



Beast's Surrender, Beauty's Revenge

Author: *Sam Burns, W.M. Fawkes*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Almas has lived his life under the hungry gaze of a man who would take everything from him. When Lord Uther's power and privilege land his father in the dungeon until Almas gives him what he wants, Almas turns beyond the confines of his small, submissive village for a savior.

Revenge sends him to the deepest shadows in the northern forest looking for a monster of legend, but when the creature he finds there is more man than demon, Almas learns the true cost of vengeance. Its pursuit makes beasts of us all.

The instrument of Almas's revenge, a brute kept in isolation for centuries, is the very person who reminds him what it means to be human, to be safe. But what is safety for himself if he can't protect his family?

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CHAPTER ONE

PROLOGUE

Once upon a time, two kingdoms had a disagreement.

No one today remembers what it was about—even the names of the kingdoms were lost to time—but as is the way of men, they decided that the only way to settle the matter was by going to war.

The strongest knight in the northern kingdom, Percival, led their armies to a dozen victories, and the southern kingdom was in danger of not only losing the war, but being wiped from the map of the world.

With the help of dark magics, they executed a plan to stop Percival: they sent a berserk beast to murder his family, from his parents to his cousins to his tiny nieces and nephews, as they slept in their beds.

Percival heard of the dark deed and rushed home, but too late to stop the beast from running amok and murdering half the people in his town as well. Eventually, he managed to stop the monster, shackling it and trapping it in a tower in the middle of the Black Forest, but only by use of more dark magics, and at the cost of his own life.

Who won the war, you ask? What came of the men who made the monster and murdered Percival's family?

No one knows.

No one cares, either.

Both kingdoms have long since fallen off the map of the world, and now, there's only the kingdom of Bellara, on the edge of the Black Forest.

The people still warn, though, not to go into the woods. The monster Percival stopped is still out there, shackled in a tower in the woods, waiting to extract revenge for his long imprisonment.

CHAPTER TWO

ALMAS

I was not, would never be, Lord Uther's plaything.

It was a promise that I'd made to myself on my first midsummer festival after turning sixteen, when the lord himself had brought me a drink and smiled in an oil-slick manner that made my skin crawl. He had leaned over and gripped my thigh tight, his hand sliding up, moving flesh beneath his incessant touch, and I?—

I'd never been touched before. Not like that, so possessively.

His hand alone had been enough to pin me to my seat and when I had squirmed, he'd smiled.

"Like that, do you?" he'd asked, and I could still smell the sourness of his breath, feel it as it fell across my cheek.

But I hadn't liked it; I'd been terrified. It'd been the first time I had realized there was something beyond sweet kisses and fond affection, something dark in the hearts of men that'd turned Uther's hunger into something ravenous.

And I had assumed, in time, he would tire of me. It was often spoken in the village that he liked young men, took one after the other to his manor for a time, then let them go back to their families.

I'd thought his attention would drift, especially as I grew older.

It hadn't. If anything, my refusal had made him more stubborn.

So I found myself trekking through the cursed Black Forest, for there was nothing between the trees more devilish and unwelcome than Lord Uther himself. Should I die out there? Well, it would be a pity for my father, but I remained firmly convinced that it was better to die in the forest, made food for some horrible beast, than to submit myself to Lord Uther. I would not break the promise I'd made myself.

Moreover, I would see Uther pay for ever putting me in that position. These past four years, he had taken so very much from me. First, fun—the idea that I could relax and enjoy the company of those closest to me without pretense. At social gatherings now, I was tense, wary, looking for where he might spring out at me, careful to dodge out of groups that he approached.

Then, he had taken my friends. It was difficult to keep them, as my family fell out of favor with the local lord. My father's tinkering could only provide so much, and though I'd taken on an apprenticeship with the cobbler, even that had disappeared after a while. I was to have nothing, it seemed, beyond what Lord Uther gave me. At least, not until I gave him what he desired.

So in our destitution, my friends had drifted away, afraid to court Lord Uther's ire when he thought any one of them had gotten too close.

My last friend, my best friend, Lara—she'd stood by me through everything, but when Lord Uther had had her flogged for adultery of all things, she had turned me away when I tried to visit as she recovered. Finally, once she was back on her feet, she tearfully told me that she couldn't—couldn't risk it anymore. Not for her family.

She'd said she was sorry, and while I understood the distance she kept from me

moving forward, it broke my heart.

Isolation had turned me brittle, and in my darkest moments, I wondered if it was all worth it. How bad could it really be, to please Lord Uther and let all of this end? It wasn't too late for me to scrabble my life back together, and—and with his favor, couldn't it be better than ever before?

But I couldn't stand the thought, and when my father found me, tear-stained face pressed into my knees, he had told me that what I wanted mattered more than all of that. He'd started putting money aside, only pennies at a time, with the hope that we could one day leave.

And then, Lord Uther had taken him from me too. It was a ridiculous charge, something to do with unpaid taxes. But I had known, when the guard led my father out of the courthouse, that it had nothing to do with what little income Uther could extract from my family.

No, he had paused on his way down to the carriage to sneer at me. "I would love to discuss your father's release. Perhaps over dinner if you'd be so kind as to visit my manor."

It had taken all of my strength not to spit in his face, but from those wooden steps outside the courthouse, I'd marched directly down, through the streets of the town where everyone shrank away from me as if I'd been poisonous. Perhaps I was. My head was swimming with murderous rage. I was no longer myself, and if I never was again, I would still exact my revenge on the man who'd stolen everything from me.

It was only that I had decent shoes from my time with the cobbler that I managed my way through the forest as well as I did. I was blundering, no tracker or huntsman or woodsman. I did not know where I was going, beyond north and north and north, because while I did not have the strength to unseat a lord, there were whispers of one

who did—a great beast who'd nearly felled a whole kingdom.

The beast would take Uther's head and spill his blood across the marble floors of his damned manor house, and if he killed everyone else besides? All the better.

They had all abandoned me to this, abandoned my father. Not one person in the village had spoken up for him against this obvious ploy. Not one had offered their aid to me in the aftermath.

No, I would see them all scream before the end. Let them all become the deranged, haggard thing Lord Uther had made me.

For days, I marched through the woods, hungry and exhausted, sleeping between the roots of trees, my clothes muddy. I laughed to myself, half-mad, to think that Uther wouldn't even want me now. He'd liked me for my dark hair, my soft, pale skin, my blood-red lips. Now, that skin was covered in grime. It'd been clawed by vicious branches. My lips were chapped and I didn't doubt my eyes were hazy and mad.

I might die in the wilderness before ever finding what I sought. The fourth night, when wolves howled in the distance, I was sure that they'd come for me.

But the fifth morning—oh, the fifth morning, I saw a tower of stone, almost hidden behind the overgrowth of trees, abandoned.

My heart thrilled.

This was it. It had to be. And if it wasn't, then I was done. This tower would be my salvation or my end.

With a firm resolve, I pushed the vines aside and opened the door, but the inside of the tower was dark, almost as if it were night even though the sky outside shone the

rosy pink of sunrise. The only windows in the tower were high up on the wall, casting a shaft of light across the round space that did nothing to illuminate the floor below me.

I could only see the narrow platform in front of me, shadows opening ahead, like if I'd blindly walked forward, I could have fallen to my death. There was no railing to stop me from blundering toward a quick death.

Instead, I took the spiral stairs around the inner wall. The shadows only deepened the farther down I went, but I had no torch of my own. I used my hand to guide myself, stepping more carefully when I could no longer see.

And finally, my feet crunched on dirt instead of stone, and I skimmed a toe out to test in front of me. Yes, the floor was firm. I'd reached the bottom.

In the dark, I heard a grunt and the rattle of chains.

Then, torches sparked to life, a strange magic drawing out the light.

I hadn't known what to expect from the supposed beast, but I had imagined a giant creature, half wolf and half man. The stories said that he could be controlled by a master, but I'd expected a slaving thing.

Instead, he was a man—a brute of a man, to be sure, but still, his shirtless torso was marked by no more than an average amount of hair. His hair hung around his face, which was turned downward, his eyes shut against the sudden light.

I stepped forward. "Hello, Beast," I murmured. "I have need of you."

CHAPTER THREE

THE BEAST

How long, since there had been light?

Hours? Days? Years? Centuries?

He no longer knew. Every moment was torment, and each seemed longer than the one before it, but perhaps that was because he no longer knew what a moment was.

He remembered the kind man. His friend. The one who had locked him away. He'd been old. That was what gray hair meant, right? Old.

He remembered the fighting. The endless, bloody, awful fighting. The rage that had filled him to the brim, leaving room for nothing but itself, only anger and violence and blood blood blood.

Only more killing.

It hadn't mattered who anymore.

Every person with the blood of Tingard in their veins needed to die. Their blood spilled to sate the land. To sate the magic. The never-ending hunger for death inside him.

Tival had been twelve, and his mother a refugee from Tingard.

That moment, looking at the boy's blond hair and feeling the bloodlust take him, that had been the moment he'd known.

It would never end until they were all dead.

Or until he was.

But he wasn't dead, and neither were they, so it couldn't end.

He couldn't end.

He could never end until Tingard was obliterated. Every single man, woman, and child with that cursed blood in their veins.

And then there were footsteps. For the first time in... forever, maybe. A breeze from above. The smell of a person, of sweat and pain and blood.

Then there was light. Blinding, horrible light, burning his eyes with its fire. He shrank away from the burn of it, the way it flared and burst at the edges of his vision.

The voice seemed to come from nowhere, even though he'd known there was a person there. In front of him.

"Hello, Beast. I have need of you."

Was that him? Was that who he was? What he was? He thought perhaps he'd had a name once. Like Tival. Like the gray-haired man who had helped lock him up. He'd had a name, hadn't he?

Perhaps Beast was right.

“You’re going to help me get what I need,” the dark form beyond the lights said, and something stirred within the Beast.

He blinked, again and again, his eyes watering against the light, but slowly, a form took shape. Dark hair. Pale skin, smeared with blood and dirt that made other faces flash in his mind. A man, familiar, cut to near ribbons just inside a portcullis. An old couple, lying in pools of their own blood in a hallway, clearly having died in a fight, collapsed where they died, before a door. Inside that door, two children lying in beds, their throats slashed. A heavily pregnant woman lying in the middle of the floor. Their mother.

Neither woman nor unborn babe had been spared.

Vivi had been four. Her hair had been the same color as this man’s. The blood from her wounds the same color as his lips.

Bloody lips that parted again and said the word.

The only word that meant anything.

“Vengeance.”

The Beast jerked forward, as though the word alone was a command he needed to follow.

Wasn’t it?

Vengeance. That was what he needed.

The blood of Tingard must be spilled.

But... the old man had locked the Beast up, and said it was good. He'd been sorry. Sad. Wished there was another way. Begged the Beast to find one, even.

But no. There had been no other way. The only way to stop the violence had been to lock the monster away.

Beast.

The wretched man came in close to him, until he could smell his skin. Could almost taste the blood on him.

Man was almost too generous a term. He was barely out of his youth, almost still a boy. With wild eyes, he looked around the room, trying to find the ends of the shackles. They were draped around the room, from one end to the other. The problem, quickly apparent, was that there was no discernible beginning or ending to the mass of chains, except for the manacles on the Beast's wrists.

No locks.

No levers or clever machinery to release him.

Just two manacles on his wrists, and what seemed like miles upon miles of chains.

For a while, the young man tried to find an end. It only resulted in anger, though, when he realized that if he followed the chain from one wrist, it led around and around the room, and eventually back to the other wrist.

"Are you even trapped here?" he finally demanded, irritation in his lovely but ragged voice. "The chains don't fucking go anywhere. If you just drag them out behind you?—"

For some reason, the Beast felt a compulsion to prove him wrong. Or maybe scare him away.

So for the first time in many years, he tried to push himself up from his knees.

The young man skittered back half a dozen steps faster than the Beast would have thought possible. As graceful as a dancer, he was. He was beautiful under all that blood and grime, the Beast realized.

And now he was afraid.

As he should be.

He should run away from the tower. Far and fast as his quick feet could carry him.

Instead, once he realized that the Beast couldn't stand up, he was coming back.

"But you can't move," he said, voice fascinated instead of terrified. "You should be able to move, but you can't. And when you try, the runes on these things glow."

He reached out toward the manacles, and though the Beast tried to jerk away, tried to stop it from happening, there was little he could do.

The too-young man touched the first rune on one of the wrists, and it glowed molten gold for a moment beneath his fingers. When he pulled his hand away, he stared at where the rune was mirrored on his skin.

Slowly, the chains started to disappear. One link at a time, starting on the far side of the room, vanishing with a quiet popping noise, leaving nothing behind as though they'd never existed at all. It sped as it went, faster and faster, until it reached the manacles and the magic hit them with a force that almost knocked the Beast onto his

back.

The manacles remained.

Still, for the first time in as long as he could remember, the Beast could push himself up from the floor, and stand to his full height. He was free. Well, not free. Not quite. There was still the boy-man who had touched the manacles. The Beast thought perhaps they were both tied to the manacles now.

Yes, that was how the magic worked. They were both trapped.

Well, that, and there was still the bloodlust. Still the burning need to rend flesh with anything he could take to hand. With his bare hands, if need be.

He was free, and Tingard would pay.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALMAS

The Beast pulled back, stretching to his full height, and roared, his crypt breath falling cold across my face as I flinched, squeezing my eyes shut. In a brief, horrid flash, I imagined him wrapping his rough hands around my throat and squeezing, squeezing until my neck cracked and I fell, limp, on the floor.

I'd been alone in the woods for days, and that that was how it might end—I almost laughed.

But as he fell silent, breath heaving so hard that his shoulders rose high with each inhale, I opened my eyes and looked at him.

He was still just a man. Yes, formidable. Yes, terrifying.

But he was the kind of monster I could handle—the one with all his brutality right there on the surface. It wasn't hidden under fine fabrics and measured words so long and winding I hardly knew what they meant.

Lord Uther had liked that—to find a peasant who was cowed by his cleverness, his wealth. He'd take them and bend them and break them, then drop them back on their family's stoop as if nothing had ever happened, leaving them to pull their lives together.

Some, I'd heard, didn't even bother with that, and simply gave up.

“You’re angry,” I whispered, searching his eyes. “I’m angry too. And no one else will help me. I have no one else. Please”—my breath hitched—“please help me. Then—gods, I don’t care about then . Kill everyone. Set yourself up as lord of our town and all its surrounding lands. I don’t care. I only want to save my father.”

The Beast’s eyes narrowed curiously, his brow furrowed as if the concept of a father was new to him. He must have one. He was—yes, certainly human, and normal so far as I could tell, but for a lack of speech.

Every inch of him looked perfectly usual, well, for a warrior of considerable height. His bare torso rippled with muscle, a bellybutton dipping at the narrowed part of his waist.

He was human, even if he was something else besides, and somewhere, he had a father.

“You felled armies,” I reminded him, and I reached out for his shoulder. He shuddered under the touch.

At first, he drew back, glaring cautiously down at me. But when I froze and left my hand there in the air, the Beast let a huff out through his nose and stepped forward once more, pressing into my hand until my palm flattened in the smooth dip between his collarbone and chest.

“I only need you to kill one man.”

“Fool,” he hissed.

I swallowed roughly. “Yes,” I whispered. “And I’m a desperate one.” Steadying my nerves, I stuck my chin up. I was well aware of my vulnerabilities—a spindle-thin neck, weak arms, a narrow chest. But I had long legs that took me far and fast, and

my fingers were nimble and clever, the calluses on my fingertips hard from stitching leather. More than all that, I had reached the end of what I could tolerate—this constant fear, this loneliness.

If this man wanted to shove his fist into my vulnerabilities and batter them until I broke, how was that any different from what Uther intended?

“If you want to kill me,” I said, “do it. I’m not afraid of you. There is one person in this world that I fear, and he’s already taken everything from me, so if you will not help me, kill me. It would be kinder than sending me away with nothing.”

“Kinder?” His heavy brow furrowed.

There was no doubt in me when I nodded. “Yes. I cannot go on like I am. I will not. So save me the trouble of finding a high cliff to step off of and help me .”

I stared at him ardently, unsure how much of what I’d said that he understood. He’d scarcely spoke, but he seemed to have my tongue. To some measure, at least, he’d understood me. He’d picked out the words that mattered to echo, the ones he wanted to understand better.

And he did it again. “Father?”

I nodded fast. “My father. His name is Henry. I’m Almas. He—he gardens, it’d be too generous to call him a farmer, and he’s an inventor. He... well, what he tries to do is make the world better. He looks for places where people’s lives might be improved and tries to help them. He is good .” Certainly better than me, given that I was here and ready to throw countless lives away to save his. He would’ve been horrified to find out, but—well, better horrified and alive.

With a shaky breath, I withdrew my hand from the Beast’s heaving shoulder and fell

to my knees there on the dirt floor he'd knelt on only moments before. In front of me, I wound my fingers together and clasped my hands.

"Please help me. Lord Uther took him. He means to—he—" I shuddered. I'd not yet allowed myself to put name to what Uther intended, but now, hoping something I said might sway the Beast, I had to try. "He intends to rape me, force me to choose between myself and my father, and I have no leverage. Nowhere else to turn. I'm begging," I rasped, tears stinging my eyes. I was so fucking tired after stumbling senselessly for days, fleeing my town in fear. "Please."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE BEAST

Father.

Please.

These were words he knew, once. Important words. Words that had meant a lot to him.

Now, he struggled to remember what anything meant. Why anything happened. How to speak or move or even think outside his dungeon prison.

The sunlight outside was bright, and he wanted to shy away from it, back into the building, down the stairs and into the dark. The safe. The place where there was no anger but his own. No pretty blond children from Tingard whose blood called out to him for spilling.

But now, there was a Lord Uther, and just the name was making his blood boil already. It was a Tingardian name, certainly. They all had those solemn, serious, short names with the strange, round feel in his mind. Uther and Gareth and Marc and Dafydd.

But no. Gareth and Marc and Dafydd were people he knew.

People he had known? Were they still alive?

“You have to come out,” the pretty young man insisted, sighing and stamping his foot.

Almas. He’d said his name was Almas.

It wasn’t a name the Beast knew.

Beast.

That wasn’t a name, was it? What kind of creature was called Beast? He would rather be called a name, even if it was a Tingardian one, but when he searched his fractured mind, he found none. Someone had to have called him something, once, right?

The compulsion from the cuffs still trapped around his wrists reached into him and tugged. Almas said come out. He had to come out. He couldn’t spend all the day thinking about names and whether he had one. He had to do as he was told.

The man with gray hair had brought him to the tower using the manacles. When they were both linked to them, he had to do as he was told by the person who controlled the magic. Almas had taken control of it when he’d touched the things.

When, the Beast wondered, had the gray-haired man ceded control? He didn’t remember that happening. The man had brought him to the tower. He’d told him to stay.

There had been tears, but. . .

With a shudder, his body took a step forward without his permission.

Almas said come out. He had to come out.

He glared at the man. He did not like being told what to do, much less when he had no power to deny it. This wasn't safe, either. He was to stay in the tower. The gray-haired man had told him to stay in the tower. He'd been crying when he'd said it. Looked like he was driving a sword through the heart of his best friend when he'd left the Beast there, in the dungeon. Apologized.

Why would a person apologize to a beast?

He didn't remember, if he'd ever known.

Then, he had been lost to the rage. The bloodlust. All he'd wanted to do was to destroy, so he'd howled his impotent rage to the air and struggled against the manacles, though he'd known they would never give. They would never release him.

He looked at them as his body stutter-stepped forward, toward Almas. They were some dark metal that wasn't iron or steel, but he couldn't have named it. The sides were etched all around with a series of runes in a language he couldn't read—wasn't sure if he'd ever been able to read—but they were black now. When Almas had touched them, they'd glowed gold for a moment. Was he magical, or were the manacles? Both?

"It's a long walk back," Almas said, coming up to stand in front of the Beast. "We should get going. It's going to take a few days as it is, and I don't even have any food."

Food?

Ah, yes. The Beast remembered food. What was its purpose, though? He recalled eating. Sitting at tables, drinking mugs of ale and being loud and rowdy, yelling and celebrating and at other times, strange, soft discussions with other people. Those, he didn't understand at all. Discussions.

What did a Beast have to speak of? There was nothing for him but the blood.

He nodded to himself and turned in the direction Almas had indicated. Lord Uther of Tingard. He would start with him. Rip his head from his shoulders and spill his blood on the earth. That, perhaps, would quell the bloodlust, at least long enough for him to think.

There was something... not quite right about that, but he couldn't lay a finger on it. Did killing not sate the lust for blood?

That seemed a strange thought, but something in his mind said no. No, killing didn't help. Killing was... was worse?

But if killing was bad, then how was he supposed to stop the need inside him to spill blood?

That was ridiculous.

They walked. The sun was too bright and painful, but he found that slowly, he got used to it. As though perhaps once, it had been normal, walking in the sun. In the time before the manacles and the dungeon. Before the gray-haired man had chained him there.

Did he hate the gray-haired man?

No. He was certain that he'd never once hated him, not even when he'd chained him in the dark dungeon and abandoned him there, tears flowing freely down his face.

So who had the man been, and who was the Beast to him?

"Bedivere."

“What?” Almas was looking at him, confused. “I thought... I thought you understood me. Don’t you speak the common tongue?”

Common tongue? What was that? The Beast considered. Bedivere. That had been the gray-haired man’s name. It didn’t mean much, wouldn’t tell him anything, unless he was still alive and the Beast could find him using his name.

He wasn’t, the Beast realized quite suddenly, and stopped walking.

“Bedivere is dead,” he said aloud. There was no other explanation. The manacles had been controlled by Bedivere. He would never have released them to another. If he were alive, Almas never could have touched them and become their master.

He stared down at the cursed metal bands, and couldn’t tear his eyes away from them.

Almas stepped in close, his expression some combination of confused and annoyed, and pressed a hand to the Beast’s cheek. “You—you’re crying.”

For a moment, they both stared at the sheen of moisture on Almas’s fingers in confusion. Then, Almas visibly shook off whatever he was feeling, took a deep breath, and looked up at the Beast. “Bedivere is dead. Is that... bad? You’re sad about it?”

The Beast considered for a long moment, then nodded. Sad. Yes, he remembered sad. There was a tearing sensation in his chest that felt like someone trying to rip his heart out, and he thought again of the bodies in his visions. The man, the older couple, the pregnant woman and children.

That was sadness.

Frankly, it seemed like a pale, pitiful word for the sensation.

“Friend,” he tried, and the word seemed to come out right. “Bedivere.”

The man dropped his head and sighed, then patted the Beast on the arm. “I’m... I’m sorry. I don’t know who he was, but it’s—it’s hard to lose a friend.”

He took a deep breath and looked up at the Beast, and something in his gaze had shifted. He didn’t look quite as wild and angry anymore, almost like a feral beast. Looking into his eyes like that was almost... calming.

Calming was good.

The Beast liked to be calm. His mind sang less for blood when he was calm.

“We should rest,” Almas finally said. “We should—bathe and rest and maybe find some food.” After a moment without the Beast’s response, he nodded to himself, and started turning around and around. “Let’s find a stream. A bath is a good place to start.”

The Beast didn’t remember what a bath was, but it had calmed Almas, so it sounded like a good thing to him as well. Maybe if they bathed enough, he could wash away the madness in his soul.

CHAPTER SIX

ALMAS

The man simply followed me, and I didn't know if he was unsure what to do or—or?—

There was a thread in my chest, something that tugged on me, even when I walked ahead of the Beast, keeping me aware of where he was. I thought that'd be true even if I couldn't hear his footsteps behind me, even if the brush didn't bend and break and crack under each step.

Walking through the dense forest, I had little idea of where we were headed beyond the ground slanting downward. Surely the water would carve some path below and we'd reach the bottom and find a stream.

Just when I was getting so frustrated that I considered ordering the Beast to find us some godsdamned water, I felt that coolness that belied fresh water on the breeze, the scent of something clean and flowing.

And finally, I began to hear it—water moving over stones, little white-capped crests that rose and fell where the creek turned.

It wasn't enormous—the water was clear to the bottom and didn't look deep enough to comfortably submerge in, but it was enough.

And there, on the muddy bank, I froze.

It was all too easy to do, as the Beast froze two steps behind and one to my right. He watched the water, and when I turned to look at him, his expression was empty, beyond a touch of confusion.

My neck ached, and I realized I was clenching my back teeth. I didn't want to?—

Well, I wanted to wash the dirt and mud from my skin, but I didn't want to be watched while doing it, and the way the Beast stood there?—

He wasn't looking at me hungrily, but his eyes were empty, distant, and I'd prefer not to be in his field of vision.

“Go over there,” I said, waving my hand toward a bend in the creek. “Bathe yourself, then—then we'll figure out what to do about food and rest.”

The Beast's gaze finally narrowed on me, and his cheeks hollowed for a moment before he shuffled off the other way.

Still, I waited until I was sure he'd keep his back turned, watching him with narrowed eyes, before loosening my belt, tugging my tunic over my head, and shedding my breeches and boots. Even then, I rushed into the water, bending my legs to sink down to my shoulders and making quick work of scrubbing my skin.

The water was cool and crisp, and while I would've preferred a hot bath, it was wondrous to get my skin clean.

Once I'd scratched my scalp with blunt nails, combed my fingers through my shortish brown hair, I felt like a different person. I could breathe again.

And, biting my lip, I chanced a look at the Beast.

He was standing in the water by the bend in the creek, staring off at the opposite shore. He hadn't even taken off his tattered trousers before walking in. Thankfully, he was only up as deep as his calves, and while the fabric hung heavy and wet around his legs, it was only the bottom of them.

I—I didn't have it in me to demand he get out of the water and forego a moment's care, but I swallowed nervously, hesitant to involve myself, particularly in such a vulnerable state.

I could get out of the water, dress, and explain the steps to him, or—well, if I stayed deep enough in the water, it was safe enough, wasn't it? The stories I'd heard of the Beast, perhaps he'd drown me there. But we had already established that I did not care to save my life and he did not care to take it.

I let the flow of the water pull me toward his spot, and dug my feet into the muddy creek bed when I reached him—not quite arm's length away, but close enough.

His gaze focused on me, his head tipped curiously one way.

“It's been a long time since you've had to do this, hasn't it?” I asked.

He gave no answer, just blinked slowly at me. Still, his eyes did not drop. He didn't seek out a glance at my body beneath the water, so when I took a shaky breath, I drew it deep enough to calm my nerves.

“Your trousers,” I said, nodding at them. “Go take them off and hang them over a branch, then come back to me?”

With orders, the Beast seemed more at ease. He lumbered up the bank of the creek, and I—I stared. He undid the ties at his waist, and then he was naked, a startling amount of muscle making his legs scarily thick.

If I—well, sometimes, it felt as if I couldn't appreciate another person's form without making all my refusals of Lord Uther seem unreasonable. But rationally, I knew that wasn't the case. Enjoying the shape of one person did not mean that I was beholden to surrender myself to anyone who wanted me.

It just... in my darker moments, when I tried to convince myself that it would not be so bad, it felt as if I could never have physical affection without first submitting myself to Lord Uther.

And then I wanted to vomit, because that was absurd, and the man himself deserved a knife punched straight into his heart and nothing more pleasant than that.

In any case, a confusing swirl of feeling rushed through me at the shape of the Beast's backside, the curve of his back, and strength of his arms. And then he turned, and I made a choking noise, looking away, but not before I'd caught a glimpse of his particularly impressive?—

No. We were bathing, nothing more.

I waved him hastily forward, eager to have the water around his waist. Perhaps higher still. "Come on then."

He sank into the water in front of me, and I swam behind him, tapping his shoulder. "Lean back."

His hair was long, floating like a scarf on the wind, twisting out from his head in dark waves.

I ran my fingers against his scalp. His breath hitched, and I froze, a moment's fear flashing through me before the Beast sighed and closed his eyes.

He let me clean his hair, such as I was able without a proper bar of soap. When I bid him sit upright, he looked faintly dazed, but I splashed water over his shoulders and neck, and he lifted handfuls to scrub at his face.

When we were done with that, I stepped back, and he looked up at me, his face smoother than I'd realized now that it was free of dust, his eyes a bit clearer.

“Can you do the rest?” I asked, miming scrubbing my hands over my chest. “Like this, but everywhere?”

He grunted and took to the work, and I turned away from him, trusting that he'd manage, and eager to get out before his attention was free again.

All that time, he hadn't pawed at me, hadn't even made a threatening gesture, but—but I didn't understand why not. I didn't entirely trust it.

Except that he'd been sweet, patient. And that, from the Beast of the Black Forest? Well, I had no idea what to do with that but flee and dress and hope that whatever came next was simpler.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE BEAST

Washing.

Walking.

The sun.

Everything was new, even as he—I. I understood that it wasn't new at all. I had walked in the sun before, even if it had been so long ago that I didn't remember it.

I'd taken baths, even baths in streams and rivers, when I had to. When I'd been... traveling? I didn't remember why I'd done that, and something in my mind shied away from the subject. From even thinking about it too much, let alone trying to remember more.

The other memories surfaced, of the dead people.

The dead family.

Had . . . had I killed them?

My mind reeled back from that notion, sickened at the idea of murdering innocent people. And yet... the blond boy, Tival. Tingardian blood. Just considering it lit a fire in my chest, sent my blood rushing in my ears, and put that metallic taste in the back

of my mouth.

Spots danced before my eyes, and I longed to end every Tingardian that had ever lived.

I had to pause, grabbing a nearby tree and holding myself up as I panted, staring at the loamy ground.

“What’s wrong?” Almas asked, and he actually sounded... concerned.

Like I was a person who was worth worrying about, not just a beast he’d uncaged and was taking home with him to commit murders.

But... murders for his father. His father, who was being imprisoned unjustly by a corrupt lord. It was the right thing to do, wasn’t it?

Right?

Murder is never right , a voice in my head said. Sometimes we’re forced to kill people to protect ourselves and our own people, but murder is wrong. Indiscriminate killing is never the answer.

But if murder was wrong, then why was I filled with a need to kill every man, woman, and child of Tingard? Surely that made me wrong?

I turned to look at Almas, and just my gaze was enough to make him flinch away. He had been wronged. That was easy to see. No one would free a monster and set it upon people without reason, especially not with that frightened look in their eyes. The way he constantly kept a healthy distance between us. It all meant something, but my mind was thick and slow like cold honey, and I couldn’t understand it.

“I . . . I don’t . . . know,” I finally managed to tell him.

“Are you hurt? Are you”—he glanced down at my feet and winced—“you’re bleeding. Because you don’t have shoes.”

I looked down and for the first time, truly looked at myself. No shoes. He was right. What kind of jackass went about out of doors with no shoes on, after the age of twelve? My trousers were tattered as well, and worse, I didn’t have a shirt either. No wonder he thought me a beast.

No wonder I thought myself a beast.

“I’m sorry,” I told him, and the words came out by rote, as though I said them a dozen times a day. “I don’t mean to be a bother.”

He stared at me, mouth gaping open like a fish, before he snapped it shut and stood suddenly. He marched over to sit down on a fallen tree nearby and reached into a small pouch on his belt. “This isn’t going to be much. We don’t have things to make real shoes. But maybe if we cover your feet, it’ll help.”

He tore fabric from the bottom of his own shirt, taking needle and thread from his pocket to it, and setting to work with impressively nimble fingers, snipping and tearing and sewing the fabric into a recognizable shape. It was a wonder to watch—he was quite talented with his needle and thread. “You... are very good at that.”

His head snapped up and he stared at me a moment, before ducking his head, then nodding. Surreptitiously, he wiped one eye. “Thank you. I—I used to be apprenticed to the village cobbler. Before Lord Uther decided that anyone who helped me would be ruined. Flogging my best friend and refusing to let any of his men go to the cobbler I worked for and”—he broke off in a sob that he quickly stifled—“and now

my father.”

Gently, slowly, I reached out and patted him on the shoulder. He jumped and started to pull away, but when he stopped and looked at me, at my posture and the placement of my hand, he burst into actual tears. I continued to pat his shoulder, and he let me. Actually, he leaned into it. It almost looked like he wanted to fling himself at me, and I started to understand.

He had been violated. This Lord Uther had tried to steal his right to his own singular possession that no one could ever take away: his body. And when he had resisted, the man had tormented him by taking away his friends, his job, and now his family. So here, now, when someone tried to touch him, he was frightened.

He wanted to be touched—everyone wanted to be touched. It was part of being human, the longing for connection. But now, because of what this lord had done, he was also frightened of touch. Suspicious of it.

As when we had bathed and I had... well, frankly, I had forgotten how, and to remind me, he’d demonstrated rather than used his own hands. Because he needed his touch to be his own choice, as we all did. As was our right.

Yes, this Uther deserved whatever fate Almas intended for him, and I would give it.

But, some part of me realized, what Almas actually needed wasn’t simply Uther’s death. It was to feel safe in his own skin again. As though he could live his life while doing the correct things, and be treated in accordance. Not to have his entire existence made unlawful simply because he didn’t want the touch of one man.

When he finished his makeshift shoes—more socks, really—he slipped out of his seat and knelt in front of me, sliding them onto my feet. They were perfect. Incredibly well done, particularly considering what he’d had to work with.

“They fit okay?” he asked, as though it weren’t obvious.

I nodded. “They fit perfectly. Thank you.”

For some reason, the thanks made roses bloom in his pale cheeks, and it was especially fetching. I could see why his lord wanted him. Obviously, though, that could never excuse what the monster had done.

“No” was a simple concept, and it applied to lords as much as everyone else.

He smiled up at me. “You’re welcome, um... Beast.”

I cocked my head, considering for a moment. That wasn’t right, was it? I had been a beast. Acted the part. But it wasn’t who I was. It wasn’t my name. So what was my?—

I smiled back at him, remembering suddenly. “Percival. My name is Percival.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

ALMAS

Percival.

The Percival of stories was a goddamn hero. He'd saved the North during the war, defeated the monster that'd struck out at innocents, kept our people safe. It was on his legend that Bellara was founded.

A coincidence. It had to be.

And still, a tingling unease swept up the back of my neck, and at night, as we sat across the campfire, I wondered if he could be that same man.

Surely not. Percival was human. He'd died centuries ago, and this—this person, who wasn't quite as monstrous as I'd assumed, well, he was still the beast trapped in the tower. That legend had lasted generations.

Still, he was a mystery. He couldn't be human, but he didn't look like anything else—not a fae or a demon. His blood was as red as my own.

Gods, his blood.

He hadn't meant to be a bother, he said, while I had forced him to go hiking through the woods without even a decent pair of shoes. His tattered trousers were all he had, and while I hardly had more at that particular moment, I did have shoes .

The shameful part was that I hadn't even thought about it. I'd seen him— Percival—as some hardened, monstrous thing, not a person capable of being hurt.

My heart twisted as I wondered if the monster, then, was me. I'd come to him with nothing, demanded so much violence, and left him to bleed because of my own thoughtlessness. Had I always been this careless, this selfish, or was this some twisted new symptom of all my bottled rage?

Whatever the case, I felt dirty and horrible, stealing glances at Percival's makeshift shoes to see if blood was seeping through the cloth.

I had to do better—I would do better—so when we finally saw a coil of smoke climbing above the trees, I set my mind to fixing what I could.

Admittedly, it wasn't much. I had no money to purchase food or clothing. For days, we'd been eating what we could scavenge from the woods, though Percival had lunged through the brush once and come up with a squealing rabbit.

I hadn't even seen it. It'd been the most impressive show of hunting I'd ever seen, and we'd eaten better that night than I had in weeks.

But now, we'd found a village—not my home, which was on open land, overseen by Lord Uther, but a smaller place where half a dozen families gathered, some never leaving the shadow of the woods in their whole lifetimes.

I told myself, as we sneaked through the woods at the edge of the village, that while they didn't have much, I had nothing, and Percival had less. These people were settled, could replenish their stores more easily than we could. And—and none of it made my intentions any better, but guilt didn't stay my hand either.

Percival needed shoes. Perhaps a shirt, even if I didn't mind the sight of him without

one.

“Stay here,” I insisted, squeezing his forearms for good measure. “I’ll only be gone long enough to grab a few things, and then we’ll be off again, yes? You’ll stay?”

Percival’s brow furrowed, but he nodded. In the end, I wasn’t sure if I left him behind because I thought he’d draw too much attention, because I didn’t trust him around people, or because I simply didn’t want him to witness me doing wrong.

Sneaking into the village at dusk was too easy, as was snatching clothing from clotheslines and muddy boots from beside someone’s back door. I even stole a loaf of bread, cooling in the window. My growling stomach wouldn’t let me leave it behind.

And with my haul bundled in the freshly laundered shirt, I scampered through the trees back to where I’d left Percival, only to find the tiny clearing empty.

I twisted around, checking fallen logs where he might’ve decided to sit and wait. Still, there was nothing.

“Percival?” I called.

A moment later, I heard a choked, guttural sound and rushed around a nearby tree. Its trunk was too thick for me to wrap my arms around, but there, on the other side, Percival was turned away, his forehead pressed into the tree’s rough bark, his eyes squeezed shut tight.

A cold shudder worked through me. Carefully, I reached out and came just short of touching his elbow. “What’s wrong?” My voice came out cracked and hoarse, and Percival didn’t lift his head.

I looked around for a clue, but I didn’t see a single thing except a tiny trail

nearby—something I'd missed before, like a single person used it to cut through the brush.

Percival's shoulders were heaving.

"Tingardian," he ground out, finally.

That drew me up short. "What?"

"There was a—" Percival cut off in a growl and shook his head, his dark hair fanning around his shoulders.

"A Tingardian?" I finished for him, scowling. "Percival, that's not—that's not possible."

He lifted his head, blinking owlishly at me, tremors still twitching the muscles in his arms and chest. "I saw?—"

"No," I whispered. "I mean, Tingard is gone. The kingdom collapsed centuries ago. There's only Bellara now. Everyone here is Bellaran."

"Bellaran?" he echoed.

I nodded. "Bellaran. Bellara—that is our kingdom. It stretches all the way from the northern coast to the south. There are no Tingardians here. No Tingardians anywhere."

Percival grimaced, almost like he wanted to argue with me. In the end, he swallowed whatever he wanted to say, his gaze drifting down to the bundle tucked under my left arm, tight against my side.

“Clothes,” I announced, lifting it up for him to see. It was a mess, mostly surrounded by the shirt I’d found for him, but once we unrolled it, there was plenty there to be delighted by. “I found you clothes and proper boots. And bread! Oh, it smelled amazing. I thought... well, you could get dressed, maybe we could put a little more distance between us and the village, then we’ll camp for the night. Try and rest. Pick up again tomorrow. What do you think?”

Percival sucked in his cheeks, looking past me to where the narrow path disappeared back toward the village. Another shudder worked through him, and he nodded. Then, he turned on the spot and started marching away, so I followed him.

If away was what he wanted, well, that suited me just fine.

CHAPTER NINE

PERCIVAL

Stay here.

Stay here.

Stay here.

The magic coursed through me, commanding that I do as Almas had ordered. It wasn't even much, and I didn't know what I'd have done other than stay there. Follow him like a lost, starving puppy?

Well why not? I seemed to be a lost puppy. I'd needed him to show me how to bathe myself. Now that I was starting to remember things, that was... embarrassing. I was a man fully grown; I didn't need someone to show me how to bathe myself.

Then the Tingardian boy had come down the path not long after Almas left me alone, and I couldn't take my eyes off him.

He'd been a teenager, with three rabbits on a line over one shoulder—he'd been hunting, obviously—and he'd wandered by on a trail just outside the small clearing Almas had left me in. His golden hair caught the sun filtering through the canopy of the trees, and every gleaming lock had my rapt attention.

Tingardian.

Killer.

Monster.

They had to be wiped from the surface of the world, or they would do it to us. They meant us all to die, and they would do anything to get what they wanted.

Didn't I know that all too well?

The thought made me pause in my rising rage. Did I? How did I know?

The dead people sped through my head once again. The man, the older couple, the pregnant woman, the children. All dead.

Not by my hand.

By Tingardian hands.

Without even realizing it, I'd wrapped my hands around the nearest thing I could find, a stick a little thinner than my wrist. I had to kill him. Had to rid the world of the Tingardian monsters, before they murdered all of us.

Stay here, Almas had said, though, and the young man was moving away.

I couldn't follow him. The manacles wouldn't allow it.

I couldn't... the Tingardians would kill us all. They were everywhere. They would destroy us. I slumped against a tree, trying to calm my breathing, the blood rushing in my ears.

Then Almas had come back. And he'd said that Tingard was no more.

How was that possible?

The boy had golden hair. Clearly, all the Tingardians had not been killed. They still posed a threat. Didn't they? Could they still threaten, if they no longer had a country to fight for?

A single country, with all the people, northern and southern, blond and brunet... was it even possible?

Bellara, he called it. Did it come from bella for beauty, or bellum for war?

There was no way for me to know.

Still, I was distracted by Almas's bounty. He didn't say where he'd gotten it, and wanted to move on quickly, so something in my mind said he'd stolen it. Part of me was bothered by that. It wanted to stay, to try to make amends for any losses people had suffered on my behalf.

Another part of me was angry on Almas's behalf. How was a clever, industrious young man in this position, where he couldn't simply pay for what he needed? Because of this Uther, who was taking everything from him.

That couldn't be allowed to stand.

It didn't much matter whether Uther was some golden-haired Tingardian, though, did it? If he'd been my own brother, I'd have beaten the hell out of him for acting that way.

My brother.

The dead man.

My brother was dead.

“Percival?” Almas asked, stopping and turning to face me. “You’re... you’re crying. What’s wrong?”

I paused a moment, but what reason did I have to lie to Almas? He’d come looking for me to do violence, but he’d been nothing but kind and good to me, not really. “My brother is dead. And... and his wife and their children. And my parents.”

“And Bedivere,” he added, then winced. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to twist the knife. I just... I’m sorry you don’t have anyone. It’s terrible to be alone in the world.”

It was. And Almas was alone too. Because of Uther.

He didn’t much seem to want to be touched, though, so I just offered him the best smile I could manage, and kept moving.

We kept walking till well into the sunset, to put distance between ourselves and wherever Almas had gotten my clothes, and were starting to think about resting for the night when we passed a small clearing with a campfire. It smelled delicious, like roasting meat, and my mouth watered.

Almas looked interested, but at the same time, anxious.

There were two men sitting at the fire, and they smiled over at us.

No, at me. Their eyes skimmed over him as though he were a ghost, present but not relevant.

“Join us,” one of them said, smiling broadly. The other’s eyes skipped back over to Almas, and this time, they were more interested.

“Indeed,” he added. “We can share our bounty, and you can share yours.”

Almas stiffened, and it took me a moment to comprehend what they were saying. They thought, somehow, that Almas was mine, and they wanted...

I scowled at him. “Almas makes his own choices, and I suspect you would not be a choice he wished to make.”

The second man scowled and stood up, fully a head shorter than me. He wasn’t Tingardian. It didn’t make my blood boil. But if a fight was what he wanted, if he wouldn’t leave Almas be without it, then I’d give it to him.

I crossed my arms over my chest and stared him down. “Perhaps you should apologize to him for ignoring his wishes and assuming I was in charge of him.”

The man narrowed his eyes at me, and his friend sighed. “Just apologize, so they can move on and you can keep your spine intact.”

The man muttered a thoroughly not-heartfelt apology, and Almas nodded, eyes round with shock. “We’ll just go then,” he whispered, grabbing my elbow and dragging me on. It was one of the first times he’d willingly touched me. How... how strange.

CHAPTER TEN

ALMAS

Was it that Percival didn't need to eat?

Clearly, he'd survived some time locked up in the tower, unable to free himself or pull away enough to find sustenance. Whatever magic preserved him, it did not seem to require the normal bodily functions most people had to account for.

Still, he'd been interested in the food the men were cooking. We'd both had a moment, mouths watering, with the long, hard days in the forest making any reprieve seem all too worth it, that we'd considered getting closer.

Hells, I'd even considered whether or not I could bite my tongue and ignore the insult for good food and a chance to rest in relative safety.

Of course, I knew what the man had implied, what he'd expect from me, and—and I hadn't considered it before a chill worked through my limbs and I realized that yes, here too. Yes, everyone.

And why? Because I didn't look as imposing or threatening as my companion? In truth, I wasn't, but I had found him. I was capable! I was worthy of respect and decent treatment.

Wasn't I? Why not me?

I gripped Percival's arm, marching us through the woods fast, nerves pricking at the back of my neck as I listened for pursuit. I didn't think they would risk following us, not after Percival's threat, but I didn't want to risk it.

Gods, I wouldn't be able to sleep that night.

"Almas—" Percival said, once the sky had turned a darker shade of blue and we risked an uncomfortable situation if we didn't take a moment to arrange ourselves for the night.

I took a shuddering breath and came to a stop. I had to face him, knowing that he had seen me so readily assessed and dismissed by those men.

There was a shame in it, even though I'd done nothing shameful at all. Still, the feeling made it difficult to look at him.

I forced myself to turn around and face him properly.

"Why did you?—"

I chewed on the sides of my tongue. Percival could've simply said no, claimed me as his own, and that might've settled matters, particularly if he'd offered up half of the fresh bread to go along with the roasted venison.

But he hadn't. He'd offered them nothing but clarification and demanded an apology in return.

While the stranger had seemed none-too-pleased to offer one, that wasn't the part that'd shocked me.

Percival had spoken up for me without my request. Without any goading. He hadn't

left space for compromise or tried to salvage what he could out of the situation, because he seemed to value what the men had on offer less than he valued—well, me.

While I wanted to excuse all this as something that'd happened simply because of the manacles on his forearms, or maybe due to the fact that I'd brought him out of the dark, it wasn't that. He didn't seem stuck or even particularly grateful that I'd gotten him out—and why should he be, when I intended to use him?

He was simply decent, which wasn't at all what I'd expected when I went hunting down the Beast, but I caught myself before asking outright why that was his impulse—a question that was more about me and my fractured sense of self than about him or anything he'd done.

“Thank you,” I whispered instead, “for standing up for me and not—not on top of me. What you said, how you said it—it meant a lot.”

Percival's brow furrowed, a pinched expression crinkling the skin at the outer corners of his eyes. I flinched into my shoulders. He pitied me; that had to be it, and this was such a silly thing to waste a thought over, that a stranger did not see me as a person.

What did I care for a stranger's perception of me?

Except that it scratched at all the vulnerabilities that had sent me running from my home, reaffirming to my mind that there was nowhere I could go where I would not face the same problems and no value that I had beyond that surface-level appreciation.

I inhaled shakily, and Percival took a tiny step toward me as I stared at the ground between us.

I expected him to tell me that wasn't a thing to thank him for, or that I was being silly

for being so caught up on what, logically, was basic human decency. I didn't know how to tell him that it was far from basic and all too rare to experience firsthand.

Instead, his arms twitched upward, and the aborted gesture had me lifting my head curiously. When I met his eye again, he only nodded.

"You are most welcome," he said ardently, feeling beyond reckoning infusing his words.

That was when I realized the purpose of the movement—he held his arms out, offering an embrace.

He wasn't demanding one, or pressing for contact for some selfish reason.

No, as I stood there, mouth slack, Percival was offering me something beyond himself—comfort, for my own sake. Connection. Something I could pick up or leave untouched as I liked.

And with a choked sound, far too like a sob for my own liking, I threw myself forward. My arms twined around his waist. I squeezed him hard, desperate for a touch I didn't have to think about, to question.

A niggling shadow in the back of my mind told me that I should have, that this could all be some game or a honeyed trap just set to manipulate me.

But no. No, Percival told me things as they occurred to him without pretense. If he was this good at playing me, well, then I deserved to lose.

The thing was, I didn't think so. Percival seemed earnest, even kind. Kinder, by far, than the monster I'd expected. Kinder, certainly, than the one I was running from. So I let him hold me and held him back, until my stomach rumbled.

“The bread,” I muttered, rifling in my pack for it and holding it up between us. “Split it with me?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PERCIVAL

Almas wanted to be held, clearly, but at the same time, he struggled with it. Like he couldn't trust me, yes, but also himself.

I struggled to sleep that night, considering all I'd learned.

No more Tingard. No more enemies. And yet, the man in the woods had still had golden hair like a Tingardian, so they hadn't been wiped out.

But... was it reasonable to expect such a thing? Even in my day, whenever that had been, there had been people like Tival and his mother, who had sought refuge from the others. Blond hair alone wasn't a sign of evil. Was it?

Just the sight of it still made the rage well up inside me.

The rage wasn't natural, though. It wasn't mine. Or, well, it was mine, but it had been... altered. Everything was rushing back, and all I could feel wasn't that rage bubbling in my veins, waiting to spill over, but a deep sense of shame.

"Don't you sleep?" Almas asked, and I turned to him, startled.

"I think so?"

"But you're not." He hadn't needed to point it out, but at the same time, it had been

on the tip of my tongue to deny everything. I didn't even know why.

No, it was because he was so skittish, so afraid already. He didn't need to be subjected to my fears as well.

"I slept some. But I'm not... not myself anymore."

I didn't know why I thought that would end the inquiry. It wouldn't have stopped me if I'd been asking the questions. It didn't stop Almas either. He sat up, stretching, then looked back at me. "You seem to be coming back to yourself. I don't think you were all there when I found you, and now you're... well, maybe you're still not, but you're getting better. You built a fire last night without me even helping."

I remembered. Building a fire was rote, really. I'd done it thousands of times in my life, and it had simply come back to me as I'd worked.

"And you... maybe you remember your name, now."

I cocked my head at that. "Maybe?"

He ducked his head, looking away. "Maybe... I mean, I'm not saying it's not your name. It's just that Percival was the hero of the story. He wasn't the—the one locked up in the tower in the Black Forest."

I blinked, staring at him for a moment, before managing to croak out, "There's a story?"

"Of course. The Tingardians murdered Percival's family by sending a monster to kill them while he was away at war, and he stopped the monster. He saved his people and sacrificed himself to defeat Tingard once and for all." He told the story like it was the sun coming up in the morning. Something everyone in all the world knew and

believed.

If only it were true.

“They didn’t send a monster,” I whispered after a moment. “It was just men. They attacked my ancestral home in the night, murdered my brother, my parents, my brother’s wife, and their children. Left them for me to find.”

Almas cringed, lowering his head and wrapping his arms around himself. When he looked back up at me, his eyes were glassy with unshed tears. “I’m so sorry.”

“I tracked them to their camp,” I continued, not willing to let myself be the hapless victim of the story. I hadn’t been. My family? Oh yes, they’d been victims.

And then... then I had made Tingard the victims as well.

“I killed them. Every soldier in the camp. Slaughtered them and left them to rot.”

“Good,” Almas answered, his voice hard. He reached out and grabbed my hand, squeezing. “They murdered your family. They didn’t deserve to get away with that.”

He wasn’t wrong, either. Even now, I wasn’t sure I’d take that part back. What had come next, though...

“There was a witch in the woods back then. I found her, while I was still covered with the blood of my family and the men who had murdered them, and demanded she give me the ability to stop Tingard once and for all. To... To kill them all.”

Almas stared at me, eyes wide and mouth open, as though he were a child listening to a bedtime tale.

“She warned me it was a mistake. That I should take time to mourn. Leave the war entirely to others, who had better judgment. I insisted. Acted a complete ass. So she... she gave me precisely what I wanted. I didn’t defeat the monster. I was the monster. I slaughtered them. One after another, every person who had so much as a drop of Tingardian blood in them.”

“You got revenge,” Almas tried to correct, but he didn’t understand.

I wanted to laugh. The tables had been turned so completely. I was the witch now, trying to tell him that the revenge he wanted wouldn’t sate him the way he thought it would, and he was me, telling me to shut up and cast the damned spell already. Make me the tool of retribution that I needed to be.

It wasn’t even unreasonable of him. He’d been horribly wronged, and he deserved justice.

But it was a fine line between justice and revenge, and I hadn’t simply crossed it—I’d obliterated it entirely, along with any Tingardian I could find.

“Bedivere was my best friend,” I finally said, going on with the story without pressing my point. Almas didn’t need me pontificating about the evils of revenge. He’d asked about my story, and I was giving it. “He helped me, every step of the way. When I realized I couldn’t control the monster inside me, he took me into the woods alone, where I wouldn’t be distracted by my mission to kill the Tingardians, and we decided what to do. He had the manacles made, the witch enchanting them, and we went to the tower. No one traveled that deep into the Black Forest, so... so the people would be safe from me there. The witch warned us that I couldn’t be free, not even to die, until the spell was broken, but... what else could we do? I almost killed a child because his father was Tingardian.”

At that, a tear spilled over, down Almas’s perfect cheek. “I’m... I’m so sorry,

Percival. That's not how the people tell it, but—but maybe they're right. You weren't the monster. Not really, not like you think. You were only trying to defend your people, the only way you knew how."

How many times over the years had I thought the same to myself? Well, until I'd simply given up and let the spell take over. Let the rage bubble up and take me, so that I didn't have to be present in my own body, merely a mindless slaving beast locked away in a tower.

I gave him a smile, though I could feel how weak it was, wavering and pitiful. "It wasn't what they'd have wanted. My family. They would have wanted me to go on. Be happy. I just couldn't find a way to do it."

Almas sniffled, then stopped and considered, hesitantly opening his arms to me as I'd done for him the night before. Like he wanted to hug me, but wasn't sure of his welcome.

I didn't hesitate a moment to take what he offered.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ALMAS

Goodness, had I gotten in over my head.

It wasn't that I thought—well, I wasn't wrong. There was no life for me while Lord Uther haunted my steps. Even though he was not mine and I'd never be his, he'd shoved himself into my life, taking over every thought and doubt and fear until they all twisted around him, making him more monstrous than he was.

I missed the boy I'd been when this had all started, who'd dismissed the lord as some pathetic, slaving creature without the fortitude to commit to his depravity. Back then, Uther had seemed so small. Now, he'd taken over everything.

No, he'd taken everything. My work, my friends, my family, my whole life.

What had sent me in search of the Beast—in search of Percival, in fact, who was a hero and not a monster at all—was that Lord Uther loomed so large in my mind that he seemed the lesser evil.

Now that I knew Percival, that had only become more true. He'd been fighting for his family, driven to commit horrors by the sharp pain of loss. That wasn't bestial—it was purely human.

But it wasn't what he wanted now, and it was what I'd freed him to do. Guilt twisted in my chest as we walked toward the forest edge. The trees began to thin and we

caught broader glimpses of the blue skies overhead.

The Black Forest behind us was thick and dense, but it wasn't some lightening of the air that made them thinner here. We were merely getting closer to larger settlements that cut the trees at the edge of the woods for their homes, for boats and buildings and industry.

These trees were younger, their boughs lower, their trunks thinner. Underneath them, it was easier to breathe, like we were on cusp of shedding the dark magic that wove through the forest and had kept generations of people from delving too deep within.

Sure, there were small settlements of people, wanting to cloister themselves away from the world, who lived within the forest, but there was nothing like Bellara proper. Even Lord Uther's holdings were tiny compared to the king's farther south.

But even with the promise of slipping from beneath that weight, I hesitated to leave the edge of the trees and step onto the broad green meadow that cut toward my village. Another day's travel, and we would be there, and I would—I would be responsible for pushing Percival further into darkness.

The thought of it gnawed at me. I could hardly choose him over my father, but my father's words twisted in my head as if he were right beside me.

He would not want this. He would not want blood and pain and vengeance.

Nor would he want to be held against his will, or see me harassed, but... Gods, what I was asking of Percival compromised so much.

I stopped at the tree line, staring out at the meadow ahead of us, sprinkled with wildflowers. I'd—once, I'd loved picnicking out here, before Uther had taken over everything in my life, before I'd been afraid to wander too far and get caught out

alone.

Taking a sharp breath, I turned to Percival, who was staring back at me, wide eyed, almost innocent in all this.

“I cannot leave my father,” I announced.

He shook his head. “I would not want you to.”

My head bobbed in a nod. That was... good. Nice. His acceptance and understanding made me feel at least a little less vile.

“I’m no fighter though,” I continued, “and I have nothing— nothing to bargain with but the... the one thing I cannot bear to surrender. I never would’ve thrown myself in there”—I waved a hand at the forest behind us—“with no plan and no supplies if there were anything or anyone out here that I could rely on for help. I need you.”

Percival made another of his strange, abortive gestures and I took the cue to lean in, pressing against his arm and dropping my forehead against the round of his shoulder. Yes, I was hiding, but this was a misery, and I did not want to face it.

The prospect of losing my father? No, I could not face that directly.

“But if you tell me that this is not a thing that you can do, I will not force your hand. I will not beg you to change your mind or press you to violence that would stain your soul. You’re our hero. You ended the war, no matter the method, and you deserve better than for me to use you against your will as Uther would use me.”

Percival flinched. He made a soft sound, almost like a protest. It was a lovely thought, that I wasn’t capable of the same evil that’d been used against me, but anyone desperate enough—for selfish reasons or otherwise—could be moved to act

against their morality. Lord Uther had stripped me of the person I had been, who'd looked forward to the future and had enjoyed picnics in grassy meadows with Lara—someone who might've been able to look at a man like Percival and not flinch from him before even taking a moment to appreciate that the planes of his face were sharp and beautiful, that his arms were strong and I felt so safe within them.

I wanted to be something different than the man who'd tormented me, even if he'd stripped back parts of me that I hadn't realized I was losing in the first place.

When I lifted my head, my smile trembled on my lips. "Still, I would ask for your help, and—and in return, I promise, I will do anything in my power to help you break this curse. Find another witch or—or find some place far beyond where Tingard ever was, where you can live without fear or madness. As I said, I have nothing, and it is not an even trade. I have no magic of my own and no clear path to salvation—yours or mine or anyone's—but if it suits you, I would stay by your side and try."

Percival's brow was heavy, shadowing his eyes for a moment. Then, he nodded. He slipped his hand into mine, his calluses scraping roughly against my skin as I spread my fingers and let him link our hands together.

The next breath I took was deeper, easier, even before he nodded and said, "I will help you."

And for the first time in years, I was sure that I had an ally who could.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PERCIVAL

The town Almas led me to was just a quiet, sleepy village with a keep overlooking it from a hill. It seemed like a hundred other towns I'd seen in my years, even if the way they'd built the front towers, somehow round instead of square, seemed quite clever and odd.

We arrived there in the morning, frost still on the grass and our breaths showing in the air before us as we walked through the quiet village. Halfway through, Almas stopped, his breath catching, a tiny noise in the back of his throat that could mean nothing good.

I turned to look at a small house just off the main street, and I almost sobbed along with him. It looked like perhaps once, it had been a lovely home. But more recently, someone—or more likely a group of someones—had tried their best to destroy it. They'd broken the windows and knocked the little wooden fence down, trampled the grass, and written words in something runny and red across the front of the building. It wasn't the language I'd learned as a child, so I couldn't read the words, but I didn't need to, did I?

I knew what these kinds of monsters did. They found a soft spot and they attacked it. They pushed and pushed until something inside you broke, and you could never be the same person again.

A gaggle of children ran through, laughing and shoving at each other, but froze when

they saw Almas. They were brunets, most of them, with a few gold-haired exceptions that I tried not to look at too hard.

One of them pointed at him. “It’s the lord’s whore!”

Almas fell against me, the breath knocked out of him.

That was precisely what he’d been avoiding. He had no interest in sleeping with this lord of theirs, and that was what had started the problem.

But that was the point, wasn’t it?

How strange, that the villagers wanted to degrade him into doing that very thing, because it would be easier for them. And when he refused to capitulate, he, not the lord, was the one they blamed for the man in power acting like a child denied candy.

Doors opened and closed, and people started to wander out into the street. An older man pursed his lips at Almas and shook his head. “Why did you come back, boy? You’ll only make things worse for all of us.”

“All of you?” Almas demanded, his sadness making way for the deeper, hardier well of anger inside him. “You? What about my father? What do you think would be better for him?”

“It would have been better for him if you’d just done your duty, and none of this ever would have happened,” a golden-haired woman sneered.

I dropped my hands from Almas’s arms as they tensed, not wanting to hurt him, but he turned to look at me, panicked, as though he were afraid I might leave him.

Instead, I breathed, long and slow, trying to quell the blood bubbling up inside me,

ready to explode and destroy and rend and...

He reached up to press a cool hand to my cheek. “Oh Percival. I’m... I’m so sorry. Maybe we?—”

“Well, well, well,” came a smooth, snide voice from the other direction. From the central street through the village, in the direction of the keep itself. “Look who’s come crawling back. Ready to do what you need to, to free your criminal father?”

“My father has never broken a law in his life,” Almas shot back, almost shouting.

I could feel his anger inside me. My father, too, had been a good man, innocent of any wrongdoing. He’d been more farmer than soldier, and had loved his grandchildren more than anything in the world.

The Tingardians had killed him all the same, because he was in their way. Because it was a way to hurt me.

Slowly, I turned to see the man speaking.

This, I was certain, was Lord Uther.

I didn’t know how I knew, or how he’d noticed us and arrived so quickly, but I had no doubt. He was wearing a crimson velvet doublet with black hose and boots, and a flimsy sword belted at his waist. It looked like a child’s toy rather than a real sword, but with shiny precious gems set into the hilt. It was the sort of thing only a madman would swing at another person. It belonged on a wall for show, not a field of battle.

His hair, halfway to his shoulders, was flowing golden waves.

Behind him, there were three guards. They had real weapons and real armor, and they

were looking at me rather than Almas.

Uther glanced in my direction and rolled his eyes. “Thought fucking a goon was going to get you protection, did you?” He waved a hand at me. “Leave. Or my men will put you in a cell next to his father.”

I drew myself up and pulled Almas to my side. I wanted to stand in front of him, shield him from this monster, but that wasn’t right. Almas was a man grown, and wronged, and he deserved to stand against the monster who had wronged him. “What charge do you intend to bring against me? You don’t even know my name. I’ve done nothing against the law.”

“You’re standing in my way,” he sneered back. “That’s my bit of fluff, and you’re fucking it anyway.”

Fluff. Like Almas wasn’t even human, but an object to be owned.

“Perhaps the laws have changed since my day, but I don’t recall standing in the way being a crime. A lord is as capable as anyone of walking around a person.”

He took two steps forward, and his guards took three, not willing to let him get too close to me, even though I was unarmed.

And even though I was unarmed, he drew his toy sword. “I’m telling you to get out of my way, fool. Leave now, or face the consequences.”

“Name my crime, and Almas and I will go,” I agreed.

That, apparently, was too much for him. He shouted and lunged at me.

I let him.

His aim was poor. The sword slid through my gut, and while it might have killed me, it didn't stop me in my tracks. It might not have hit anything vital. Even before the spell, I might have lived through it.

Now? Now, I grabbed his sword hand and ripped it from the hilt, then shoved him away from me. He fell back onto his ass, releasing the sword and leaving it buried in my gut.

Almas squeaked. "Oh no. No no no no no no, Percival, he—you—we have to get help. You?—"

I reached over and put my hand on his shoulder, trying to calm him, and met his gaze steadily as I pulled the sword out of myself. There was a gout of blood, but then, as expected—as they always had after the spell—the wound closed almost instantly.

I turned the sword in my hand, testing its weight. It wasn't the worst weapon I'd ever used in my fight against Tingard. Looking down at Uther, I nodded. "I accept your challenge."

"What? Challenge? I never?—"

His guards, while terrified of what they'd seen, leapt to his defense. One slashed at me with all the dexterity of a child who had no sword training, and I whipped the blade up in answer, striking his head cleanly from his shoulders before turning to the next man.

He was more circumspect, more skilled, determined that he could take me down. But no one could defeat the Beast I had made myself into. Not even when I held the most pitiful sword in the fight, not even when I was barely dressed, let alone armored.

I was the horrible Beast of legend for a reason.

I beat back his blows with inhuman dexterity, disarming him in four blows, and then stabbing my ill-gotten sword straight through his chain shirt as though it were butter. He fell from the tip of it, light already fading from his eyes.

The third guard paused. He clearly understood that he would not defeat me, and was trying to decide whether Uther's life was worth his own. I picked up my foot, planted it in his chest, and shoved him down and away.

Stepping past him, I stood once again in front of Uther, who hadn't even bothered standing up from where I'd knocked him down.

Without waiting for him to flap his vile tongue any further, I stabbed the sword forward. I deliberately missed his heart, aiming for his belly, and stabbed just deep enough to do the damage necessary.

Necessary to ensure his eventual death, but leave him in pain, suffering, whining for escape. No one could save him now, short of a very talented witch, and he could feel a measure of the suffering Almas had felt at his own filthy hands.

"Tingardian," I growled, baring my teeth at him.

The guard I'd knocked down was trying to stand, and in the process, lost his helmet, exposing a head of sun-gilt hair. My breath came short, and I stared at him. Golden hair. Tingardian. Murderers.

I had to keep going, didn't I? Had to destroy them all, stop them from spreading across the land like the plague they were.

I spun to look around, at the villagers gathering. So many of them, Tingardian.

I lifted the sword again, ready to kill them all.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ALMAS

The revenge I'd imagined—bloody, Lord Uther left to agony and death—was so much like this, and somehow, my imagination hadn't prepared me for the truth of it. The stench of blood and bodies split open washed over me, tightening my throat as if I'd be sick any moment. My stomach turned.

And there was Percival in the middle of it all, chest heaving, his grimace filled with rage. He raised his sword and?—

This wasn't what I wanted. I did not like the people of my village anymore. Perhaps I had once, but they'd turned their backs on me and I saw no reason to try and salvage something from all that pain. Nevertheless, I didn't want to see them slaughtered.

Moreover, I did not want to see Percival's hands coated with the blood of innocents. A man did not lock himself away for centuries because he was at ease with the concept of killing.

No, this wasn't him, and I wouldn't allow it to be.

My breath hitched, and I surged forward, holding onto the memory of running my hands through his hair as we'd bathed in the creek, how he'd gone soft beneath the touch. Remembering how he had stood at my side, ready to defend me against those men around their campfire and here, against Uther. He'd neither crowded me nor turned his back on me. He'd defended me without belittling me or claiming any stake

against me, just because he was good.

And I would not turn my back on him now. Whatever came next, if he razed this place to the ground, it would be on us, together.

When his eyes landed on me, he flinched, his shoulders rising in a quick gesture, almost like he'd caught himself from lunging forward and striking—at the woman who'd insulted me, at the guard on the ground, it did not matter, because when Percival saw me, he froze.

With a shaky breath, I nodded. I understood. He didn't want to hurt me. I trusted that he wouldn't.

I edged closer, between him and the other villagers, holding his eyes with my own while his jaw flexed.

"It's all right," I said, reaching for him, over the rough woven linen of the shirt I'd stolen for him, up around his neck where I could feel his pulse hammering beneath my palm. "You did what you had to do, and now it's over. There's no more Tingard." I wanted to promise him, to show him the world and let him see that it was safe, his enemies were dead, and now was the time to grieve his losses and move on.

For me, too, I realized. There was nothing for me here, no home—even that had been destroyed by people fearful and looking out only for themselves.

"They're all gone. You are safe. We are all safe, thanks to you. You don't have to fight anymore." I pushed up onto my toes then. I couldn't show him the whole world, but I could—I could show him something to hope for, a spark in my chest that warmed when I thought of his kindness and unassuming strength, when I realized that because of him, I wasn't alone.

I kissed him, not parting my lips or pushing inside, but warm and firm and there. Please, please feel this like I do .

His breath shook, same as mine, but some of the tension went out of his shoulders. His sword arm fell, the point dragging across the bloodstained street.

“Be with me,” I whispered against his lips. I pressed my forehead to his, hard, willing him to breathe easier, to let go of the ridiculous sword in his grip.

I’d sworn to help him, but it wasn’t that alone that pushed me. I wanted to be seen and held and protected by the man I’d come to know, who was still finding himself through all the dark. I wanted to support him in turn, to learn more about him.

I wanted him, wasn’t ready to let him go, and certainly couldn’t watch him destroy himself just to defend me.

“Please, Percival,” I begged, tears streaking down my cheeks. “I need you with me, beyond today. Beyond tomorrow. Don’t lose yourself where I can’t find you.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PERCIVAL

The sword clattered from my hand into the cobblestones with a loud noise, but no one around us moved.

The guard stood over the dying Uther, his sword out, but wavering.

And in front of me, there was Almas.

Almas, who had come through the Black Forest, through woods older than every human kingdom, stumbling through streams and rocks and woods, hungry and hurt and worried about his father, to find me. Or no, to find the legendary Beast who could help him get his revenge.

Well-deserved revenge, against a man who had taken everything from him, and a people who had watched it happen, cold and careless about the need of their fellow human being.

But he was done.

His vengeance hadn't turned out to be all of them after all.

It wasn't simply that he had no stomach for it, I realized as his lips pressed against mine, warm and hopeful and oh so distracting from the anger constantly boiling in my body.

And in that moment, something snapped inside me. The breath left me in a whoosh, and I realized... I didn't have to kill all of Tingard. Time had defeated Tingard for me. Almas's tormentor was defeated, lying prone in the street. He might not know it yet, but he was dead.

Three lives. That was enough.

The lord was a monster, and the men who protected him were in clear support of his vile behavior, so I felt no sadness at what I'd done, but what I'd done was enough. That was it.

I reached up to cup Almas's cheek in my hand, and he leaned into the touch like a flower to the sun. He'd never wanted to hold himself apart from everyone. He'd only wanted the right to choose who touched him. The right every person should have, always.

Leaning in, I pressed my lips back to his. Not forcefully, but so soft, as gentle as a great oaf like me could manage. "Yes," I agreed. "This is done. None of them matter any longer. Tingardian or not."

"You... won't get away with this," Uther panted out from where he lay on the ground.

Almas turned to look at him like he was mad. "Do you want him to kill you?"

"I wouldn't worry about that," I said. "He's dying. Unless you have better witches now than in my day, nothing can save him."

A few of the people gasped in shock. "The king will have you killed," one woman said. She actually sounded, perhaps, a little saddened by the notion of us being murdered.

“For what?” I asked her. “This man attacked me for no reason. I’d committed no crime. He attempted to kill me and got his just reward. If any of you had a bit of backbone, someone else would have done it years ago. Almas couldn’t be the first young man this lecher has tormented. But the lot of you ignored it. Allowed his behavior. You should be ashamed. All of you.”

“Here now,” the old man from earlier said, stepping forward, but when I turned to look at him, he stepped back.

I waited for a moment, looking at him. Then at the others. “Nothing to say for your behavior? I’m not even armed.”

“You’ve killed two men,” a woman pointed out.

“Three.” I looked at Uther again, then back to her. “As I said. He might not be dead yet, but he will be. That isn’t a wound a man survives. But again, unarmed. And I only attacked them when they attacked me. You don’t want to defend yourselves?”

The old man apparently found his balls and straightened his back, lifting his chin into the air. “How could we have known the boy didn’t want him back? He kept flouncing around town in the same clothes that had attracted the lord. Acting the same way, saying the same things. Clearly, he liked the attention.”

Only one other person in the crowd nodded, most of the rest were staring at the ground.

I glared at them all. “Don’t look away. Look at him. This man. He thinks your lord’s behavior was warranted. Threats and harassment and torment. He thinks people are at fault for being mistreated. He’s one who’ll mistreat others.” I pointed to the other who’d nodded. “Him as well. I may not give a damn about any of you, but you should recognize the monsters among you.”

A few people took steps away from the men I'd singled out, but none of them spoke.

Gently, giving him room and time to stop me, I pulled Almas toward me. "You were right. The lot of them are beyond hope. We should get your father and leave this cursed place. It may not be Tingard, but it's still full of monsters."

He spun and threw his arms around me, nodding into my shoulder. "Please." I almost felt the word, breathed into my skin, more than I heard it. But that was enough.

"Can you walk, or shall I carry you?"

He let out a sound somewhere between a giggle and a sob, but drew himself up. "I'll walk. To get my father out of his unjust imprisonment."

I nodded, and without another glance at the people, turned to the remaining guard and his golden hair. There was still a beat, a moment where looking at him reminded me. A group of men sitting around a campfire, laughing about how my brother's wife had pled for the lives of her children, so they'd forced her to watch as they'd slit their throats.

But he wasn't them.

"Will you show us to where Almas's father is, and help us release him?"

"You will not," Uther panted, but his voice was going thin and reedy, almost more whisper than voice. "Get me... back. Need. Water."

I glanced at him. "Thirsty? Yes, that won't get better. I pierced your stomach. It's emptying its contents into the rest of you. Apparently it's quite acidic."

The lord paled and swallowed, his head falling back against the stones. "Need

healing.”

“I told you, healing can’t help you. Bargain with whatever gods you believe in. They’re the only thing that can help you now.” Turning back to the guard, who swallowed and stared at his lord for a moment, I continued. “Now. Almas’s father?”

Shockingly, the man nodded to us. “Of course. The tinker is in the dungeon. I’ll... I’ll take you.”

Somehow I suspected that accompanying us to the dungeon would be quickly followed by packing his things and leaving for parts unknown, never again to admit to having been anywhere near this tiny apathetic town and its evil lord. I didn’t even blame him.

Instead, I put my arm around Almas’s waist and walked, together with him, up to the keep.

Uther only tried to call after us once, and then he lost the strength to do even that. Lucky for him he was so weak, he’d die quickly.

The guard, intelligently, didn’t try to put up a fight or call on the other guards when we arrived at the keep. He turned to the man at the gate and said, “Lord Uther is dying. He challenged a strange knight to a fight and lost. He’s in the village now, but... there’s nothing to be done.”

The guards were stunned, but it said something about the man they’d served that I didn’t see a single moment of sadness in any of them. More confusion. What were they supposed to do? Uther didn’t have a wife or heir, apparently, so?—

The guard who’d come with us looked at me. “You could take over here, if you wanted to. We’ve never seen anything like you. You’re clearly a leader of men.”

He said it half-heartedly, like he already knew the answer. Because he did.

“I could no more be lord to the monsters of that village than you wish to be. They watched my friend be tormented by the beasts in this keep and did nothing. I despise them. I would give them nothing.”

Almas buried his face in my shoulder at that, and from the heat of it, I thought he might be blushing. I wasn't sure why, but if he wanted to talk about it, we could do that. Later. Once we'd escaped the prying eyes of the people who had wronged him.

His head popped up after a moment, and sure enough, his cheeks were red. He turned to look at the guard. “And my father's money. Lord Uther took it. It'll be returned to him.”

The man blinked for a moment, and stared at the head guard, who was looking between us. He stopped and turned toward me. “You... you killed Lord Uther?”

“I did,” I agreed. “He attacked me and left me no choice. His guards as well.”

“Don't even think it,” the golden-haired guard from the village whispered to him. “He cut them all down in less than a second. No effort. But... Lord Uther stabbed him, and it—it's just gone. He healed.”

I wondered if it would still happen, if they stabbed me now. I'd had to live until all of Tingard was dead, but I'd felt it, the resounding snap inside me, when I'd realized that Tingard was already dead and gone. That the killing didn't have to continue.

When Almas had made the killing stop.

I certainly wasn't going to tell them that, though.

I just stared at the keep guard, unblinking. The man turned to someone else. “Get a bag of gold from the treasury. For... for compensation. For the lord... wronging the tinker and his son.”

I nodded, slowly, and the guards took off to see it done.

They’d only been gone a few moments when, next to me, Almas took off suddenly, shouting. “Father!”

He almost bowled over a man who was blinking in the morning sun as though he hadn’t seen proper light in days. I knew the feeling all too well, and empathized with him.

It was almost funny. Almas’s father. Henry, he’d called him once.

He had golden-brown hair. It wasn’t quite Tingardian, but it was much lighter than Almas’s. I wasn’t sure how the Beast in me would have reacted if Henry had been the one to awaken me in my tower in the woods.

Almas almost dragged him back to me, insisting that he had to introduce him to someone very important.

Me, important.

“Father, this is Percival. Yes, that Percival. From the stories. I went looking for the Beast of the Black Forest to get revenge on the town—I know, I know, you never would have wanted that. But—instead, I found him. And... he saved me. Then he helped me free you.”

“You saved me from the Beast first,” I told him, and we shared a quiet moment of understanding while Almas bit his plush red lip.

That was when a man came out of the keep, almost dragging a bag alongside him. He hoisted it up and dropped it into Henry's arms, and the poor man almost tipped over trying to keep it from slipping through his hands. He blinked in shock, turning to the guard who'd dropped it on him. "I'm quite sure this is more than the lord took from me."

The head guard of the keep shrugged. "Uther's not here to count it."

"Excellent," I told him. "Now we need horses, and we'll be on our way."

He hesitated for a moment, considering me once more. Then he gave a sharp nod and motioned to someone to bring us horses.

We were on the road less than an hour later, and the world... well, the world was entirely new for all of us, and the possibilities were endless.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ALMAS

I had no idea where we were going.

My father was exhausted, not strong and vital as Percival had been when I'd brought him out of the tower, preserved by his strange magic, but weary and hunched and hungry. They'd not taken good care of him in the dungeon, and I hated them for it, but I didn't feel the need to return and shout and exact my revenge on them all.

I just wanted away—all of us, away.

My father would find a place to create and—and maybe I would try at cobbling again, or maybe I would do something else altogether.

Whatever came next, I would not shrink and make myself small out of fear. Perhaps I'd convince Percival to teach me the sword, and we'd fight back the worst of Bellara together.

But really, I didn't think I wanted that. Sure, I wouldn't mind picking up a sword and figuring out what to do with it. I definitely wouldn't mind sparring with Percival, for proximity's sake alone. An excuse to grapple with him, maybe even impress him as we went? No, I didn't mind that at all.

I just didn't think I wanted a life of danger and violence. Something simpler would suit me just fine, and I hoped he'd enjoy the reprieve as well. Though I imagined his

life in the tower had been simple enough, one lived in the summer sun would be better.

So we rode out of the village with a sack of gold that I hadn't yet worked my way around to fully comprehending. It was more wealth than my father had earned in his whole life, just there in one bag, collected for us to start a new life.

We rode in the opposite direction of the Black Forest until twilight spread overhead, and then we saw the flickering of candles in the distance, the twist of smoke through the purple-pink sky.

We turned toward town and stopped at the first tavern we found. By the time we dismounted, I was half convinced my father was just going to fall out of his saddle, but he caught himself and staggered inside.

While they got settled, I left the coins with Percival to protect. Strangely, I trusted him with the whole amount, not thinking for a second that he would abandon us with nothing. No, what struck me as strange was that I was of the opinion that most people would.

We only needed a few things, but I didn't want to be without supplies, forced to steal, ever again. For once, I could see us all taken care of, and I'd never—gods, I'd never been so relaxed as I was when I realized there was nothing I had to scrape or beg for. I could afford all of it. We were safe.

I came back with packs for each of us, better stocked with clothes to change into and all the things we'd need for a few days on the road, and by then, it was time to eat.

When we ate the stew and bread the tavern provided for supper, none of us spoke. Not one among us had had a decent meal in over a week, and we ate heartily, a warmth working through my limbs.

It was over. I was free.

It was even easier to breathe, knowing that Uther was dead.

I sat on the bench beside Percival, my knee pressed against his while my father, bright-eyed and curious, asked him all sorts of questions. A good meal seemed to have cleared his mind. His queries weren't just about the old stories, his heroics, but also about the tools his people had used before Bellara was founded.

Percival was kind, but even stranger, he seemed keen to talk agriculture and was excited by the trinkets my father described. My heart sang to watch them get on, and it was so blessedly normal that it was hard to go up to bed, even long after the sun set.

My father and I were sharing one room, which wasn't so different from the small cabin I'd grown up in. I felt a pang to remember it destroyed.

Percival was in another room alone.

After so long at his side, I couldn't stand it. Even after I'd seen my father tucked comfortably in bed, was assured that he wasn't hurt beyond mere exhaustion, I kept glancing toward the door. I wanted?—

“You should go talk to him,” my father said knowingly, patting the blanket over his waist. “I'm too tired to be good company tonight, but we'll catch up over breakfast and you can tell me how you found the Percival. That sounds like a tale I'd love to hear.”

I bit my lip. “Are you sure?”

He waved me off. “Go. Be young and foolish. Gods know you've gotten little enough chance.”

There was something sad in his eyes then, but that was for later. It would take time before all my anger disappeared. We'd all heal though; it'd just take a while.

I slipped out of my father's room and knocked on Percival's door. When he opened it, he was?—

My eyes fell to his chest. It was bare, his shirt discarded somewhere, presumably so he could wash his hair, which hung damp and dark around his shoulders.

My mouth went dry, and I couldn't help simply staring at him. It was a luxury I'd barely allowed myself to indulge in before, at least without flinching back from what it meant.

Now, I didn't feel the need to hold myself apart.

"Are you all right, Almas?" I looked up to find his head tipped to one side, an easy smile playing across his face.

"Yes," I breathed. "Very. Very all right. May I come in?"

"Of course." He stepped back, and I slipped into his room, shutting the door behind me and leaning back against it.

I only just stopped myself from looking him over again. The last thing I wanted to do was return his help with unwanted attention, and in truth, should he never want anything more from me than friendship, that alone would be a gift. He had saved me, and he was a good man. I required no more of him than decency, and I wanted to be by his side either way.

But if there was a chance for something more? Well, I wanted to explore it.

“We didn’t talk about it, before I kissed you. In the moment, it seemed the best way to reach you, but I wonder—could we talk about it now?”

Percival hummed his ascent, and I took a half step toward him.

“Would you like to do it again?” I asked, my heart in my throat.

When Percival scowled, a sudden fear stabbed through me. I didn’t want him to say there was nothing between us, no chance for more, even if it would not change my valuation of him.

But when he met my gaze, I couldn’t put a name to the feelings in his eyes. Only, it didn’t look like a rejection.

“What do you want, Almas?”

“Oh—” The tiny sound punched out of me. Was that all it was? Percival wanted to be sure that he wasn’t pressuring me, that I thought first of myself.

The warm spark in my chest began to spread as I grinned at him.

“I want you,” I said. “I want to be close to you, to kiss you again, to feel your hands on my skin. You make me feel safe, like I could build something with you—something good and whole and worthwhile. I want to act without thinking, without worry about what I should be doing or what I owe anyone else. I want to be seen and I—I’d like it best to see you in turn. I just... want you.”

Percival’s mouth had gone soft, just a small hiss of air escaping the tiny part in his lips.

Then, he was on me, his arms around me as he pulled me into him, drawing me onto

my toes as I looped my arms around his neck. This time, when he kissed me, I opened for him, and his tongue slipped inside.

Heat and a twisting tightness flowed through my body. My breath hitched as we parted.

“Can I stay?” I whispered.

Percival’s response came out like a growl. “Never leave.”

We kissed, fumbling as we made our way to the tavern’s lumpy bed. But gods, was it better than sleeping on the ground.

Percival pulled my shirt off, and I reached for his trousers. “All right?” I rasped against his mouth.

“Yes,” he promised, but a moment later, his hand closed on my shoulder and he held me back. “I will tell you if I want you to stop, and you need only say no and this ends.”

Gods, that assurance shouldn’t be half as sexy as it was, but the sharp awareness that stopping was the last thing I wanted crashed over me just at his offer. I whimpered, dropping onto the bed and pulling him with me.

From the bed, it was an awkward shuffle to shed the rest of our clothes, but we managed, leaving them piled on the floor right at the bed’s end.

We kissed for what felt like hours, just touching, enjoying the rush of blood that followed trailing fingers and hungry lips. But kissing wasn’t all that I’d wanted, and while I was out, I’d made a purchase just for myself. Well, myself, and I’d hoped, Percival.

When I pulled the vial of oil from my pocket and the glint of candlelight caught on the glass, Percival groaned. He rolled his hips, pressing me down into the bed before he fell to the side. His hand on my hip pulled me over with him, and we kissed again, his arm cushioning my head.

“What is your preference?” he asked breathily, his thumb tracing circles over my hipbone in a way that made me squirm, my cock trapped hard and straight between us.

“My preference?” I echoed, dazed and arching toward his hips, eager to press myself against him.

“Would you like to be inside me, or for me to be in you?”

“Oh.” How was it that this man, ancient and powerful as he was, could bring me up short time and again? No other man I’d slept with had asked. They’d each assumed, because I was pretty, and often smaller, that there was only one thing I wanted—or perhaps their eyes had found me because there was only one thing they wanted.

“Do you... have a preference?” I asked, ducking my head.

Percival laughed, and the sound was loud and unabashed and I loved it.

He shook his head. “No, Almas. Tonight, in any arrangement, I am yours. Tomorrow, we may try a different one. Beyond tomorrow? I cannot wait to find out.”

I made a sharp sound, unable to keep from kissing him again. It was long and sloppy, my lips slick with spit and the glorious sweep of his tongue. All the while, I looped my leg over his hip and pulled him close.

With a huff, I rolled him onto his back and straddled his hips. “You in me.” I rocked

against him, delighting in the feel of his hands gripping my hips hard. He wanted me, and I thrilled with the uncomplicated truth of it.

“Prepare me?”

The rumble I got in response made my hair stand on end. Percival was so very careful, warming the oil between his fingers before ever touching my skin, circling his finger around and around until my skin felt molten and soft. When he sank inside, I whined, pressing back into his touch.

With my hands braced on his shoulders, I stretched to kiss him, caught between the dual pleasure of his lips and his clever fingers.

“So gorgeous,” he whispered, dragging his lips from my mouth to my cheek, across my neck.

I whined, unable to voice how good it was to feel beautiful and not ashamed of it, to let someone close to me knowing that they’d never hurt me.

It was hard not to sink into the feeling, to hang in that space and spend the whole night just touching and being touched and going no further, but deep down, I wanted more. I wanted to have this without reservation, to know that I could take what felt good and wake to another morning where Percival was still with me and no one was dogging my footsteps and everything would be fine.

It was just sex—wonderful and fun and messy and perfect, but not the kind of world-shattering thing that a dead man had turned it into.

I could take it back.

So I drew Percival’s hand away from me and palmed oil over his cock, holding him

steady as I sank down on his dick. Gods, it'd been so long—much longer for him, I realized with a burst of laughter entirely inappropriate for the moment.

Beneath me, breathless, Percival raised his brows in question, but I shook my head. “I’m just happy. Happy to have this. Have you.”

His breath caught and he nodded too. Miraculously, I also made him happy.

That thought spurred me to start moving, rocking my hips, lifting up with the help of Percival’s hands on my hips and falling back down. My cock bobbed as I moved, dripping tantalizingly onto his lower belly.

Gods, we were a mess. No grace to us at all, just thrusting and kissing and the frustrated hiss I made when it was too hard to kiss him and fuck him at once—the same hiss that drew a grin out of him and had him pushing to sit up, angling closer so I could have all that I wanted.

My body pressed to his, his thrusts short and deep and?—

“Shit,” I hissed as he reached between us, gripping my cock so that when I moved, there was just enough friction. He hardly moved his hand, but expertly flicked his thumb across my leaking tip.

I clinched around him, arching my back to give him more space to move and then—oh, and then the world narrowed to a single point and blew up all at once, pulsing from my dick in his hand, my ass flexing around him with each blissful spasm.

Out of breath, panting, I clung onto him as he moved my hips. I used the leverage of my heels pressing into the small of his back to follow the movements.

And when he buried his teeth against my shoulder to muffle his shattered moan, when his body shook with pleasure beneath mine, I grinned and pressed a kiss against his damp hair, because this was perfect, and it was all mine.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

PERCIVAL

Five days travel on the horses we'd taken from Uther's keep, we found it.

I'd known it was there, and hoped against hope that the years hadn't completely destroyed it, and, well... My hopes had been half granted, and that was enough for me.

My family keep was still there. It wasn't in perfect condition, but it still stood, and it was empty.

Dismounting my horse and rounding the area on foot, I was quickly joined by Henry.

"Good bones," he said speculatively. "It's in the old style, but there's nothing wrong with that. Just makes it less likely some lord will come along and claim it."

I grinned at him. "They could try. This has been my family's home since before a single one of them was born. Since before Bellara was born."

His breath caught with excitement, and he practically bounced on the balls of his feet like a man half his age. "Do you think there's anything left inside? The history we could find..."

Henry, as it turned out, was a man in love with learning. He was a tinkerer simply because he wanted to know how every single thing worked, and he'd figured out

quite a lot of it. I suspected that with the right inspiration, he could go a step further and create newer and better things than what we had.

So that was my plan. Rebuild the family keep. We had enough coin to buy the materials and hire workers, if Almas and Henry agreed to it.

And then . . . we would simply live.

We hadn't passed a town in days, living off the rations we'd bought and kept in our packs. This was the northern end of the country, Henry had said, and few people lived there. It was unlikely we'd be accosted by someone claiming my family home. If they thought it theirs, they wouldn't have allowed it to start to fall apart.

Perhaps a town would come up around the keep again in time, but that didn't matter. For now, we would build. And we would farm, and tinker, and... well, Almas could do whatever he wished to. If he wanted to farm with me, then I'd teach him everything I'd learned from my own father. If he wanted to breed horses or make shoes or... well, I'd quickly realized that the gold they'd given us from Uther's treasury could easily pay for anything his heart desired.

Almas could have whatever he wanted in life, and Henry and I would be happy to give it to him, because he did the same for us every day.

It was like having a family again.

Mine would have adored Almas and Henry, I thought. I only wished they could have met, without centuries between their passing and Henry and Almas's lives. I'd never expected to be grateful to have survived all those years. There had been a time—many times—in the tower, when I'd longed for nothing but death. An end to the never-ending bloodlust that had lived inside me.

When we'd passed through the last town half a week earlier, a gold-haired

shopkeeper had made a snide comment about my shirt's quality, and I hadn't even been taken with an urge to smash his nose. I'd simply rolled my eyes and told him it served me well enough. Almas had procured it for me, after all.

Henry had lifted a brow, Almas had blushed, and we'd moved along.

I turned to Almas, waiting for his judgment. Henry and I had a say, obviously, but I'd never demand he live somewhere he didn't wish to. If he wanted more or newer or better or just different, then we'd find that and give it to him.

He smiled at me and stepped into my arms, which I closed around him automatically. "It's perfect. Let's make it home."

Little did he know, it was already that. Not because my family had once lived there, but because he was there, and we were together and safe. Nothing else mattered.