heard the sound of carts pulled by horses as they were moving away on the cobblestone road.

“So I’m in a town,” I stated.

My assumption seemed to be confirmed, as cheerful highland music from the street filled the air of our sweet home. Sarah was bustling about around the furnace. It seemed she was preparing to go somewhere. Then she came to me.

“My love, wake up, it’s going to be your turn soon...”

“What?” I asked back.

As I came to I started to realize: this was no dream. It was too real to be a dream! What happened again?

“Where are we?”

“Oh, darling don’t be silly!” Sarah said, while she was getting ready. “Don’t you remember? Today it is the day of the Wind Riders. You have entered too.”

“I entered for WHAT? Who are the Wind Riders anyway?”

“The ones you’re going to fly with.”

“ME?! FLYING?!” I gasped “But I have a fear of heights!”

“I know. I was surprised too, but you know what you want...”

“What I want?” I was freaking out. “I want to get out of here as soon as possible. Come on, let’s go!”

I jumped out of bed, I put my boots on, and I was on the street in the blink of an eye.

“Hey! Wait for me!” Sarah ran after me. “Where are you rushing off to now?”

“Just out of this dream!” I replied. “I really don’t like it! How did we get here from the desert anyway?”

“What are you talking about? What dream did you get here from? And what is this desert?”

“Don’t you remember? The prison, The Island, Pellax?”

“Ha ha, honey I think you ate something bad yesterday. You’re talking nonsense!”

I halted.

“You don’t remember anything?”

“I don’t.”

“So this is what you were talking about. That I won’t be able to control my dreams? That I’m going to be enslaved by them?”

“I never told you this!” Sarah said.

“Yes, you did,” this is when the picture started to clear in my head. “And you also said, that my imagination will separate us!”

While we were talking, a stocky man with a mustache appeared in the distance. He seemed very tense, he was looking for someone. He went up to each passerby and was mentioning the number five.

„Five! Five! Where is the Rider number five?“ he shouted.

”Here he is!“ Sarah pointed at me.

Then the man ran up to me, grabbed my forearm and started pulling me.

”What? But why?“ I didn’t understand what was going on.

”Ahhh! Quick, come on, hurry up! We’re getting started soon!“

The realization suddenly hit me.

”Of course! I will fly... great.

”Bye! Take care my love, we’ll meet down here!“ Sarah shouted after me.

The man led me through the city very quickly. It all felt really strange. It was like I have been here before, the people looked familiar somehow, yet strange and different at the same time. I didn’t understand anything. It was like the world had turned upside down.

Finally, we arrived at the starting line. The competitors were still convulsively working on their creations. Everything was happening so fast I couldn’t really see

anything. My escort suddenly stopped at a machinery and said to me:

“Now, fella, this is going to be yours! Have you ever ridden something like this?”

“I haven’t had the honor yet...”

He started explaining all kinds of things to me about handles, chains, wings, but I didn’t care about what he was saying. I was simply mesmerized by what I saw in front of me. I’ve never seen a vehicle like this one before.

So many things were sticking out of it. Oh I wish I wasn’t so scared of flying...Though, if this is only my imagination then there is nothing I should be scared of! That’s it! I’ll just fly a bit and then we can get going with Sarah!

“Dude, are you listening?” the man looked at me angrily.

“Excuse me? Uhm, yeah, yeah, I got it.”

“Now... Then line yourself up with the others” he ordered.

Then a familiar voice cried out from behind me.

“Yes, come on now! Don’t keep us waiting!” Murdarh grumbled .

“That’s right, the wind is just perfect,” Pellax said.

At first, I couldn’t believe my ears. I stopped and glanced back but I heard it correctly. They were right there. Murdarh the fool, and Pellax who noted with a smug smile on his face that I noticed him.

“How did you get here?” - I asked.

“Of course they are here, as Sir Pellax is the champion!” the stocky man intervened.

“You really thought you can run away from us?!” Pellax snarled at me. “You’re dumber than I thought...”

I felt something frosty deep in my soul. As if the very world I found myself in started to shatter into tiny splinters. It became a place without control. Chaos ruled over it.

“You cannot be here this is my imagination!” I bellowed.

“Bah. Yeah, you’re right... imagination,” Pellax brushed the dust off of himself as he took his place in his vehicle. “BUT it is not you who controls it! You might have found that out already.”

“I am a slave of my own imagination...” I realized the bitter answer.

“Exactly, and see, Fate has been so kind to us that we can find you even here! We will never let you go!” Pellax laughed and he clapped his hands happily.

“No way!” Murdarh shook his head.

“Oh, yes! About your little Sarah, we will get her out of the way as soon as we can so that no connection to your former home!” Pellax said.

“You swine!” I shouted.

The stocky man stepped between us, and looked at us disapprovingly. He walked along the vehicles, ready for the competition. Finally, he exclaimed:

“All the Riders are ready?”

“Yeah, ready!” the competitors shouted in reply.

Huge tribal drums began to thunder around us. Their deep bass tone were beating my stomach. We could barely hear the referee's voice as he tried to start the race.

“Ready...steady...”

“Hey, Boy! I wish you a weak wind!” – said Pellax.

“Go!”

As soon as I heard the signal, I immediately pushed myself off of the cliff.

(Please listen 07. Wind Rider)

I felt incredibly free in the air. I could hardly keep my eyes open against the whistling wind. To my surprise I was the first one to cross the finish line and the crowd began cheering as I flew over them. What a feeling! I heard as they were shouting: Five, Five, Five! Then I caught sight of Sarah and I tried to fly closer to her. I saw her jumping, trying to say something. Going closer I finally heard her:

“My love! My love! I remember everything!”

I felt victorious in every way. I defeated Pellax, I am the one controlling my own imagination, and Sarah can also

remember everything. I flew higher in the sky and turned back a little, and then I saw Pellax's annoyed face.

"See, Pellax? No matter where you find us... You will never be able to separate us!" I said to him.

"Oh, really?! Are you sure?!" he shouted.

I saw as anger flushed over him. His eyes glowed red, the wrinkles on his forehead tensed. I couldn't imagine what he was up to. He then gained speed and crashed into me intentionally. I wavered from the big hit and began speeding towards the ground with my injured machine. Everything happened so fast, I didn't know what to do. I shouted, I tried to move all the levers but nothing helped. And then everything went dark.

Chapter VI.

I was woken to the deafening sound of a clock ticking. When I opened my eyes darkness covered the room. I tried to put my thoughts in order and think through what had happened to me. I did remember that a moment ago I was flying ... then I crashed ... Pellax, yes, I crashed because of him! I sat up in the bed and went pale.

"It seems you dozed off a bit, Sir," a voice said from behind, but as I quickly glanced at my hands I didn't even care about the strange voice anymore.

"My hands... How hairy they are!" I gasped. "What happened to me?"

"Ha ha ha!" the voice laughed behind me. "And mine is so stiff like a tree..."

I looked behind me and I could not believe what I saw. I was talking to a mantle clock.

"We have already made all the arrangements for the ball," it said.

I learnt from my previous mistakes so I pretended to have understood everything, even though I didn't. I understand how I became a furry thing. I didn't understand what this strange world was.

"Uhm... really? Brilliant," I replied.

"Yes, indeed. We prepared everything. We cleaned up, Ms. Potts provided for the delicious dishes, there are many types of beverages, crystal clear water, fine wines and punch. Our guest just arrived and..."

I'll be honest it was quite funny how this little clock was fussing about. He was walking up and down, explaining things. All the while smoothing his mustache with its hand, which was made of the hour and minute hands respectively. He must be the butler of this house.

"Listen, my, uhm, clocky pal..." I interrupted.

"Cogsworth, if you please, Sir."

"I was kidding, Coggy," I continued to play along, but now at least I knew his name.

"Cogsworth," he looked at me angrily.

I realized he didn't have a sense of humor. Though there was a question I had to ask.

"Cogsworth, have you seen a beautiful creature somewhere here, a lady whose name is...?"

"I have," he interrupted. "In fact, it is her you are supposed to have dinner with at the ball that is arranged for Mademoiselle Belle herself."

Belle? What Belle? Where's Sarah?

"I'm looking for a certain Sarah."- I tried again.

"Sir, I assure you that she's not here."

"Are you sure? I have to meet her."

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in." I said.

"Sir, we are waiting for you only," a candlestick said through the door. I wasn't even surprised anymore.

"Alright, alright," I got up from the bed. "Let's go, Cogsworth."

Before we got going Cogsworth gently pulled on my hand.

"Sir, may I give you an advice?"

"Of course, Cogsworth."

"Everything depends on tonight," he sighed. "Your life and our lives. The rose slowly drops all of its petals."

He pointed at a rose under a glass cloche in the middle of the room. It was dying.

"What should I do?" I asked.

"Be very kind and thoughtful to her. I know you got what it takes. Deep inside it slumbers in your feeling heart," he said, pointing at my chest with his thin little hand. "Just wake it up. Amaze her."

"I hope I will succeed with this."

"Surely you will."

We stepped out of the room and proceeded towards the sound of music through many different corridors. When we arrived to the ballroom, I was mesmerized by the luxury of the castle. Huge ornate marble columns, gold-plated forged railing, magenta carpet and beautiful furnitures. The crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling lit up the room

in long patterns. Then the music faded. Everyone was looking at the stairs.

“Ladies and gentleman!” a voice said. “Mademoiselle Belle!”

She walked down the stairs gracefully in her lovely golden dress. Her silky long brown hair was floating behind her. She was her

”It is Sarah!” I shouted.

”Belle, Sir. Belle,” Cogsworth whispered. ”Let’s have a go, Sir.”

Sarah stepped closed and bowed. I did the same. Then I held out my hand towards her. She put her hand in my chunky paw, and as the music started we began dancing.

(Please listen 08. Last Dance)

Our dance ended. It was a wonderful feeling, though none of us was a great dancer. Sarah’s life-giving smile gleamed on her face. It kept hope still living inside me.

”The evening was really wonderful,” Sarah said as we were standing face to face.

”I’m happy that you liked it,” I smiled at her.

”I would have never thought that you could be so kind,” she touched my paw.

Her velvety hand seemed lost in the thick fur. I loved it when she touched me.

"I would do everything for you!" I said.

Then it seemed something happened. Sarah let go of my hand and moved away. She seemed sad. I waited a bit before finally walking up to her.

"What is wrong, darling?" I asked.

"Nothing... It's just... I'm so confused. It feels like we've met before."

I looked deep into her eyes.

"Perhaps we have, in another dream..."

Suddenly time stopped around us. We were lost in each other's eyes. I wanted nothing more, but to be stuck in this moment forever.

"Oh, my love!" Sarah exclaimed.

Then she kissed me. Her sweet soft lips on mine. It has been so long since I've felt her. I missed her terribly. And when I opened my eyes I was my old self. There was no sign of the fur or other oddities.

"I thought you will never come back to me!" I said as I squeezed her to me.

We went for a walk with Sarah, just like old times. We laughed so much in the empty castle. The sound of our laughter echoed anywhere we went. It was so amazing that I began to forget that everything is just imaginary. We were far away from everything, pain, fight, we were just together. Together with my imagination...

”Didn’t you forget something?” I heard a familiar voice.
”We are also part of your imagination!”
Murdarh jumped at me with a huge blow to my head, and I fell to the ground unconscious. In the dizziness, Sarah’s scream was ringing in my ears accompanied by Pellax’s savage laughter.

Chapter VII.

When I regained consciousness, every part of me was aching. I felt as if my limbs were twisted from their places. It was dark and I didn't know where I was. I tried to move only to discover that my whole body was hanging on chains. My hands and legs separately. I was like a puppet. Suddenly a source of strong light lit up in the thick darkness, blinding me. I started to get used it and finally discovered where I was. On the stage of a theater.

Then a figure moved beside me. It was Pellax. He grinned at me, walked next to me, turned to the audience, and then declaimed a poem.

*"Lil' Puppet, lil' Puppet,
Attached to iron string.
alas, for you, the stage is set,
to torture with its sting!*

*Lil' Puppet, lil' Puppet,
You're always welcome here!
Surrender now you worthless rat,
Don't fight, just disappear!"*

His laughter echoed in the building mercilessly. It was as if it squeezed the space, it was deafening.

"You see? I can be really poetical!" he said.

"What is all this?"

I tried to rid my hands from the chains, but I failed.

"It is no use trying, no one has ever overcome the metal wires..."

"Where is Sarah?"

He turned to me. I saw the exultant shine in his eyes.

"Oh...She... Well, she can't be here with us now... since she's not participating in the show."

"What did you do to her?!" I shouted.

"This show is about US," he started to get angry. "Don't you understand?! And it's about how long you can fight, for your right, for the TRUTH, if you like."

"WHERE IS SHE?!"

"It doesn't matter where she is. What matters is where you are!" he tittered.

After he finished laughing, he turned to me again.

"As you may have realized, we are in a theater. The play was written and directed by me. And you are the protagonist! The tiny little marionette puppet that I can control at my own pleasure. Nobody can ever set you free!" Pellax's laugh covered the whole room. It moved into my head, the vicious laughter drilled itself deep into my thoughts. Then suddenly, in the chaos, I heard a faint cry

from somewhere far away. I recognized it right away: It was Sarah.

“Don’t believe him!” she shouted.

“Sarah! Where are you?”

I tried to find her with my gaze, but I didn’t see her. Was she perhaps only one of the many voices that whirled in my head?

“Stand firm no matter what you have to face!” I heard her voice again “This is the only way to free yourself!”

“I will try with all my might!” I shouted.

I was trying to tear the wires by sheer force. The chains tightened, sweat was running on me in streams. I screamed, I pulled on my shackles, I gave it everything I had but to no avail. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t tear them. I broke and fell to the ground. Pellax’s laugh became more infuriating for me, I could not hear or see anyone else but him.

Suddenly, I perceived someone in the distance. He drew closer to me very slowly. His clothing glittered like silver. His hair was shining like snow. He came to me but didn’t say a word. He smiled at me, then touched the wires. Instantly the chains melted away, they were like thin threads against fire. They fell off me. I stoked my wrist where my shackles have been just a moment ago. I looked at him. His face was friendly and it reflected tranquility, yet I was so scared.

"Who are you?" I asked.

The figure did not answer; he started off as if nothing happened. The echo of his steps muted Pellax's brainless laughter. I stood up and hurried after him.

"Please, answer me!"

Then he stopped and turned around.

"It is not necessary to introduce myself as you already know me," he said. "But for now, I cannot do anything else for you. You have things to do here. Be prepared and we will meet again."

"What should I do here?" I asked.

"Destroy all the detestable things of Pellax!"

(Please listen 09. Puppet Show)

I destroyed everything that Pellax created. His theater was in flames. It gradually collapsed with a great rumble as the fire consumed the building.

Pellax just stood there on the edge of the ruins, staring at the fire. His face was still, his eyes mirrored the dance of the flames.

"It's over!" I stood next to him. "Your work is destroyed. You no longer have a place in my imagination!" He laughed, then squinted at me.

“Unfortunately you've won, I have to admit it. We shall go, for now. But you have to know that in reality, we are much more, and our power is unlimited. Your imagination,” he spit on the ground, “you can keep that.”

He turned around and walked away. His shadow slowly floated away, until it finally disappeared in the darkness. I was free from him at last. But where is Sarah?

“Sarah?” - I shouted.

“I'm here.”

She slowly walked out of nowhere and stopped right next to me.

“Did you get hurt?” - I asked.

“No. I'm fine.”

I embraced her. I took a deep breath of the scent of her fresh hair.

“Tell me, was it Hope who rescued me?”

“Yes, it was Him.”

“But why would He do that?”

“He did it because He loves you,” she explained, her voice broken. “He knew that despite your best efforts to satisfy him, you'd have failed should he not intervened.”

For a moment I just gazed into the distance.

“When I was in the puppet show... like a puppet... I thought that it's pointless... that I've failed and that I'll be just like them. Tell me. Can I meet Him again? Can I find Hope?”

“Yes. I’ll help you,” she offered her hand. “Come, I’ll lead you to Him.”

We could barely see anything in the dark but Sarah knew the way. She led me by the hand through the ruins. Finally, we got to a door through which piano-playing could be heard. I opened it. An all-entailing brightness welcomed me, so bright that at first I couldn’t see anything. Then my eyes slowly started getting used to the light. We were in the room where everything has started. There was the rose, the piano. The keys were still moving. And there He stood. Hope.

“Welcome, I see that you did what I asked.” he welcomed us.

“Yes. I destroyed the works of Pellax.” I said and walked closer.

He looked into my eyes, and put his hand on my shoulder.

“I’m glad,” he smiled. “You almost did everything you can.”

I was embarrassed.

“Tell me, what should I do next? What is missing to regain your trust?”

He pointed at Sarah.

“Your imaginations... your imaginations prevent you from facing reality, and from TRULY using the power I can give you. Unfortunately, I can’t help you anymore until you go back to reality.”

“How can I go back to reality?” I asked.

“Do you see that piano? You still play that... You have to stop playing it... This is the only way to go back to reality.”

I grew silent for a moment.

“But...but if I stop playing, then Sarah will be gone!” I exclaimed.

“She will be gone,” he stepped closer. “You have to choose: You can stay in your imagination, you can have Sarah and the world that you have to serve forever, unfortunately... Or you can face reality... that you’re alone in a prison in the company of Pellax and his peers. You have to fight for your integrity, you’ll get hurt and Sarah won’t be with you, but I can help you to hold on. If you choose this, then you will be able to return home. And Sarah... the real Sarah will be waiting for you... I promise.”

I was astound by what I heard. I didn’t know what to do, everything started to blur around me. Then Sarah touched me.

“Darling, it’s OK. You have to choose this.”

“No.” I shook her gentle hold off of me. “I will stay here with you!”

“You cannot stay here! I don’t even exist, my love,” she stroked my cheek. “I’m just a shadow, the creation of your imagination. But... at home, in reality, under the cherry-

trees where our children are playing... I always think about you!”

I burst into tears. Somewhere deep inside I knew she was right, but what she said hurt me... They are waiting for me at home. I want to be home with Sarah, our children and my parents. I can't do this anymore, I can't continue living in my imagination.

“Please forgive me,” I said, my tears choking me, “but I can't live without you.”

“I know, my love... I know... But that's why you chose well! Because you truly love me!”

“I will miss you so much,” I whispered.

“We will meet soon! I love you!” Sarah smiled at me.

I stood opposite of the piano. I was watching as the keys played my favorite ballade. The notes rang beautifully in the old ruined room. I knew what I had to do. I looked for an iron pipe amongst the ruins on the ground. I grabbed it and stood in front of the piano again. I gathered all my strength. I looked at Sarah. I could barely see her sweet smile through my tears. I couldn't delay any longer.

I shouted from my lungs and beat the piano. I hit it and hit it with all my force. Keys were flying in the air, strings were split in moments. Finally, I collapsed beside the remains. Silence befell the room. I looked for Sarah, but she was nowhere to be found. She was gone. Forever. Hope stood next to me. He was beaming in the grey hall.

“You chose well,” he said.

“I did everything you asked,” I said, my voice broken.
“Please help me.”

“I will help you, since you found me.”

(Please listen 10. Finding you)

Chapter VIII.

I was startled by the sound of thunder. First, I didn't know where I was only that I was lying on a blanket on the floor. I sat up, and my first thought was Sarah.

"Sarah... Sarah... where are you?" I asked.

But there was no response. My back was awfully aching. Probably because I fell asleep on the floor. When I stood up I staggered, but managed to straighten myself holding on to a commode.

"Oh my God! What happened to me?"

A candle was flickering in the room. It brought a bit of light into the darkness. I went closer to the light, and that was when I glimpsed at my hands. They were wrinkled, old and veined. Then I picked up the candle. I looked around in the room hoping to find a mirror. I wish I haven't found one. My hair was white, and I barely could recognize my face. My eyes weren't shining as before.

How much time has passed by? And how much time is still left? I looked at the piano I destroyed. The rose was still on the floor, its petals were lying lifelessly.

I reached for its petals and buried my face in them.

"Sarah... Sarah," I whispered. "Are you here?... Sarah? Oh, Sarah... I wish I could fix everything! I would go back in time. I would never ever let this happen again! We could

be together forever. Please give me a new day, give me a new chance... I wish you gave me a new day!"

(Please listen 11. New Day to Me)

I was sitting in the room speechless. Somehow I felt a strange calmness. I started to believe again that I can go home, and that it is worth holding on since Hope himself promised me his help. I knew that I had to face Pellax and his company. I knew that it won't be easy but as long as I don't give up Hope will be with me and support me.

"How much time is left from my punishment?"

I was walking in the room thinking about that. The room was dark, the candle only lit the outline of the objects. I couldn't find an answer to this daunting question no matter how hard I tried. I was walking up and down impatiently, looking for the objects that could help but nothing. Finally I walked to the piano:

"Tell me, how much time have I spent in your captivity?"

I got no answer. I just stood there waiting to find out the truth through some kind of a miracle. My heart sank.

I leaned against the damp wall and closed my eyes. Sarah smiled at me. I clearly remembered our wedding day. Every tree has blossomed into bloom, the birds were singing, the sun was shining. I have never seen her so

happy. I wanted to caress her face but in reality I was caressing the wall. I stopped.

I started to stroke the wall and I felt small cavities on it. I quickly ran to get the candle, and to examine the cavities. As I came back I could see what those cavities were better. The cavities that I felt, they were tally marks divided by fives. I don't know how they got here or who made them. But they surely weren't there before I started playing the piano. It's impossible that I haven't noticed this. While I was examining the wall, I found a sentence among the marks. A sentence that explained everything:

“I love you my only Sarah...”

It was me, who engraved tally marks on the wall. While I was in the captivity in my imagination, I was counting every single day. In reality, I have never given up hope! I was always hoping to go home!

I started to count the grooves, it took me a lot of time since the wall was full of them. I don't know how much time I spent on counting, but I continue tirelessly until I got to the last group. The result was astounding!

“The ship comes for me TODAY... I return home today! I have to get ready!”

An unbelievable excitement and fear seized me. I tidied myself up as quickly as possible. I got washed, shaved and I adjusted my clothes too. I was filled with deep happiness that my suffering is over and that at last I can see Sarah

again. However, I also knew that I cannot avoid the last trial. I have to meet Pellax and his company again, I have to fight them and though it will be a hard fight, but this is the only thing between me and my release.

I set off through the dark rooms back to the place where it all started 25 years ago. Almost nothing has changed... I walked through the same dark and dusty rooms full of wickedness. In the thick darkness only my white clothes were shining, candle in my hand. As I went closer I heard the voices I saw their works and felt the lewdness in the air. I was very close to the arena... I stopped for a moment to gather strength.

Then I made the first step. As I stepped into the hall every eye was set on me. Pellax noticed me from far. He climbed out of his velvety chair and approached me to take a look at me. He barely changed, only his face became paler and more wrinkled. Most of his teeth were made of gold.

“Hey, look, look, who we got here!” he pointed in my direction. “The lost soul! I see you are well up in years now.”

“True. But it seems time wasn’t very kind to you either.” Someone laughed in the crowd. Pellax sent a pungent look in the voice’s direction. Then he turned to me once again.

“Ha ha ha. At least I lived my life the way I wanted. What did you occupy yourself with? You were not smelling your little rose, were you?”

“Yes, I was,” I walked closer to him. “And you know what? It made my happy... I used every single day that I spent here to be prepared for the meeting...”

“Well,” he clapped his hands together. “Then your wish has been granted! Here we are face to face with swords drawn!

I smiled.

“Pellax... it is not you whom I have to meet, but my beloved ones who are waiting for me, who trust me. It is true that my rose has faded as you predicted it would. But one thing has never faded. The hope that keeps me alive that will always keep me alive.”

“Nonsense!” he hissed. “Can’t you see that you are misled? For us you’re nothing else than an ulcerous leper who is cast out and hated! No one has ever waited for you as much as we did!”

“You’re wrong! Do you think your family haven’t been waiting for you? Your wife and your children? You let them down just to live for yourself!”

“THEY NO LONGER MEAN ANYTHING TO ME! MY FAMILY IS HERE!” he bellowed.

His voice echoed in the room, then silence followed. Everyone was watching with rapt attention.

“I feel sorry for you...”

“YOU feel sorry for ME?!” he was surprised. You’d better think it over and realize that there is no other way!

If you serve yourself and live for yourself and your desires, only then will you find the true meaning of life. Listen to me, - he gestured wildly with his arms - do not let others deceive you, you still have time, you only have to try what it's like to live for your desires!"

"Forget it, Pellax... I'm not under your control as I have Hope. Believe me, I will never be like you! Never! I would rather die than becoming unfaithful to Hope, my family and myself! Until my last breath, I will preserve my integrity!"

(Please listen 12.Until My Last Breath)

I ran with all my strength towards the big iron gate that was wide open in front of me. Pellax and his pals were chasing after me. They were simply unable to stop me, there were only a few steps left and I ran through the ironwork. And the gate slammed shut with a loud noise my persecutors were stuck on the inside. I heard as they cursed behind me, screaming in their pain. I defeated them.

I set off towards the shore. After a few minutes of walking I spotted the small boat on the beach, and the anchored ship in the distance that was waiting for me. I bursted into laughter. The weather was still stormy but that did not break my mood. I was still laughing as I got in the boat, grabbed the oars and began rowing. My eyes were

set on the ship. I felt the distance increasing between me and the island with each pull. I did not look back. I won't look back. Never again.

Chapter IX.

(Please listen 13 Ever After while you read this)

All was at peace on the sea glittering as the golden sun was shone upon it's surface. The ship was cutting through the waves fast. The Boy was on deck, grabbing the handrail enjoying the Sun caressing his face. The wind was blowing through his white hair gently. There was only one thing on his mind: Sarah. Did she really wait for me? Was she faithful to me? Does she still love me after all this time?

He was thinking about this when he glimpsed the outline of the city. He saw people waiting on the port. He was watching them with excitement, who they could be, where was Sarah? As the ship was approaching, he recognized his family, his sons, daughters and his parents among the people.

Finally, the ship reached the harbor. As he disembarked, he went towards them and stopped for a moment. His eyes were looking through the faces as he was looking for Sarah. At this moment, an aged lady stepped forward with shining eyes and a sweet smile. It was Sarah. They looked at each other. There was no need for words, they understood everything. She ran up to him and kissed him. When they opened their eyes they found themselves

in a completely different world. They were restored to the days of their youth, what's more, no one got old anymore!

The Boy finally understood that Hope really did keep his word completely, and that he also got the new day he had asked for. They never had problems anymore. The family gathered around them feeling deeply happy. Everything was perfect, a lot better than before.

And they lived happily... forever.