



B is for Beast of Dean (The ABCs of Cryptid Love #2)

Author: Adrian Blue

Category: Fantasy

Description: Alice: I came to Blackwood Farm for a new start. There was nothing left for me in London. So, I would be the perfect land girl, tending fields and following orders, rebuilding my life according to others expectations. They warned me to stay away from the woods, told tales of a horrifying beast. But the ancient Forest of Dean calls to me, and I want to answer.

Heath: I had accepted my solitude as inevitable. The forest was my sanctuary, my prison, my only companion for more years than I cared to count. Humans feared what they did not understand, and I had learned the price of being different. Then she appeared in my life. Alice looked at my inhuman face and saw not a monster but a soul as isolated as her own. She offers me a future I never dared imagine—if the world will let us claim it.

Total Pages (Source): 12

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:04 pm

The train's whistle pierced the morning air as we approached the small station at Lydney. I smoothed my traveling skirt, peering through the rain-streaked window at the platform beyond. A lone figure waited beneath a black umbrella, hunched against the downpour.

"Nasty welcome for a young lady," said the elderly gentleman across from me, shaking his head sympathetically.

"I'm told it rains frequently in these parts," I replied.

"Aye, the Forest of Dean has a way of collecting clouds." He studied me with curious eyes. "Visiting family, are you?"

"No, sir. I'm to be a land girl at Blackwood Farm."

His bushy eyebrows rose sharply. "A land girl? In these parts?" He leaned forward, lowering his voice to barely above a whisper. "Be careful around that forest, miss. Strange things happen there. Things that aren't quite natural, if you take my meaning."

Before I could ask what he meant, the train shuddered to a halt with a sharp hiss of brakes and steam. The conductor's voice echoed through the carriage: "Lydney!"

I stood carefully, gathering my valise and checking that my hat was secure. The elderly gentleman tipped his cap to me as I moved toward the door.

"Remember what I said, miss," he called after me. "That forest's no place for a young

woman alone."

I forced a smile and stepped down onto the rain-slicked platform, immediately buffeted by wind and driving rain. The station was little more than a wooden platform with a small shelter, and I hurried toward it. The man with the umbrella approached, his boots splashing through puddles.

"Miss Alice Harwick?" he called over the storm.

"Yes," I confirmed, struggling to keep my hat from flying away in the wind.

"Thomas Fletcher. Farm manager at Blackwood." His tone was brusque, businesslike. "Come on then, let's get you to the wagon before we both drown."

I followed him to a covered cart waiting outside the station, climbing aboard as gracefully as I could manage while my skirt whipped around my legs. Fletcher settled onto the driver's bench and snapped the reins, sending us lurching forward into the grey morning.

"You worked a farm before?" he shouted over the rain drumming on the wagon's canvas top.

"No, sir. But I'm a quick study."

He grunted. "We'll see about that. Farm work isn't like those fancy courses they give you London girls." He glanced back at me, his eyes hard. "You'll be working the far pasture tomorrow. Stone clearing, mostly. Hard work, but it needs doing."

I nodded, though unease prickled at his tone. "I understand."

"The farm sits right at the edge of the Forest of Dean," Fletcher continued, turning

back to watch the muddy road. "Oldest forest in England, they say."

"It sounds lovely."

Fletcher barked a harsh laugh. "Lovely isn't the word I'd use, miss." He twisted on the bench to look at me directly. "That forest is pure evil."

A chill ran down my spine that had nothing to do with the rain. "Surely you don't mean—"

"I mean exactly what I said." His voice was flat, final. "Stay out of those woods, Miss Harwick. For your own sake."

The wagon fell silent except for the steady drum of rain and the splash of wheels through mud.

To our right, I could see farmland stretching into the grey distance.

Neat fields and stone walls that spoke of civilization.

But to our left loomed a wall of ancient trees, dark and impenetrable through the curtain of rain.

We arrived at Blackwood Farm as the afternoon was fading into early dusk. Fletcher directed me to a small outbuilding where warm yellow light glowed in the windows.

"Work begins at 5:30," he instructed curtly. "Don't be late."

I watched him walk away before I opened the door. Inside, the building was cramped but clean, housing three other land girls who looked up from their card game as I entered. The eldest, a dark-haired woman with laugh lines around her eyes, rose to

greet me.

"You must be Alice. I'm Margaret, and this is Bess and Jane."

The other two nodded but remained seated, studying me with frank curiosity.

"We've set up a bed for you by the window," Margaret continued. "It's not much, but it's dry."

"Thank you," I said, setting down my valise gratefully.

"You missed tea, but there's bread and cheese if you're hungry," offered Bess, a plump girl with rosy cheeks.

I accepted the simple meal and sat at the small wooden table, suddenly aware of how exhausted I was.

"So, Alice," Jane began, her tone casual but her eyes sharp. "What brings you to the back end of nowhere?"

"I needed work," I replied. "This position was available."

"Bit of a fall from grace, isn't it?" Jane pressed. "You talk like one of those educated types."

"Jane," Margaret said with a warning look.

But Jane continued, studying me with uncomfortable intensity. "Has Fletcher warned you about the forest yet?"

"He mentioned I should stay away from it."

The three women exchanged glances.

"There's things in those woods," Bess whispered, glancing toward the window where rain continued to lash the glass. "Unnatural things."

Jane nodded grimly. "Mary Sutton, the girl who had your position before you, she went in there on a dare. Came back white as a sheet and wouldn't speak of what she'd seen. Left on the next morning's train."

"What did she claim to see?" I asked, though part of me did not want to know.

"A beast," Margaret answered, her voice heavy with meaning. "A creature that walks like a man but isn't one. They call it the Beast of Dean."

I forced a smile. "Surely, that's just a local story."

"Laugh if you like," Jane snapped. "But stay out of those woods."

Later, as I lay on my narrow cot, I thought about their warnings. Through the small window beside my bed, I could see the dark line of trees in the distance. I pulled my blanket higher and tried to sleep.

The next morning came too early, announced by Margaret shaking my shoulder in the pre-dawn darkness.

"Up you get," she said. "Fletcher doesn't tolerate tardiness."

I dressed quickly in the work clothes provided, sturdy trousers, a thick cotton shirt, and heavy boots, and joined the others for a breakfast of porridge and strong tea. By 5:30, we assembled in the main yard where Fletcher waited with his usual scowl.

"Margaret, you'll work the vegetable gardens today," he instructed. "Bess and Jane, the dairy needs attention." His gaze settled on me with something that might have been satisfaction. "Miss Harwick, you'll clear stones from the far pasture. It needs to be ready for plowing by week's end."

I gathered the tools he indicated and set off in the direction he pointed with only a few words of direction. The morning was crisp and clear after yesterday's rain, the grass heavy with dew that dampened my pant legs as I walked.

The path led me past Millfield, where several workers were already bent over their tasks, then past Shepherd's Field where sheep grazed peacefully.

Finally, I reached the footbridge Fletcher had mentioned.

It was a simple wooden structure spanning the Blackwater Stream.

The water below ran clear and shallow, babbling softly over smooth stones.

Beyond the bridge lay the far pasture, a field that stretched to the very edge of the forest. Ancient oaks marked the boundary between civilization and wilderness.

Beyond the tree line, the woods were nothing but impenetrable shadows and shifting mist. I cast the forest a wary glance as I set down my tools.

After a deep breath, I put the rumors from my mind.

I set to work immediately, using the shovel to pry stones from the dirt and load them into my cloth sack.

Every rock was a fight, clinging to the ground stubbornly.

The bag hanging over my shoulder grew heavier with each victory, but I refused to quit.

Sweat stung my eyes as I worked and my long hair escaped my braid to stick to the sides of my neck.

By midday, I had barely cleared a quarter of the field. I trudged over to the stone wall that bordered the field and flopped down. I unwrapped the bread and cheese I brought, setting aside manners to take large bites in between gulps of water from a jug.

That is when I first felt it, the unmistakable sensation of being watched.

I paused midbite and glanced around. There was no one in sight, nothing but sheep moving in the nearby field. I scanned the tree line. Nothing. Just the play of light and shadow between the massive trunks. But the feeling persisted, raising goosebumps along my arms despite the warmth of the sun.

I finished eating and returned to my work, but the awareness never left me. Several times I straightened, certain I had caught a glimpse of something moving in my peripheral vision. Each time I turned, there was nothing but forest.

As the afternoon wore on, the sensation grew stronger. Not threatening, exactly, but... watchful. The feeling should have frightened me, but whatever watched from the forest did not feel malevolent. Just interested.

When evening approached and it was time to return to the farm, I gathered my tools and walked back toward the bridge. At the edge of the field, I paused and looked back over my shoulder.

For just a moment, I could have sworn I saw a shadow shift between the trees, tall,

broad, and definitely not a trick of the light. Then, it was gone. I blinked, unsure if I had imagined the whole thing. With a frown, I hurried back to the farmstead.

???

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:04 pm

I had been watching her all day. The one the other humans called "Alice".

From the moment she crossed the bridge that morning, I had positioned myself in the shadows at the forest's edge. She worked with quiet determination, and unlike the other farm workers who hurried through their tasks with nervous glances at the forest, she seemed almost drawn to the tree line.

I had been careless once, moving too close when she bent to lift a particularly stubborn stone. For a moment our eyes had almost met across the distance, and I felt a jolt of something I had not experienced in years. Connection.

She had sensed me, I was certain of it. The way she straightened, scanning the trees with those intelligent dark eyes before finally returning to her work.

As evening approached and she gathered her tools, I watched her prepare to leave with something uncomfortably close to regret.

She paused at the forest edge and looked back, her gaze sweeping the tree line one final time.

At that moment, I made a decision that would have horrified my more cautious nature.

I stepped forward, just enough to let her catch a glimpse of my shadow between the trees.

I remained motionless until she was well out of sight, then made my way back to my

cottage through the deepening shadows.

The evening air carried the scent of pine and damp earth, and somewhere in the canopy above, an owl called to its mate.

My footsteps were silent on the moss-covered ground, following paths worn smooth by years of solitary travel.

My cottage felt different tonight. The familiar creak of the wooden door, the soft hiss of the oil lamp as I lit it—sounds that had been my only companions for so long suddenly seemed louder in the quiet space.

Tomorrow she would return. Fletcher had said the field needed to be cleared by week's end, which meant several more days of distant observation.

It had been years since I had seen someone work with such quiet determination, years since anyone had looked toward the forest with curiosity rather than fear.

I prepared my meal, listening to the familiar chorus of night sounds beyond my walls—the rustle of small creatures in the underbrush, the distant call of a fox, and the whisper of wind through the ancient oaks.

But my thoughts kept drifting to the woman in the far pasture, and I found myself wondering what had brought her to this remote place, so far from the world she clearly belonged to.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:04 pm

Sleep eluded me that first night at Blackwood Farm.

Every time I closed my eyes, I found myself thinking about that shadow and the strange feeling that something had been watching me.

In the darkness of the bunkroom, it seemed foolish.

It could have been anything. A deer or simply my imagination running wild after all the warnings about the forest.

I rose before dawn, dressing quietly so as not to wake the other girls. The small window showed nothing but darkness beyond the glass, but I knew the Forest of Dean was out there, ancient and impenetrable.

I should have felt apprehensive about returning to work so close to those woods. Instead, I found myself curious about what I might have glimpsed yesterday—if I had glimpsed anything at all.

After a hurried breakfast, I gathered my tools and set off for the field just as the other girls were waking. The morning was damp and cool, heavy with the promise of rain. Birds sang in the shadows of the trees, and the sheep in Shepherd's Field looked up placidly as I passed.

I glanced over the rail as I crossed the footbridge. The water ran higher today, swollen with runoff from somewhere upstream. The current that had been a gentle babble yesterday rushed under the bridge, carrying leaves and small branches toward the valley below.

In the far pasture, I continued my work clearing stones but found myself glancing frequently toward the forest edge. For the first hour, I saw nothing unusual—just the play of light and shadow between the massive oaks. But as the hours passed, that familiar sensation returned.

I was being watched.

This time, I did not try to catch sight of my observer directly.

Instead, I continued working while staying alert to my peripheral vision.

There—a shift in the shadows that had nothing to do with wind-blown branches.

The suggestion of something large and still, positioned where it could observe the entire pasture.

The morning passed peacefully, my pile of stones growing steadily. I fell into a rhythm with my work, the repetitive motions leaving my mind free to wander. Who was my silent observer? A deer? Something else entirely?

Around midday, I paused to eat my lunch of bread, cheese, and dried meat, sitting on the stone wall with my back to the forest. The sensation of being watched intensified, and I found myself speaking softly to the empty air.

"I know you're there," I said, not turning around. "I don't know what you are, but I'm not afraid."

Silence answered me, but somehow it felt like a listening silence.

I had just returned to my work when a shadow passed over the field.

I glanced up to see dark clouds roiling across the sky, swallowing the afternoon sun.

The air grew heavy and still for a moment, and then a gust of wind swept across the pasture, bending the grass flat and setting the oak leaves dancing.

My hair whipped across my face as another gust hit, stronger this time. The trees at the forest edge began to sway, their branches creaking in protest. I could smell rain on the wind—that earthy, damp scent that meant a serious storm.

The farm buildings looked impossibly distant across the fields. Past the bridge, across Shepherd's Field, past Millfield—twenty minutes of walking on a good day. A low rumble rolled across the sky, and the first cold drops strike my face.

I hastily gathered my pickaxe, crowbar, and canvas sack, but the wind was already pulling at my trouser legs. The sky was churning an ominous dark gray, and the air itself seemed to press down on me.

Lightning split the sky, turning everything white for an instant. The thunder came immediately after—a sharp crack that shook the ground beneath my feet. I could smell the electricity in the air now, sharp and dangerous.

I looked again toward the distant farm buildings, then at Blackwater Stream running between me and safety. The bridge lay to my left, but to my right, the stream appeared narrower. If I could cross there, I could save time.

Another lightning flash decided for me. I dropped my tools and ran toward the stream. The rain was falling harder now, sheets of water that made the world a blur of green and brown. My boots slipped in the mud as I ran and I nearly fell twice.

I reached the bank of the stream and looked down at the rushing water. What had seemed like a reasonable crossing from a distance looked far more treacherous up

close. The current ran swift and dark, the stream swollen nearly out of its banks.

Thunder crashed directly overhead. I eyed the distance between the two banks. The stream had widened with the runoff, but it still looked manageable—maybe six feet across at the narrowest point. If I could get a running start...

I backed up several steps, then sprinted toward the bank. At the last moment, I launched myself across the rushing water, arms windmilling for balance.

I almost made it.

My boots hit the far bank, but the muddy ground was slick with rain.

My feet shot out from under me, and I tumbled backward into the stream with a splash.

Dark water closed over my head, as I fought to regain my footing, but the current was relentless.

The water was deeper than it had looked from above, the cold shocking the breath from me.

My boots slid over the smooth stones lining the streambed as I clawed for anything to stay above water. My hands grasped at nothing but rushing water. The last thing I saw before the stream swallowed me was the black, rolling clouds.

???

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:04 pm

I had been watching her all morning. From the shadows at the forest's edge, I could see Alice working. She was different from the other humans I had observed over the years. More aware of her surroundings. She knew I was there.

When she spoke to the empty air, acknowledging my presence, there was no fear in her voice. And the lack of fear, when it was all I had ever known, did something to me. I should have left then, disappeared back into the deep woods where I belonged. But I could not make myself move.

When the storm clouds began gathering, I felt the first stirrings of unease.

I knew the power of these sudden spring storms, and how quickly they could turn deadly.

When Alice looked toward the stream, panic seized me.

The water was already running high from yesterday's rain. If she tried to cross...

I started forward before I could think better of it, crashing through the underbrush toward the stream bank. But Alice was already trying to cross.

"No," I breathed, watching her jump.

I burst from the forest without thinking, rushing into the stream. The water was shockingly cold as I waded in, but I barely felt it. I could see her beneath the surface, her dark hair flowing with the current. Her clothes were snagged on something that held her under.

I reached her in three long strides. Gripping her around the waist, I hauled her up out of the water, her slight form nearly weightless. I jerked her pant leg free from where it was caught on the streambed. Then I turned and waded back to shore, carrying Alice against my chest.

But she was not breathing.

I laid her on the wet grass, rain pelting down on both of us. Her lips were blue, her face white as chalk. Panic clawed at me, but I shoved it down. I had seen the village healer do this once, years ago, when a child nearly drowned in the mill pond.

I tilted Alice's head back and pressed my hands to her chest, pushing hard and fast like I remembered. Water dribbled from her lips, but she still was not breathing. I tried again, harder this time, and suddenly water gushed from her mouth.

She coughed violently, her whole body shaking as she fought to get the water out of her lungs. Relief hit me like a punch when I heard those harsh, gasping sounds. She was breathing again. But before I could feel truly safe, she went limp again.

The storm was getting worse. Both of us were soaked and Alice was shivering. I could not leave her here. I carefully scooped her into my arms and hurried into the forest.

The journey to my cottage felt like it took hours. I took the most sheltered paths, trying to shield her from the worst of the rain. By the time I reached my door, she was shaking violently.

Inside, I laid her on my bed and immediately started building up the fire, my hands trembling as I fed wood to the flames.

She was so cold, too cold. I grabbed every blanket I owned, every fur and warm

covering, yanking them from their places and piling them around her.

Still not enough. I pulled my winter coat from the hook by the door, anything that might trap warmth.

Her lips were still too blue. Was she breathing? I leaned close, relief flooding through me when I felt the faint whisper of air from her nose. But her skin was like ice to the touch.

I should get her out of those wet clothes, but no. That was not proper. Instead, I tucked the covers higher around her neck, trying to keep the warmth in. She looked so small in my bed, swallowed by all the furs like she might just disappear.

Was this enough? Should I do more? I crouched beside the bed, watching for any sign of improvement, any hint of color returning to her pale face.

As I knelt beside the bed, watching the slow rise and fall of her breathing, the magnitude of what I had done settled over me.

I had broken my most sacred rule. I had revealed myself to a human.

Everything I had built, every precaution I had taken to remain hidden, had been cast aside in a moment of desperate action.

I shakily rose to my feet to change into dry clothes, hanging the others near the fire to dry.

I pulled my only chair to the side of the bed and dropped into it to begin my vigil.

Whatever came next, whatever consequences my choice might bring, I had to believe saving her life was worth it.

Even if it meant the end of the only life I had ever known.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:04 pm

I woke to the sound of crackling fire and the scent of woodsmoke. My head throbbed, and for a moment I could not remember where I was. The ceiling above me was not the familiar rough planks of the land girls' cottage, but long, sturdy branches and dark thatching.

The memories returned in a rush. The storm. The stream. Drowning.

I tried to sit up and immediately regretted it as pain stabbed through my temples. A large, gentle hand pressed against my shoulder, urging me back down.

"Easy," said a voice—deep, rumbling, unmistakably male. "You nearly died."

I turned toward the voice and froze.

A creature knelt beside me, unlike anything I had ever seen.

Even crouched down, he was huge, with broad shoulders and a thick, powerful frame.

He wore a leather vest and plain black trousers.

Coarse black hair covered his muscular arms and what I could see of his chest. His hands were the size of dinner plates with thick fingers and blunt, black claws.

I stared at the one hovering just inches from me until he snatched it away.

He cleared his throat and I jerked my gaze to his face.

My heart stuttered. Pointed ears rose from the top of his head and his nose was more of a snout, complete with tusks that jutted from his lower jaw.

His eyes, though... His eyes were amber-colored and startlingly intelligent, watching me with what looked like concern.

The scream died in my chest. His careful stillness, kept me frozen in place. He did not move, barely breathed, as if afraid of frightening me. I inhaled shakily. So, this was the Beast of Dean.

"You're safe," he said quietly. "I pulled you from the stream. You nearly drowned."

I stared at him, speechless. The creature the other girls had whispered about with terror had saved my life. I was not sure how to feel.

I looked away from him to scan my surroundings. The cottage was small but immaculately clean, with books lining several shelves and bundles of dried herbs hanging from the rafters. A fire burned cheerfully in a stone hearth, and I was buried beneath what felt like a dozen furs and woolen blankets.

That is when I realized I was not wearing anything beneath the covers.

Heat flooded my face as the implication hit me. My wet clothes must have been removed. They would have killed me otherwise. But still, the thought of this creature undressing me while I was unconscious made my cheeks burn with embarrassment.

"How do you feel?" he asked, his eyes carefully fixed on my face, never drifting lower.

I opened my mouth to speak, but no sound came out. My throat felt raw, probably from the water I had inhaled. The creature seemed to understand.

"Here," he said, reaching for something beside him. "This will help." He offered me a wooden cup, steam rising from it.

"It's just broth," he said when I hesitated. "Herbs for healing and honey for sweetness. Nothing that will harm you."

There was something in his tone, a patient kindness that finally convinced me. I struggled to sit up, carefully keeping the blankets pulled high, and took the cup in shaking hands. The broth was warm and soothing, easing the rawness in my throat.

"Thank you," I managed, my voice barely above a whisper.

Something flickered in his amber eyes. "You're welcome."

We sat in silence while I sipped the broth, both of us carefully avoiding the obvious. Finally, he cleared his throat and his ears twitched backward.

"Your clothes," he said quietly, "they were soaked through. I had to... that is, you would have..." He gestured helplessly toward the fire where I could now see my shirt and pants hanging to dry. "I kept my eyes closed," he added quickly. "I only did what was necessary."

I felt my face flame even hotter, but I forced myself to meet his eyes. "I understand."

His shoulders sagged with relief. "I have a shirt you could wear. Something dry and warm."

He rose from his chair to cross the room. From a wooden chest, he retrieved the promised garment. He set it on the bed beside me, then moved toward the door.

"I'll be just outside," he said. "Call out when you're ready."

I caught a glimpse of trees before the door closed behind him with a soft click. I set down the empty cup and looked around more carefully. The furniture was rough but sturdy, the floor swept clean, everything in its proper place. The books looked worn from frequent handling.

I pushed back the mound of blankets and slipped out of bed.

The floor was further down than I anticipated and cool under my feet.

I struggled out of my damp shirt and pants, hanging them near the fire to dry.

The shirt he had given me was soft and clean.

It smelled faintly of pine and something uniquely masculine.

Not unpleasant, but not human either. I dropped the shirt over my head and it fell nearly to my ankles.

"I'm ready," I called, folding the sleeves back to free my hands.

He entered a moment later, his eyes carefully averted until he was certain I was decent. When he looked at me, something in his expression made my chest feel tight.

"Better?" he asked.

"Much. Thank you." I shifted in place, fiddling with the shirt sleeves. "I'm Alice. What's your name?"

The question seemed to surprise him. He was quiet for so long that I thought he might not answer.

"Heath," he said finally. "My name is Heath."

???

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:04 pm

She had not screamed.

That single fact occupied my thoughts as I prepared more broth, adding herbs that would help ward off fever and restore her strength.

When Alice's eyes had first opened and focused on my face, I had braced myself for the inevitable terror, the screams that would shatter the peace of my cottage and drive home once again how utterly Other I was.

Instead, she had simply stared. Frightened, yes—I could smell the sharp scent of fear that had made my heart clench—but not hysterical. Not fleeing. She had looked at me as if trying to solve a puzzle rather than confronting a monster.

And when I had offered her broth, she had accepted it.

Had thanked me. Now she sat in my shirt, which draped over her small frame like a tent, and spoke to me as if I were simply a man who had helped her.

As if the tusks, claws, and fur were irrelevant details rather than the defining features that marked me as different.

"How long was I unconscious?" she asked, accepting the cup of broth from me.

"Several hours. The sun is setting now." I gestured toward the window, where I could see glimpses of purple sky through the canopy. "Your people at the farm will be worried."

Alice took a sip of broth. "Yes, I suppose they will be."

"I will take you there," I said. "When you're ready."

"I'm ready, now," Alice said softly, setting down the empty cup. "They'll be wondering where I am."

I nodded, though the words felt like stones in my chest. "Of course. You're strong enough to walk?"

She stood carefully, testing her balance. "I think so." She paused, looking around the cottage with curious eyes. "This is your home?"

"It is."

"It's... peaceful," she said, and there was something wistful in her voice. "You live here alone?"

The question was gently asked, without prying. "Yes. It's safer that way."

"Safer for whom?"

"For everyone." I met her eyes. "People fear what they don't understand, Alice."

She was quiet for a moment, studying my face. "You saved my life," she said finally. "That's all I need to understand."

The acceptance in her voice caught me off guard. I had expected questions, demands for explanations. Instead, she offered only gratitude.

She gestured toward the door. "I should go before someone comes looking."

I gathered her dried clothes from beside the fire and handed them to her.

“Come out when you’re ready,” I said, stepping outside.

I took a deep breath of the cool evening air, enjoying the comforting scents of dirt, rain, and growing things.

When Alice emerged a few minutes later, she looked like herself again.

Her hair was rebraided and she was wearing her work clothes.

Only the careful way she moved suggested anything unusual had happened.

"Ready?" I asked.

She nodded, then surprised me by stepping closer. "Heath... thank you again."

I ducked my head, gesturing toward the forest path. "We should go. It'll be full dark soon."

The journey to the forest edge passed in relative silence, Alice following me along paths known only to woodland creatures and myself. I found myself unconsciously adjusting my stride to accommodate her shorter legs, staying close enough to catch her if she stumbled.

When we reached the boundary between forest and farmland, I stopped. The lights of Blackwood Farm glowed warmly in the distance, promising safety and normalcy.

"Can you make it from here?" I asked.

Alice looked toward the farm, then back at me. "Yes." She hesitated. "Will I... see

you again?"

The question caught me off guard. "You want to?"

"I think I do," she said, sounding almost surprised by her own words. "If you don't mind."

Mind? I would have laughed if the situation were not so absurd. This lovely, kind woman was asking if I minded whether she wanted to see me again.

"I'm often in the forest near the far pasture," I said carefully. "If you ever need... assistance."

It was not an invitation, but it was not a refusal either. Alice smiled, the first real smile I had seen from her, and it transformed her entire face.

"Good night, Heath," she said softly.

"Good night, Alice."

I watched until she was safely within sight of the farm buildings before melting back into the forest shadows. Only then did I allow myself to consider the impossibility of what had just happened.

She wanted to see me again.

For the first time in years, I found myself looking forward to tomorrow.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:04 pm

I woke before dawn, my mind immediately turning to the events of the previous day. The memory of Heath's warm eyes, his gentle hands, the impossible kindness he had shown me. It all felt like a dream in the grey morning light. But the faint ache in my head reminded me it had been very real.

I dressed quietly, not wanting to wake the other girls, and reached under my bed where I kept my few personal belongings.

I pulled a slim, light blue book from the depths of my valise.

Tennyson's collected works, my father's favorite book.

I had carried it with me from London, though I had not opened it since arriving at the farm.

Now, as I held the worn leather binding, I thought of Heath's cottage. The books on his shelf, the careful way he had spoken, the intelligence in his gaze. He was clearly educated, someone who would appreciate literature. And after his kindness to me...

Before I could second-guess myself, I tucked the book into my canvas bag alongside my lunch. Whatever Heath was, he had saved my life and asked nothing in return. The least I could do was share something meaningful with him.

The morning was crisp and clear as I made my way across the farm. I crossed the footbridge over Blackwater Stream, noting how peacefully it flowed now. In the field, I resumed my work clearing stones, but my attention kept drifting to the forest edge.

Was he there? Watching? The thought should have unsettled me, but instead, I found it oddly comforting.

As the morning continued, that familiar sensation returned. The feeling of being quietly observed. But today it felt different. Less like being watched and more like... companionship.

I worked steadily until the sun was directly overhead. Then I set down my tools and walked to the stone wall that marked the field's boundary. The forest was full of shadows even at midday.

"I know you're there," I said softly, settling onto the wall with my back to the trees. "I brought my lunch. And something for you."

Silence answered me, but it felt like a listening silence. I unwrapped my bread and cheese, eating slowly while I waited. The minutes stretched, and I began to wonder if I had imagined his presence after all.

Then I heard the soft crunch of leaves underfoot, the careful tread of someone moving through the underbrush.

"Alice."

His deep voice sent an unexpected shiver down my spine. I set down my half-eaten lunch and slowly turned.

Heath stood at the forest edge, partially concealed by the massive trunk of an oak.

In daylight, he looked even more imposing than he had in the dim cottage.

He was two feet taller than me and over twice as wide.

His long, muscular legs ended in large black hooves and his coarse black hair gleamed in the dappled sunlight.

But his eyes held the same gentle concern I remembered.

"How do you feel?" he asked. "Any dizziness? Headache?"

"I'm well," I assured him.

He stepped closer. "You nearly died yesterday."

"I'm stronger than I look," I said, then gestured to the space beside me on the wall.

"Will you sit with me?"

Heath hesitated, his gaze darting toward the distant farm buildings. "If someone saw..."

"No one comes to the far pasture but me. Fletcher made that quite clear." I patted the stone wall again. "Please."

After a moment's consideration, Heath moved out of the forest's shelter and settled beside me on the wall. Up close, I could see details I had missed in the cottage. His pointed ears twitched at every small sound, and he kept his fingers curled inward as if trying to hide his claws.

"I brought you something," I said, reaching into my bag. "A thank you, for saving my life."

I held out the book of poetry, and Heath's eyes widened with surprise. He took it carefully, his large hands dwarfing the slim volume.

"Tennyson," he murmured, running a clawed finger along the spine. "I haven't read him in years."

"I noticed you had quite a collection of books in your home," I said. "You seemed like someone who would appreciate poetry."

Heath's mouth quirked in what might have been a smile.

"My mother taught me to read. She believed knowledge was the one thing that could never be taken away.

" His expression grew distant. "She had many books.

Poetry, philosophy, natural sciences. She said understanding the world through words was as important as understanding it through experience. "

"She sounds like a remarkable woman."

"She was." Heath opened the book carefully, pages falling open to a poem marked with a pressed flower. "Do you have a favorite among Tennyson's works?"

"My father always loved 'Ulysses,'" I said.

"He said it reminded him that there was always more to discover in the world, even when life seemed settled.

" I smiled at the memory. "He believed education was important for a woman, even if society would have preferred I use it only for polite conversation. "

"Do you prefer polite conversation to clearing stones?" Heath asked.

I laughed. "My father always said hard work builds character. Though I'm not sure this is quite what he had in mind."

"What changed your mind?" Heath asked gently. "About society life, I mean."

I had not bothered to share my past with the other girls, but I found myself wanting to answer Heath honestly. I felt compelled to share something of myself with this strange, kind creature who had saved my life.

"My father died in the war," I said quietly.

"The book belonged to him. He loved poetry.

He said it helped him understand the world better.

My mother died when I was young, so it was just the two of us for years.

After he was conscripted and killed..." I paused, gathering my thoughts.

"London felt empty. I was living with my aunt and uncle, and they made it quite clear I was a burden.

I needed something real, something that mattered. "

Heath was quiet for a long moment. "I'm sorry," he said finally. "For your loss."

"Thank you." I glanced at him from the corner of my eye. "What about you? Have you always lived alone in the forest?"

"Not always." Heath closed the book carefully, cradling it in his large hands. "But for many years now. It's... safer that way."

"Safer for whom?"

"For everyone." His amber eyes met mine. "People fear what they don't understand, Alice."

"You don't seem frightening to me," I said.

His lips twitched like he was trying not to smile. "You're braver than most."

"Or more foolish," I said with a smile.

We stared at each other for a moment before Heath abruptly stood. "I should go."

I nodded. "I should get back to work." I sighed and began gathering my things.

Heath watched me, but he made no move to leave. "Alice..."

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

I glanced at him.

"For the book," he continued. "It's been... a long time since anyone gave me a gift."

The quiet sadness in his voice made my chest tighten. "You're welcome. Maybe we could discuss it sometime? I'd like to hear your thoughts."

Heath's lips curved into a smile. "I would like that very much."

As I returned to work, Heath melted back into the forest shadows. But I could feel

him there, watching over me. The thought warmed me more than the afternoon sun.

???

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:04 pm

The book lay open in front of me on my rough wooden table, its pages illuminated by the golden light of my oil lamp. I turned the pages carefully, reading verses I had not seen since my mother's death.

"Come not, when I am dead, to drop thy foolish tears upon my grave," I read aloud. The words stirred memories of evenings spent by my mother's side. She had believed that literature could bridge any gap, that beauty and truth transcended all boundaries.

If only she could see me now, I thought, sitting in my cottage reading poetry given to me by a human woman who had looked at my face and seen someone worth knowing.

Alice. Even her name was beautiful. The memory of our conversation by the stone wall filled me with a warmth I had not experienced in years. She had sat beside me in the open air, asking questions about my life as if I were simply another person worthy of her interest.

Because she was kind and grateful to me for saving her life. I must not read deeper meaning into gratitude, must not allow my loneliness to manufacture affection where none existed.

But friendship... that was a gift beyond price. To have someone to talk to, someone who saw me as more than a monster lurking in the shadows. Someone who brought me books and sat beside me in comfortable companionship.

I had almost forgotten what it felt like to be seen as a person.

The sound of distant barking interrupted my thoughts.

I set down the book and moved to my window, peering out into the forest darkness.

I strained my ears, counting the voices.

At least three dogs, possibly more, their cries echoing through the valley.

They were still far away but the sound sent a chill down my spine.

For years, I had lived in relative peace.

I had been careful, maintaining my solitude in the deepest parts of the forest where men rarely ventured.

But hunters were unpredictable. They followed their prey wherever it led, pushing deeper into the wilderness than farmers or woodcutters ever dared.

And if their dogs caught wind of something unusual. ..

The baying grew more distant, the hunting party moving away from the forest for now. I could only hope they would not return.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:04 pm

I barely slept that night. Every time I drifted off, I would dream about amber eyes and that deep, gentle voice, or I would jolt awake remembering the water closing over my head. By the time the other girls started stirring, I was already dressed and ready to go.

I slipped out into the grey pre-dawn air, planning to grab something quick to eat before heading to the field. I wondered if Heath would be there already, watching from the forest edge like he had before. I hoped we could talk again.

I was smiling to myself when voices from the direction of the stables made me pause. Fletcher's unmistakable growl was answered by another man's voice. There was something about their hushed, urgent tone that made me uneasy. I crept closer, staying in the shadows.

"...been tracking for thirty years," the stranger was saying. "If there's a beast in there, we'll flush it out."

"About time," Fletcher replied. "The thing's been lurking in that forest too long. Makes the workers nervous."

I moved closer, my heart beginning to pound.

Through a gap in the barn wall, I could see two men standing beside a wagon.

Fletcher I recognized immediately, but the other man was a stranger.

He was older, with the weathered look of someone who spent his life outdoors.

Three large hunting dogs sat at his feet.

"My hounds are the best in the county," the stranger continued. "Once they catch a scent, nothing escapes them. We'll put an end to the Beast of Dean once and for all."

I covered my mouth. They were going to hunt Heath.

"The dogs picked up something yesterday evening," the stranger continued, adjusting the rifle strap on his shoulder. "Fresh tracks near the stream. Whatever it is, it's big and it's been moving through these parts regularly."

"Good," Fletcher said with satisfaction. "Should be easy to track then."

"We'll start from the eastern edge," the stranger said. "work our way west. If it has a den, we'll find it."

"I'll come with you," Fletcher said. "Show you where there've been sightings."

"Good. Give me an hour to get ready."

I pressed my back to the barn wall, my mind racing. I had to warn Heath. I waited until both men had moved away before emerging from my hiding place. My hands were shaking as I gathered my work tools, but my mind was already made up. I had to find Heath before they did.

Instead of taking the usual path to the far pasture, I headed straight for the treeline. My heart pounded as I slipped into the forest, leaving behind the safety of open farmland for the deep shadows of the woods.

The change was immediate. Cool, damp air wrapped around me, thick with the scent of moss and decaying leaves.

Ancient oaks towered overhead, their massive trunks disappearing into a canopy so dense that only scattered beams of pale morning light reached the forest floor.

Mist clung to the hollows between the roots, and everything was hushed as if the trees themselves were holding their breath.

My footsteps seemed impossibly loud on the carpet of fallen leaves and twigs, each crack and rustle echoing. Somewhere high above, a bird called out. The lonely, haunting sound made me shiver. The trees pressed in around me, their branches reaching out like gnarled fingers.

I had no idea where to look for Heath. The forest stretched endlessly in every direction, a labyrinth of shadow and green twilight. Ferns spread across the forest floor and I caught glimpses of movement amongst the leaves. Small things scurrying away from the trespasser.

I moved as carefully as I could, pausing every few moments to listen. Then I heard it. A rhythmic thudding sound echoed through the trees. The steady rhythm of an axe biting into wood.

I followed the sound deeper into the forest, my heart beating faster with each step. It had to be Heath. Who else would be chopping wood in the depths of the wilderness? The sound grew louder as I approached a break in the trees. I paused at the tree line.

Heath stood in the center of the clearing, his back to me, wielding a massive axe.

He had removed his leather vest, and the morning sunlight caught the ripple of his back and shoulder muscles as he brought the axe down in a perfect arc.

The log split cleanly in two, and he positioned another piece of wood without stopping for a breath.

I found myself watching the fluid motion of his work, the way he handled the axe as if it weighed nothing at all. There was something captivating about his easy competence, the controlled power in every movement.

I must have made some small sound because Heath suddenly froze mid-swing. He turned slowly, the axe still raised, and his gaze found mine across the clearing.

"Alice?" His voice was filled with surprise and concern. "What are you doing here?"

I stepped out from the trees, my legs feeling strangely unsteady.

"I came to warn you," I said, forcing myself to focus on the urgency of the situation rather than the way his chest rose and fell with controlled breathing.

"There are hunters. Fletcher and another man.

He has dogs and rifles, and they're searching the forest for you. "

Heath's expression darkened immediately. He set the axe aside and reached for his vest, pulling it on with quick, efficient movements. "How long ago did they start?"

"Just now." I moved closer. "They mean to kill you, Heath."

"I know." His voice was grim. "I heard the dogs last night. I should have left then."

"Left?" The word came out sharper than I had intended. "Where would you go?"

Heath glanced at me, something unreadable in his amber eyes. "Deeper into the forest. Or maybe further." He paused, studying my face. "You shouldn't have come here, Alice. If they find us together..."

"I had to warn you," I said. "You saved my life."

"And now you're risking yours for mine." Heath stepped closer, and I caught his scent. Damp earth and something uniquely masculine. "You barely know me."

"I know enough," I said, looking up into his face. "I know you're kind and gentle and nothing like the monster they think you are."

Heath's eyes softened. For a moment we stood there, close enough that I could see the flecks of gold in his eyes and feel the warmth radiating from his large body.

Then the distant sound of baying hounds shattered the moment.

"They're getting closer," Heath said, his voice rough. "You have to go back, Alice. Now. And you can't come here again."

"What do you mean?"

Heath's hands clenched into fists at his sides. "I mean this has to end. Whatever friendship we've begun, it's too dangerous to continue. For both of us."

The words hit me like a physical blow. "Heath, no—"

"Yes." His voice was firm, final. "Go back to your work, your normal life." He sighed. "Forget about the Beast of Dean."

"I can't forget about you," I said. "I won't."

Heath closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they held a resolve that made my heart sink.

"You must," he said quietly. "Goodbye, Alice."

Before I could argue, he turned and melted into the forest, leaving me alone in the clearing with the scent of fresh-cut wood and the sound of hunting dogs growing ever closer.

???

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:04 pm

I moved swiftly through the forest, putting distance between myself and the clearing where I had left Alice. Every instinct screamed at me to go back, to make sure she made it safely out of the woods before the hunters found her. But I could not risk leading them to her.

She had come to warn me. Despite barely knowing me, despite the danger to herself, she had risked everything to ensure my safety. The knowledge sat heavy in my chest, a mixture of gratitude and despair that threatened to overwhelm me.

And the way she had looked at me in the clearing...

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to banish the memory of her gaze moving over my body as I worked.

The shift in her scent when she watched me, that sweet, musky aroma that spoke of things I could never have.

Not truly. Not in a woman who belonged to the world of civilization and respectability.

She had called me kind and gentle. Had said she could not forget me. But what future could there be for a creature like me and a woman like her? The very idea was madness.

The hunters would be entering the forest soon. I knew places deeper in the woods where even the boldest men feared to venture. Caves and ravines where I could wait out their search. I adjusted my grip on the axe and picked up my pace.

But then I caught a familiar scent on the morning breeze. Something that made my blood run cold.

Dogs. Close and getting closer.

They had started earlier than expected or moved faster than I had anticipated.

Either way, my time had run out. I led them deeper into the forest, using streams to break my trail and doubling back through rocky ground where the scent would be harder to follow.

The sounds of pursuit grew more distant with each turn I took.

But something felt wrong. The dogs were too loud, too obvious. And there was something else. A wrongness in the forest that I could not place. An absence of sound where there should have been birdsong.

The first rifle shot cracked from my right, completely unexpected. The bullet splintered bark inches from my head. I spun toward the sound and saw Fletcher emerging from behind a massive oak, rifle already being reloaded. He fired again, closer this time.

Behind me, the dogs were getting closer, their baying more frantic. To my left, the ground was becoming treacherous, sloping toward the cliff edge. To my right, Fletcher advanced steadily, his rifle trained on me.

I sprinted toward the only escape route.

Fletcher's rifle cracked again. White-hot pain exploded through my left side as the bullet found its mark, spinning me around.

My foot slipped on loose stones, and then I was falling.

Rocky walls blurred past as I tumbled down the slope, striking stone again and again until darkness claimed me entirely.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:04 pm

I had only been walking a short while when the first gunshot cracked through the morning air.

My blood turned to ice. The sound came from the west, followed immediately by the triumphant baying of hunting dogs. They had found him.

Without thinking, I turned and raced back toward the sound.

A second shot echoed through the forest, and my heart nearly stopped.

I crashed through the underbrush, following the sounds of men yelling and barking dogs.

Branches caught at my clothes and scratched my face, but I barely noticed.

All that mattered was reaching Heath before it was too late.

The voices grew louder as I approached, and I forced myself to slow down. Getting caught would help no one. I crept forward through the dense undergrowth until I could see flashes of movement ahead. The two men with rifles, the dogs circling them excitedly.

"It went over the edge," Fletcher's voice carried clearly through the trees.

"Good," came the stranger's reply. "That's a fifty-foot drop onto rocks. Nothing survives that fall."

I pressed myself against a massive oak tree, my hands shaking as I peered around the trunk. Through the trees, I could see the two hunters standing at the edge of what looked like a steep ravine. Their dogs sniffed eagerly at the ground, whining with frustration.

"Should we go down and look for the body?" Fletcher asked.

The other man shook his head. "Not worth the risk. If the fall did not kill it, the blood loss will. Look at all that." He gestured toward dark stains on the rocks at the ravine's edge.

My stomach lurched. Heath's blood. He could be lying down there right now, dying, while these men stood around congratulating themselves.

"Besides," the stranger continued, "I've got to get back to my own farm. Job's done. The Beast of Dean won't be troubling anyone anymore."

I watched as the stranger called his dogs to heel and the two men began walking away, their voices growing fainter with distance. Fletcher's harsh laugh echoed through the trees as they discussed their successful hunt, as if Heath were nothing more than a dangerous animal they had put down.

I waited, every muscle tense until I could no longer hear their voices. Then I waited longer, counting the minutes to be certain they were gone. The forest around me seemed unnaturally quiet as if even the other animals understood something terrible had happened.

Finally, when I was sure the hunters had truly left, I crept forward to the ravine's edge.

I did not pause to think before I carefully crept over the edge.

The descent was steep. I had to move slowly, testing each handhold and foothold before trusting my weight to it.

My clothes caught on every sharp rock, and twice I nearly lost my grip.

By the time I reached the bottom, my hands were scraped raw and my pants were torn in several places.

The ravine floor was a jumble of boulders and fallen logs, made even more treacherous by the slick moss covering everything. I scrambled over the rocks, following the dark stains that led toward the stream, my heart stuttering with each splash of blood I found.

Then I saw him.

Heath lay wedged between two large boulders near the water's edge, so still that for one horrible moment, I thought— No. I threw myself down the remaining rocks, not caring when my knees hit stone.

"No, no, no," I breathed, dropping beside him.

Dark blood had soaked through the leather of his vest, the metallic smell making my stomach lurch.

The thick fur on his left side was matted and sticky where the bullet had torn through flesh, and more blood streaked from a gash on his forehead.

His massive chest barely moved, his breathing a shallow rattle.

"Heath!" I pressed my hands to his chest, feeling for his heartbeat. There. Slow and weak, but there. "Heath, please, can you hear me?"

Nothing. His face was slack, lifeless. I looked around frantically. He was so big, so heavy. How could I possibly...? But I had to try something. I could not just watch him die.

The cottage. I had to get him back to his cottage where I could properly tend to him. But Heath was several times my size, far too large for me to move alone.

"Heath, please," I said more loudly, touching his face with trembling fingers. "You have to wake up. I can't do this without you."

His eyelids fluttered but did not open. I tried again, gently shaking his massive shoulder.

"The hunters are gone," I told him urgently. "You're safe now, but you're hurt badly. I need you to help me get you home."

???

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:04 pm

Pain clawed me back to consciousness. White-hot agony that felt like molten metal poured through my side. Every breath was like fire.

Then I heard her voice cutting through the haze, desperate and pleading.

"Alice?" The word scraped out of my throat like broken glass. My vision swam, as I tried to see her.

Shot. The memory hit me so hard that I flinched. The crack of the rifle, the burning pain, the sickening sensation of falling into nothingness. I should be dead.

But Alice was here. Alice had found me.

"You came back," I wheezed.

"I heard the gunshots," she said, sliding her arm under my shoulder. "I couldn't just leave you."

I tried to sit up and nearly blacked out as agony ripped through my side. Blood, warm and sticky, ran down my side. I could smell it. Metallic and sharp. It turned my stomach.

But Alice was warm against me, solid and real. Her slight frame felt more substantial than anything I had ever known.

"Can you walk?" she asked.

I managed a nod that sent the world spinning.

"Your cottage isn't far," she urged.

The journey out of the ravine was pure torment. Blood ran down my side in a steady stream, and I could feel myself getting weaker with every drop. My legs tried to give out several times, but Alice held me up through sheer force of will.

"Almost there," she kept saying, her voice tight with strain. "Just a little further."

By the time we reached my cottage, black spots danced at the edges of my vision. She somehow got me inside and onto my bed, where I collapsed.

"Let me see the wound," she said, reaching for my vest.

I caught her wrist, my grip clumsy and weak. "Alice, you shouldn't. This isn't proper."

Her eyes blazed with fierce determination. "You're bleeding to death. Let me help."

When she peeled away my vest, her sharp intake of breath told me everything I needed to know.

It was bad. But Alice did not flinch. I heard her rifling around the inside of my cottage for a moment before she was back at my side.

She cleaned the wound with steady hands while I gritted my teeth against the pain that threatened to drag me under.

Each touch of the cloth felt like being shot all over again.

"This will hurt," she warned before pressing down to stop the bleeding.

I bit down on a roar as white-hot pain exploded through my side. My vision grayed at the edges, and for a moment I thought I might pass out entirely. But Alice's voice anchored me and kept me conscious through the worst of it.

When she finally finished bandaging me, I was shaking violently.

"Alice," I managed through chattering teeth.

She looked up. "Yes?"

"Thank you." The words came out barely above a whisper. "For finding me. For this."

Something soft entered her expression. "You don't need to thank me."

This woman, this incredible, fearless woman, had risked everything to save a monster like me.

"Alice," I whispered, reaching up with a trembling hand to touch her cheek. "I..."

"Rest," she said gently. "You need to sleep. I'll stay and watch over you."

As consciousness slipped away, one thought burned through the haze of pain and blood loss: I loved her. Desperately, completely, hopelessly.