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### Happy Endings

Once upon a time, in a land far far away, there was a kingdom plagued with tragedy and heartbreak. Through the darkness came a prince who served as a beacon of light to all who served him. Instead of making his subjects kiss his feet, he shook their hands and treated them as equals. He was loved by all, but he had a dark secret.

The beloved prince's name was Alexander. He learned compassion from his beautiful mother, Beatrice. Beatrice was born a royal, but never understood why she was considered better than everyone else. She looked at the commoners as her equal. As a child, she was beaten for playing with the village children. Despite all the king's efforts, Beatrice never lost her compassion for the common people. After the king died, Beatrice became the queen of the kingdom. She quickly wed a blacksmith and was with child the next year. She was so excited to start her new family. Several months before the baby was due, Beatrice woke up screaming in pain. The royal doctor announced, "In order for one to live, the other must die." The queen faced the impossible decision of choosing her life or her baby's. James, her husband, begged her to let the child go. He promised his wife that they could have more children. Pleading to her senses he asked, "How can a child survive without his mother. I can't do this without you." Despite everyone's cries, Beatrice made her decision. Her last words were, "I know he will be special. He will bring light to the kingdom. My dear Alexander, you are destined for greatness."

After the queen's death, James took over the kingdom. No one knew how since he was never in line for the throne, but it was just accepted. James was a ruthless ruler. The power went to his head, and he brought great evil to the kingdom. Anyone who opposed him was slaughtered. Several villages were eradicated into oblivion. King James threw lavish parties to cover up the tragedy in the kingdom. Everyone ignored his violent actions for fear of death. If something is never acknowledged, did it ever happen? To the people of the kingdom, ignorance was bliss. They ignored the millions who were slaughtered, the enormous debt, the extreme poverty, and the inevitable downfall of the kingdom. The king was destroying everything Beatrice had worked so hard to build.

On Alexander's eighteenth birthday, he was to become the rightful king. James fretted so much that his son would take away all his power. There were several "accidents" when Alexander was a young boy, but he had made it. The next day was his eighteenth birthday. James had one last trick up his sleeve. He knew he had passed on a certain undesirable trait to his son. Like his father, Alexander was a werewolf. Their kind had been hunted so viciously that they were almost extinct. It was a trait that first presented itself on Alexander's sixteenth birthday. Every full moon the castle was shut down to prevent anyone from finding out the royal secret.

James decided to leave the castle on a full moon and leave a trail that would lead the mobs to his son. That night he went out into a quaint village. The lights were out in each house, and the only thing lighting the king's way was a dim torch in the middle of the town square. He crept into each house and massacred each family. The sight was so unbearable even God had to look away. The king didn't shed a tear; instead he smiled and placed a few strands of his son's hair on the bodies of two victims.

The next morning the whole kingdom was hysterical. Everyone demanded justice. One handmaid recognized the young prince's hair and called for his head. The mobs formed and marched towards the castle. Outside the castle door they demanded to speak to the king. He gladly let them in. After explaining what they found, the king's acting skills came in handy. His face went pale, and he cried, "Not my son! You must be mistaken." The townspeople showed him the hairs, and he hid his face as he wept. As the people ate up his grief, he secretly flashed a smile. One person didn't believe his tears. She noticed his smile, and she knew something was amiss.

This young maiden was a wise girl, who had worked hard her whole life. She was impossibly beautiful. She was always covered in soot from her job, so no one noticed her beauty. Every day she worked laboriously. Marriage was never on her mind. Her brain always got her into trouble. Questioning everything she came into contact with didn't please many people. Especially her mother. She had a troubled past and wished for a better life. That day she was at the castle to deliver flour to the royals.

After feeling something was wrong, the maiden went in search of the prince. She felt the need to warn him of the impending danger. He was practicing the flute in his study. She approached wearily. With a booming voice, he greeted her. Scared, she whispered, "The mob is here for you." He responded, "And are you are part of it?" She shook her head no. The prince flashed his smile at her and motioned for her to sit down. He noticed her beauty through her rags and covered face. He claimed it was like a light was glowing around her. She was the one he had been waiting for.

Turning on his charm as easily as flicking on a light, he strutted over to her. As he flashed his famous smile, she laughed and asked, "Do you think I am like all the other girls? This won't

work on me.” Pressing on he retorted, “Oh no, you are like no other girl. You are special.” He lingered on the word special and gave her a quick wink. Feeling a heat slowly rising from her belly to her cheeks, she turned her gaze in hopes he wouldn’t notice her blushing. Overwhelmed by the encounter, she quickly blurted out, “Sorry sir, I really must go. I just wanted to warn you.” As she turned to leave, he grabbed her arm and swung her back to him. There was a slight pause, and he began to lean in for a gentle kiss. As he closed his eyes, he felt something he did not expect. She slapped him. Registering the shock on his face she explained, “Just because your blood is royal does not mean you can have any girl on a whim. A kiss must be earned. You don’t even know my name.” He protested, “A face that lovely must have an equally lovely name to accompany it. I need not know it yet, for we have many years together ahead of us. You are everything I imagined in a girl and more. My desire stems not from my royalty, but from my humility. I know a girl like you is far too good for a boy like me, so I must steal a kiss while I have the chance. Someone like you won’t be free for long, my dear beauty.” Entranced by his words, all she could do was stare. After a few moments, she managed to get out, “What shall you call me for now?” Immediately he answered, “Grace. It is the only name that can truly do you justice.” Before she could respond, they heard the sounds of the mob approaching. Frantically, she said, “Quick come with me. You will be safe in my village.”

As they entered her home she felt embarrassed for the first time in her life. She realized it was because no one had ever paid enough attention to anything she did for her to feel embarrassed. Every inch of her home was tidy, everything in its place, not a speck of dust, and yet she felt the rush of heat on her cheeks again. Noticing her blush, the prince eased her with his soothing words, “Your home is almost as beautiful as you. I wish to stay here forever.” Holding back tears she said, “For a man who has grown up in the most beautiful castles the world has to

offer, this is nothing. It is not beautiful, and I'll let you return as soon as possible." Inching closer to her he retorted, "This home has something none of the castles ever did. The beauty of a castle means nothing without it. You, my Grace, make this the loveliest place in all the kingdom." Growing angry she cried, "A prince could never love someone like me. I am nothing. No one ever notices me so why should you? There are many beautiful maidens for you to choose from. As soon as you leave here you will forget me." Desperately the prince argued, "You think me a selfish man. You say these things, but you don't know me. Judging me so quick makes you as bad as you say I am. I do not call you Grace to flatter you, but instead to make you see what I do." Her face softened, and she looked at him with pleading eyes. He leaned in closely and sealed their love with a kiss.

As the sun rose, Grace did too. She went about her daily chores. When she was 14, her mother left her. Her father had died before she was even born. On her own, she didn't want to be sent to an orphanage, so she began taking care of herself. Having only what her mother had left behind, she knew she'd have to find work. The miller need some help, so he hired her to deliver flour. After many days tidying her own home, she decided to do it for others too. Together the two got her by, but occasionally she had to pick up a few odd jobs. She was no stranger to hard work and loneliness. It had left a sense of longing inside her.

The prince saw the pain in her eyes. He wanted more than anything to make it go away. When he awoke, he gently sat up and watched her clean. After she had finished, she noticed him. Startled she jumped back. Laughter filled the room as he got up and crossed the room. He swept her up and kissed her. Their story truly was one of love at first sight.

Back in the castle, the king was watching his evil plan unfold. Mobs ransacked town after town in search for the prince. The whole kingdom was in an uproar, either trying to find the

prince or angry at the destruction of the mobs. Everyone was so preoccupied that no one remembered this day was special. For today was the day their once beloved prince was to become king. A ceremony was to be held in his honor, but with all the chaos all the good he did was forgotten. The king was getting exactly what he wanted. The future for the prince held two paths, death or exile.

Coming to the same realization, the prince decided to face the people instead of running. Grace pleaded with him to change his mind, but he was stubborn like his mother. He had made up his mind, and no one would change it. The mobs approached the village, and the prince stood at the entrance waiting for them. With Grace on his arm, he began to speak to them.

Remembering the prince they had loved, they listened to what he had to say. He was brutally honest. Telling everyone the royal secret, why he had run, his love for Grace, and the king's plan. Making words dance through the air creating a symphony, he won over the crowd. They knew he was a werewolf, but they believed he could be good. After hearing the prince's theory, the villagers realized all the destruction the king had caused and grew angry. Urging the people to act rationally, the prince told the people to let him handle his father. They gave him 24 hours.

Grace and Alexander walked hand in hand up the steps of the castle. Word hadn't travelled fast enough. The king didn't know that his future was about to change. He cried out, "Oh my poor son, they're coming for you." The prince snapped back, "We know your plan, and the people know our secret. The game is over father." With a look of panic the king began to babble, but no clear words came out. He turned to run, but Alexander grabbed his arm and slapped silver cuffs on him. King James struggled. Struggling was pointless because the cuffs were charmed so that no one could remove them. Villagers cheered as the king was thrown into a cell for his entire life.

With everything how it should be, the prince was once again to become king. His coronation was a lavish celebration. There was dancing and laughing, singing and crying, and many fun events. The whole time, Grace was by Alexander's side. As the evening carried on they talked and laughed all night. She finally leaned over to him and whispered one word. He smiled with delight and said, "I was wrong. That is even more beautiful." The word she had said was Aiyana. A name which means endless beauty. With their story seemingly complete, there was only one thing left to do. Alexander silenced the people and bent down on one knee. "Will you marry me?" he asked with pleading eyes. Aiyana shook her head yes, and he stood up and placed the ring on her finger. He swooped her up and kissed her. Their happy ending was set.

Many months later their wedding day finally arrived. Aiyana wore the most beautiful dress the kingdom had ever seen. Alexander sat at the end of the aisle waiting for his beautiful bride. A violinist began to play and Aiyana walked down the aisle like the princess that Alexander had always seen in her. They exchanged the most beautiful of vows, and not an eye in the kingdom was dry. The officiant proclaimed, "You may kiss the bride." Alexander leaned forward to embrace his new wife. She closed her eyes. Like her husband a few days before, she felt something she didn't expect. Alexander collapsed in her arms. His warm blood soaked her dress such that one could never tell it once was white. An arrow protruded from his back. Tears streaming down her face, she looked up and saw a man with an arrow at the end of the aisle. He smirked and said, "No monster can be good. I have saved you all."

Aiyana prayed it was a dream. Coming to grips with the reality of losing what she'd had for so short a time was impossible. Reality was too hard to face. The only thing keeping her going was the people's need for a ruler. She was the new queen of the kingdom. Everyone loved

her, but she always had to carry her burden. The prince had lost his life because of the doubt in one man's mind. He stole their happy ending.