



# Betraying the Beast (Cursed Kingdoms #6)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** A love written in blood. A betrayal neither can forgive.

CERYN

I was sent to betray him. A beast feared by all, a creature no one dares approach. The warlord who owns my family commanded me to infiltrate his castle, learn his secrets, and deliver him into my master's hands.

But VaelZhur is not what I expected. He is a storm of power and hunger, a monster who should frighten me—but instead, I crave him.

When he touches me, I forget my lies. When he whispers my name in the dark, I forget my mission.

I should run. I should kill him.

Instead, I want to stay.

VAELZHUR

I knew from the moment I caught her that she was a trap.

She entered my garden like a thief, but she is no ordinary girl. Her words are too careful. Her eyes watch me too closely.

I have suffered centuries of betrayals, and she will be no different. And yet... I do not kill her. I keep her. I let her touch me, let her wake the part of me I buried long ago.

She does not fear me. She should.

Because when I learn the truth, there will be no mercy.

**Total Pages (Source):** 13

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:18 am*

## Chapter One

The sun was barely peeking over the horizon when Ceryn Vale slipped out of the bed she shared with her younger sister, Maeva who was barely thirteen and ten years younger than her. She began to dress hurriedly to ward off the chill of the evening in her woolen trousers and linen shirt. Her teeth chattered in the cold bedroom and she slipped her feet into her boots before heading into the kitchen area to throw a few logs into the fireplace, reviving the sleeping embers.

“Ceryn?”

She turned to see her sister standing in the doorway, the threadbare old quilt wrapped around her shoulders. “Maeva. Get back to bed. It’s too early to be up. You’ll catch cold.”

“You’re up. You going hunting again?”

Ceryn shrugged. “I’m going to check the traps and see if there are any berries left.”

Winter was coming and they didn’t have enough stores to keep them fed through the long, cold months ahead. Game would be scarce and the garden hadn’t produced enough to store for the season, not after the heavy burden of taxes to Warlord Aldaric. Their garden was used mainly for herbs for their mother’s healing potions, as a way to support the family, once her husband had died in service to the warlord. But it was never enough. So Ceryn supplemented by hunting and foraging in the forest.

Ceryn reached for her hunting knife, sliding it into the leather sheath at her hip. The

weight of it was familiar, comforting even. Seven years she'd been providing for them, since the day her father never returned from the warlord's castle. Seven years of becoming something her father would barely recognize—a hunter, a trapper, a shadow moving through forbidden woods.

Maeva shuffled across the dirt floor, the quilt dragging behind her like a queen's train. At thirteen, she still retained the childlike hope that had long ago been beaten out of Ceryn. She stood at the rickety table, her eyes wide with worry in the faint glow of the freshly stoked fire.

"Don't go to the forbidden woods today," Maeva whispered, her voice catching. "Please. I had a dream last night. I saw you running, and something... something was chasing you."

Ceryn forced a smile as she wrapped strips of dried meat and half a stale loaf in a scrap of cloth, tucking it into her leather satchel. Dreams were for children and fools. Dreams didn't fill empty bellies.

"The beast again?" Ceryn asked, trying to keep her voice light. "Your imagination grows wilder by the day."

"It wasn't just a dream." Maeva clutched the quilt tighter around her shoulders. "People say he was a man once, before the curse. That he can smell fear. That he?—"

"Enough." Ceryn's voice was sharper than she intended. The stories of the beast had circulated in whispers for as long as she could remember. A creature half-man, half-monster, confined to the ruins of the ancient castle that stood deep in the forbidden woods, not that anyone ever ventured close to the castle to see it. Most believed it a tale to keep children from wandering too far. Ceryn knew better. She'd seen... things. Tracks too large for any normal animal. Claw marks on trees higher than a bear could reach. And anyone who tried to reach the castle never came back.

But she'd also learned its patterns, its territory. Known when to avoid certain parts of the forest.

"Winter is coming," Ceryn said, softening her tone as she knelt before her sister. "And Aldaric's men took nearly everything at the last tribute collection. We need meat, we need herbs, and whatever I can find." She tucked a strand of hair behind Maeva's ear. "I'll be careful. I always am."

"You promise?" Maeva's eyes glistened in the firelight.

"I promise." Ceryn pressed her forehead against her sister's for a moment. "Besides, if the beast ever did find me, I'm far too clever for him. I know every hiding place in those woods."

"Cleverness won't save you if the winter storms come early."

Ceryn stiffened at the sound of her mother's voice. Saraid Vale stood in the shadows of the doorway leading to her small bedchamber, her once-beautiful face now permanently etched with lines of grief and bitterness. She looked older than her forty years, worn down by widowhood and poverty.

"The snares need checking," Ceryn said, her voice even. "And we need more wood for the fire."

Her mother's mouth tightened, but she said nothing more. Instead, she turned away, disappearing back into the darkness of her room. The silent dismissal stung more than any harsh words could have. Just once, Ceryn wanted her mother to be the happy, smiling woman she remembered from before. But, like so many things, her mother died the day they buried her father.

Ceryn sighed and rose to her feet. She reached for her worn leather cloak, swinging it

around her shoulders before retrieving her bow and quiver from their place by the door. The bow had been her father's—the only thing of his she'd managed to keep when Aldaric's men had taken everything else as “death taxes.”

“I'll be back before midday,” she told Maeva, forcing another smile. “Have some porridge and help Mother with the herbs.”

Ceryn stepped outside, closing the door quietly behind her. The air was crisp, carrying the unmistakable bite of approaching winter. The forest loomed before her, dark and dense, a wall of massive trees shrouded in mist. Somewhere deep within those woods stood the ruins of the ancient castle, home to the beast of legend.

A sensible person would stick to the village outskirts, to the thin stretch of woods that bordered the farmland. A sensible person would beg for a permit to hunt in the warlord's forest, despite the scarcity of game and the hit to her pride. But Aldaric's men patrolled those areas, demanding permits and punishing poachers, requiring a steep cost that she couldn't afford. The alternative was the deeper woods where the beast supposedly roamed where game was plentiful and herbs grew in abundance. No one ventured there—no one but Ceryn.

She pulled her hood up and began walking toward the tree line, ignoring the flutter of unease in her chest. Maeva's dreams, her mother's warnings, the villagers' tales—none of it mattered. What mattered was survival.

The mist parted before her as she entered the forest, the familiar scent of damp earth and pine enveloping her. She moved silently, as her father had taught her in those brief years before he was taken. The farther she went, the more the trees closed in around her, ancient and watchful.

She had checked several snares. All empty so far. Stifling her disappointment, she ventured further into the forest, keeping an eye out for the herbs her mother needed

for her remedies. She was nearly to another snare when she heard it—a sound that didn't belong. Not the snap of a twig beneath an animal's foot or the rustle of leaves in the wind, but something deliberate. Something large. Much larger than a human or even a bear.

Ceryn froze, her hand moving to the knife at her hip.

Behind her, something exhaled—a deep, rumbling breath that sent chills racing down her spine.

Perhaps Maeva's dreams were more than just dreams after all.

Ceryn spun around, knife drawn, her heart hammering against her ribs.

There, between two ancient oaks, stood a shadow darker than the forest itself. Massive. Unmoving. Watching.

He stepped out of the shadows like a creature born of nightmare—huge and silent, his presence swallowing the space between them. Ceryn froze, every instinct screaming as her eyes locked on his. They glowed faintly in the gloom, golden and slitted like a predator's, fixed on her with an unnatural stillness. His face was partially obscured by a wild tangle of golden hair, but what she could see was wrong—inhuman. His features were too sharp, his brow too heavy, and his mouth... too wide. When he bared his teeth, it wasn't a snarl—it was a warning. Fangs glinted in the dim light, far too long, far too real.

His body loomed, tall and broad, cloaked in coarse fur the color of golden sunlight but he was a creature of nightmares, not the day. Muscle rippled beneath it as he moved, powerful and purposeful, like a beast who had once walked on four legs and never fully adapted to two. His hands were monstrous—oversized, clawed, twitching with restrained violence. A tattered cloak clung to his shoulders, shredded with time

and weather, and the scent of him hit her then: wild earth, damp leaves, and the faint copper tang of blood.

Ceryn's body screamed at her to run, but terror rooted her in place. Seven years she'd hunted these woods, caught glimpses of strange tracks, heard distant howls. But never this. Never him.

The beast's chest expanded as it drew in a deep breath, seeming to taste her scent on the air. Then it threw back its head and roared—a sound that shook the very trees, that reached deep into Ceryn's chest and squeezed her lungs until they burned..

The spell broke. She ran.

Branches whipped at her face as she tore through the forest, leaping over fallen logs and crashing through undergrowth with none of her usual stealth. The bow bounced painfully against her back, her satchel slapped against her hip, but she dared not slow. Behind her, she could hear it—the heavy thud of massive paws, the snap of branches beneath its weight, coming closer, closer.

Her foot caught on an exposed root, sending her sprawling. Pain shot through her knee as she scrambled back up, gasping for breath. Her cloak had caught on something—a branch, a thorn—and she clawed at the fastening at her throat, desperate to free herself.

The clasp gave way. The cloak tore from her shoulders just as she launched forward again, leaving the garment behind like shed skin.

Only when the trees began to thin, when the first glimpse of village rooftops appeared in the distance, did Ceryn dare to look back.

The beast stood at the forest's edge, a massive dark figure partially obscured by mist

and shadow. In one clawed hand—too human, too deliberate—it held her cloak, lifting the fabric to its snout, inhaling deeply as if memorizing her scent.

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Ceryn didn't stop running until she reached the village outskirts, her lungs burning, sweat freezing on her skin despite the cold morning air. She bent double, hands on her knees, fighting to catch her breath. Empty-handed. Her snares unchecked. And her only winter cloak now in the possession of the creature she'd convinced herself was merely legend.

When her breathing steadied enough that she could think clearly, she straightened and turned toward home, her steps heavy. As she drew closer, the feeling of dread grew. Something was wrong.

Their cottage was on the outskirts of the village but people usually bustled about their daily business, yet no one was around. It was as if the village was deserted, or people were staying inside, their doors and windows barred from the inside. She spied her home and fear clutched at her. The small cottage stood silent, no smoke rising from the chimney though the fall chill demanded a fire. No sound of Maeva's chatter or her mother's cooking. The garden gate was unlatched, banging in the autumn breeze.

"Mother?" Ceryn called, approaching the door. "Maeva?"

Silence answered her.

She pushed open the door, the familiar creak of hinges unnaturally loud in the stillness. "Mother? Maeva? Are you?—"

The words died in her throat.



A man sprawled in one of their three mismatched chairs, his booted feet propped on their rickety table, mud caking them. His clothes were rich, dark leather and fine wool, a sword with a jeweled pommel at his hip. Behind him in the shadows of the kitchen stood another man, taller, broader, his face impassive beneath a short-cropped beard, one hand resting on the hilt of his own weapon.

Ceryn knew them both, though she'd only seen them from a distance at the tribute collections. Warlord Aldaric and his general, Rorik. A shadow fell over her from behind and she jumped. A soldier appeared behind her to close the door, trapping her in her own home.

"Ah, the elder daughter returns," Aldaric said, his tone pleasant as if they were old acquaintances. He gestured around the small cottage. "How fascinating to see how the other half lives. Tell me, does the roof leak when it rains? I've always wondered about these... charming little hovels."

Something sour curled in Ceryn's stomach, a mixture of fear and rage. A strange, faint smell hung in the air beneath the familiar scents of home—something sickly sweet like rotting fruit or spoiled meat. Like death.

"Where are my mother and sister?" Her voice emerged steadier than she felt, her hand still wrapped around the hilt of her hunting knife, even as she knew it would be her death if she drew in his presence.

"Spirited, aren't you?" Aldaric smiled, though the expression never reached his cold, dark eyes. "They're quite safe, I assure you. And they'll remain so, provided you make the right choice when presented with it."

He tilted his head, studying her. "I remember your mother as a much prettier woman. Saraid, isn't it? One of the village beauties in her day. But life is hard out here in the borderlands, isn't it? Time and grief are cruel sculptors." He gestured to the chair

across from him. "Please, sit."

It wasn't a request. Ceryn sat, keeping her back straight, her hand on her knife, her eyes fixed on the warlord's face.

"What do you want?" she asked, her voice even despite her trepidation.

"Direct. I appreciate that." Aldaric leaned forward, clasping his hands on the table. "I understand you know the forbidden forest better than anyone. That you hunt there regularly, despite the... restrictions."

Her pulse quickened and the fear that had only just bled from her after her encounter with the beast was renewed. Was this about poaching? Would he take her hands? Her eyes? The penalties for hunting without permission in the warlord's forests were brutal but no one ever hunted in the forbidden forest.

"I have a task for you," he continued. "One I strongly advise you to accept."

"I wasn't aware I had a choice," she replied, unable to keep the bitterness from her voice.

Aldaric laughed, the sound startlingly genuine. "You really don't. Clever girl." His smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared. "You will go to the beast's castle."

Ice flooded Ceryn's veins. The beast. The same creature she'd just fled from, that even now held her cloak in its clawed hands.

"He has something I need," Aldaric continued. "And you will obtain it for me, or your mother and sister will pay the price."

"What is it?" Ceryn's mouth had gone dry. "What could the beast possibly have that

you want?"

"The Beast is immortal and I need the source of his power," Aldaric said, his tone conversational, as if discussing the weather even as he waved his hand as if he didn't have a care in the world. "Sadly, the same source also makes him mad, insane, and prone to fits of homicidal rage. That is... unfortunate. I need you to find out how to counter the side effect and make me immortal."

"That's impossible," Ceryn protested. "The beast would tear me apart before I got within a hundred paces of the castle!"

Aldaric's eyes narrowed. "Do you know what happens to those who defy me, girl? Ask your father." He leaned closer. "Oh wait, you can't. Can you?"

Ceryn's hands trembled beneath the table.

"Three days," he said, rising from the chair. "You have three days to enter the castle and find what I seek. My soldiers have already escorted your mother and sister to my keep, where they will enjoy my... hospitality until you return." He smiled thinly. "Consider it motivation."

"It's folly. Three days isn't enough time to discover what you need. Even if I survive the beast," she protested.

He stared down at her. "Time is running out for both of us, but I can give you a week." He tore open his shirt revealing a blackened wound with tendrils spiraling outward like poison invading his body and the smell of decay intensified. "We both have an interest in your success. Lives are at stake, Ceryn. There is an orchard on the castle grounds. A silver fruit grows there that may be what I seek, according to a seer. Bring me the fruit but only once you have confirmed it is the source of his power. And be sure to discover how to counter the side effects."

“And if I fail?” Ceryn forced herself to ask.

“Then you will have the privilege of choosing which one dies first.” He adjusted his gloves, casual as if discussing a minor trade agreement. “Though I suspect little Maeva wouldn’t last long in my dungeons anyway.”

Ceryn’s vision swam red with rage and terror. “I’ll do it,” she whispered.

“Of course you will.” Aldaric strode to the door, Rorik falling into step behind him. “One of my men will remain in the village to escort you when you return—with the beast’s power in your possession.” He paused in the doorway. “Don’t disappoint me, Ceryn Vale. I’m not known for my forgiveness.”

The door closed behind them, leaving Ceryn alone in the silent cottage, the faint smell of death lingering in the air.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:18 am*

### Chapter Two

Ceryn didn't bother gathering supplies. She wouldn't need them for this journey. She would either survive and return quickly or be dead. She would venture deeper into the forbidden forest, far deeper than she ever had before. Hopefully she'd survive. The trees here grew impossibly tall, their ancient trunks wider than village houses, their canopies so dense that only thin, silvery shafts of daylight penetrated the gloom. With each step, the forest closed in around her, watching, judging, even guiding her toward her destination.

Toward her doom. The same doom that claimed her father's life, if the warlord's words were to be believed.

The warlord's words echoed in her mind. The source of the beast's power. A silver fruit from a walled orchard. One that supposedly granted unnatural life, enhanced magic, and and also made one filled with rage. Aldaric had been unusually specific about this part of his demands, his eyes gleaming with an almost feverish light as he'd described the fruit—"like an apple or plum, but veined with silver, glowing with its own inner radiance."

He had provided additional details before leaving the cottage, but she wondered what he hadn't shared. She didn't doubt that he was dying. She saw the wound, smelled death on the warlord for herself. But what hadn't he told her? She didn't doubt that he didn't share everything. What else did the fruit do? Not that it mattered to her. She would give him anything he needed to save her mother and sister.

"Consuming even one would make me—" he'd caught himself, smiling thinly.

“Would make anyone a force to be reckoned with. But one alone will not suffice. You must verify its power, eliminate the side effects, and secure a way to obtain more.”

Which meant getting caught. Deliberately placing herself in the beast’s clutches.

Her stomach twisted with each step closer to the castle. The warlord’s plan was madness. But what choice did she have? Maeva and her mother were already on their way to Aldaric’s keep, hostages to ensure her cooperation. If she fled, they would suffer. If she failed...

A twig snapped beneath her boot, the sound unnaturally loud in the eerie silence. Ceryn froze, listening. Nothing. No birdsong, no rustling of small creatures in the undergrowth. Even the wind seemed to have abandoned this forsaken place.

She pressed on, following a narrow game trail that wound between massive tree roots. The forest floor sloped gently upward, and as she crested a small rise, she saw it rising from the mist like something from a nightmare.

The beast’s castle.

It wasn’t what she had expected. Not a crumbling ruin but a massive structure of dark stone, its towers piercing the low-hanging clouds, its walls overgrown with thick vines that seemed to pulse with a life of their own. No moat surrounded it, no drawbridge or portcullis barred entry. Only a high wall encircled what must be the orchard, visible just beyond the main structure.

And she had to go inside.

Ceryn sank into a crouch behind a fallen tree, studying the castle grounds. No guards patrolled the walls, no servants moved about the courtyard. Only the beast dwelled

here, if the stories were to be believed. A creature cursed to solitude, bound to this place for all eternity.

She circled the castle slowly, keeping to the shadows, searching for a way into the orchard. The main gate stood open, a dark maw leading into the beast's domain. Too obvious. Too easy. There would be another way.

Near the eastern wall, she found it—a section where the stones had crumbled, creating a rough, natural staircase up the side. The top of the wall was lined with cruel iron spikes, but between two of them, a gap just wide enough for a slender woman to slip through.

Ceryn waited until late afternoon and the sun had set far enough in the sky, when the shadows lengthened and the silver-veined fruit would be easier to spot by their glow. Then she climbed, her fingers finding purchase in the rough stone, her boots scraping quietly as she ascended. At the top, she paused, heart pounding, and peered over the edge.

The orchard stole her breath.

Trees unlike any she had ever seen grew in neat rows, their bark the color of burnished copper, their leaves a deep blue-black that shimmered in the fading light. And hanging from their branches were the fruits. Dozens of them, each glowing with a soft, silvery radiance that pulsed like a heartbeat. Like the castle itself, they seemed alive in a way that normal fruits were not.

This was it. This was what Aldaric coveted. The source of the beast's power, the key to his curse—and now, the only hope for Ceryn's family. Assuming he could be trusted.

She slipped between the spikes and dropped silently to the soft earth below. The air in

the orchard was different—heavy, sweet, intoxicating. Each breath seemed to fill her with unnatural vitality, as if the very essence of the fruit permeated the atmosphere.

Moving swiftly between the trees, Ceryn approached the nearest one bearing fruit. Up close, the silverfruit was even more mesmerizing—about the size of a plum, its skin a deep purple-black laced with intricate patterns of silver that shifted and flowed like liquid metal. It pulsed with internal light, the rhythm somehow matching the beating of her own heart.

This was madness. Every instinct screamed at her to flee, to forget Aldaric's demands, to find another way to save her family. But there was no other way. Not against the warlord's power.

Ceryn reached up and plucked the fruit from its branch.

Immediately, the air changed, filled with tension. The silverfruit grew warmer in her palm, its glow intensifying as if in response to her touch. The silver veins pulsed faster, matching the quickening beat of her frightened heart.

She had just slipped the fruit into her satchel when she felt it—a change in the air, a presence. The same presence she had sensed in the forest.

He was here.

Ceryn turned slowly, forcing herself not to run. That was the plan, after all. To be caught. To gain access to the castle. To find a way to secure more of the fruit for Aldaric and to ensure he did not meet the same fate as the beast if he ate the fruit.

But knowing that did nothing to calm the terror that froze her blood when she saw him.



The beast stood between two trees, his massive form blocking any escape. In the orchard's strange light, she could see him clearly for the first time. He stood upright like a man, yet towered at least two heads taller than any man she'd ever known. He was covered in thick fur that shimmered gold in the low light—beautiful, almost regal in hue. The fur rippled over muscle too dense to be human, corded arms ending in clawed hands large enough to snap bone. His face was a brutal thing: broad and sharp-jawed, with a heavy brow shadowing eyes that glowed like twin embers, slitted and watchful.

His mouth opened slightly, revealing fangs—not teeth—jagged and gleaming, and her pulse jumped as a low sound rumbled from his chest. Not quite a growl. The wild mane that framed his face matched the rest of him—brilliant gold with streaks of darker bronze, as if sunlight had tried and failed to burn the monster clean. Around his neck hung her cloak, fashioned into a makeshift scarf, her scent apparently still of interest to him.

Those amber eyes fixed on her, then dropped to the slight bulge in her satchel where the silverfruit lay hidden.

“Thief,” he growled, his voice so deep and rough it seemed to vibrate the very earth beneath her feet. Yet there was something else in that voice—something that had once been human, educated, perhaps even gentle.

Ceryn's plan had worked. She was caught. Now came the part she feared most. She had to survive the capture.

“Please,” she began, but got no further.

With shocking speed, the beast closed the distance between them. One massive paw-like hand closed around her throat—not squeezing, but pinning her to the tree, the rough bark biting into her back. The other tore the satchel from her shoulder, ripping

the leather strap as if it were thread and tossing it aside.

“You dare,” he snarled, his hot breath washing over her face, smelling strangely of cinnamon and cloves. “You dare steal from me?”

She couldn’t speak, couldn’t breathe. The world narrowed to those burning amber eyes, filled with rage and recognition, maybe?

In one swift motion, he hoisted her over his shoulder and carried her from the orchard, through a side door, and into the castle itself. Through corridors lined with dusty tapestries they went, up winding stairs, past chambers whose contents she could only glimpse—a library with thousands of books, a music room with instruments draped in white sheets, a dining hall with a long table set for one.

Finally, they reached what could only be the castle’s great hall. A massive fireplace dominated one wall, a fire already blazing within it. Threadbare carpets covered the stone floor, and at the room’s center stood a throne-like chair scaled to the beast’s massive frame.

The beast flung her to the floor at the foot of this throne, though not as bone jarring as she’d expected. Yet, Ceryn landed hard, the breath knocked from her lungs. When she could focus again, she found herself staring up at her captor, his massive form silhouetted against the firelight, her stolen cloak still around his neck, and he clutched one glowing silverfruit in his clawed hand, its pulsing light illuminating the terrible beauty of his face.

“What am I to do with you?” he asked, his voice softer now but no less frightening. “No human has dared enter my domain in seven years. And none has ever touched the fruit of my orchard.”

Seven years. The same time since her father’s death. Since Aldaric’s grip on the

village had tightened. A coincidence?

Despite her terror, Ceryn studied the beast with new interest. There was intelligence in those eyes, a deep sadness behind the rage. This was no mindless monster, but a being trapped in a form not his own. Cursed, the villagers said. Bound to this place, to this form.

Just as she was now bound to her task.

Just as the silverfruit bound those who consumed it.

The beast leaned closer, and Ceryn fought the urge to shrink away. This close, she could see the heavy golden fur covering his skin with no gaps and the lips curved into a bestial snarl, revealing sharp teeth. Grotesque, yet somehow fascinating.

“Tell me, little thief,” he said, the silverfruit’s glow reflecting in his eyes. “What brings you to steal that which sustains me? That which made me what I am?”

The truth hovered on her lips. Aldaric. Her family. The warlord’s demand for the source of the beast’s power. But something in those amber eyes stopped her. Something aching human beneath the monstrous exterior.

“Hunger,” she whispered instead. “My family is starving. I’ve heard tales of fruit that can sustain a person for weeks with just one bite.”

The beast studied her for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then he extended his massive hand, the silverfruit resting on his palm.

“Is that what you believe?” he asked softly. “That this is mere sustenance?”

He brought the fruit to his mouth and bit into it with sharp teeth. Silver liquid ran

down his chin like bright blood, and the glow from within the fruit intensified, bathing them both in ethereal light.

“This,” he said, “is not food. It is power. It is curse. It is binding.” He extended the bitten fruit toward her. “But if you hunger, then you shall be satisfied. Taste what you sought to steal, little thief. Now you shall understand what it means to be bound to this place. As I am bound.”

Ceryn’s eyes widened in horror and fascination. The silver liquid dripping from the fruit called to her, promising life, strength, secrets.

She was supposed to verify the fruit’s power. Wasn’t this what Aldaric wanted?

But as the beast’s massive hand drew closer, as the fruit called to her, tempting her, hovering before her lips, Ceryn realized that this was more than a mission to save her family. This was a threshold. Once crossed, there would be no returning to the life she had known.

The beast’s eyes held hers, challenging, waiting.

And despite every instinct screaming for her to flee, Ceryn leaned forward.

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V ael’Zhur had killed more men than he could remember who dared enter his domain. So many souls extinguished without hesitation, their blood painting the stones of his orchard, their screams echoing through his lonely halls before fading into eternal silence. He had taken their lives as easily as one might snuff a candle flame. He could no more resist the rage of the beast than he could resist the demand of the silverfruit that sustained him. Both were inextricably intertwined together. Both bound him to eternal life and damnation. Long life, and boundless rage. No

escape from either.

Yet, he could he not kill this woman who sought to steal from him. Why?

The silverfruit hung between them, its bitten flesh weeping luminescent sap like liquid starlight. The power coursed through his veins where he'd consumed his own bite, mingling with the ancient magic that sustained his curse. He could feel the pulse of it, the binding, the unbreakable chain that tethered him to this place.

The woman before him—this thief, this trespasser—trembled beneath his gaze, yet she did not flee. Her scent filled his nostrils: fear, yes, but also determination, courage, and something else. Something that stirred memories he'd buried beneath centuries of isolation.

Fresh earth. Pine needles. Leather. And beneath it all, warmth. Human warmth.

“Take it,” he growled, pressing the fruit closer to her lips. “Taste what you came to steal.”

She shook her head, a small gesture that sent her dark hair swaying, and pursed her lips tightly together. “I cannot.”

Rage flared in his chest—or was it something else? “You refuse?” His voice emerged as a snarl, teeth bared. “You dare to refuse when mercy itself stands against my nature?”

“Please,” she whispered, and the word slid under his skin like a thorn. “I only sought to feed my family. I meant no harm to you.”

Liar. All humans were liars. Had he not learned this truth a hundred times over? Yet as he leaned closer, studying her face in the silverfruit's ethereal glow, he saw no

deception in her eyes. Only desperation. Only fear of something greater than himself.

His massive hand spasmed around the fruit, crushing it. Juice and the pulp dripped between his claws, spattering her cheek with liquid light. The power called to him, demanded that he force it past her lips, bind her to this place as he was bound. Or kill her, as he had killed all the others who dared disturb his solitude.

But her scent...

A memory flickered at the edges of his mind—a woman's laugh, sunlight through glass, the warmth of human touch against skin not yet corrupted by curse and claw. He shook his head violently, his fur ruffling from the movement..

"I should tear you apart," he murmured, the words more to himself than to her. "I should paint these walls with your blood as I have done before."

"Then do it," she said, meeting his gaze with startling directness. "But know that my death serves no purpose save to feed whatever darkness dwells within you."

The boldness of her words startled him out of his rage like ice water. When had any human spoken to him thus? When had any dared to look upon his cursed form without flinching away in revulsion?

Vael'Zhur straightened to his full impressive height, the silverfruit still dripping from his fingers. The choice should have been simple. Death had become as natural to him as breathing once was. Yet something stayed his lethal hand.

Her cloak, still wrapped around his neck, carried her scent more strongly. He'd kept it—why? Curiosity? Possession? The need to track her should she have escaped? None of these answers satisfied the confusion roiling within him.

“What is your name, thief?” The question emerged before he could stop it.

“Ceryn,” she answered, then added with careful formality, “Ceryn Vale.”

“Ceryn,” he repeated, testing the word. Her name was pronounced like a mound of rough stones, solid and immovable. Or a grave.

How long since he’d care to ask a stranger their name? How long since he spoken to anyone save the cursed souls trapped with him? “You will stay.”

It was not a question. Not an offer. A command that surprised them both.

Her eyes widened. “Stay?”

“Here. In my castle.” Each word emerged slowly, as if he were rediscovering speech, the offer unexpected and unsure. “You came seeking the fruit’s power. You shall learn its truth.”

“I told you?—“

“You told me lies.” He cut her off, tossing the bitten silverfruit into the fire where it hissed and sparked, releasing perfumed smoke. “No one enters my domain by chance. No one scales my walls carrying tales of starving family.” He leaned down, bringing his face close to hers. “What sent you here, Ceryn Vale? Who guides your hand? Tell the truth, for once in your miserable life.”

Fear flickered across her features—he saw it, scented it, recognized it from a thousand terrified faces. But she did not break.

“Aldaric,” she whispered, the name emerging like a curse.

The name hit him like a physical blow. Aldaric. The warlord who had been the bane of his existence...at least most recently.

Rage exploded through Vael'Zhur's frame, muscles tensing, claws extending. Seventy years. Seventy years he'd been harassing Vael'Zhur.

"How?" The word emerged as a roar that shook dust from the ancient rafters. "How does he still live? How does he still reach into my domain?"

Ceryn flinched but held her ground. "He rules the borderlands. He has for many years. He.." She paused, as if rethinking her words. "He rules our village."

Aldaric should have died years before. Yet here he was, still plaguing Vael'Zhur's life, sending more innocents to their death in a vain attempt to steal the curse and shackle Vael'Zhur for himself. Coincidence? Vael'Zhur's mind raced, seeking connections, patterns, the web of fate that had brought this woman to his threshold.

"You will stay," he repeated, his voice carrying the weight of command that had once bent armies to his will. Before the curse. Before the beast. "You will answer my questions. You will tell me all you know of Aldaric."

"My family?—"

"Will survive or perish based on your cooperation." He straightened, looking down at her with eyes that burned like molten gold. "Fail me, and they are lost. Defy me, and you join them."

It was cruelty. He knew it, felt it settle into his bones with familiar comfort. Cruelty had become his shield against the pain of endless isolation. Yet as he watched her process his words, saw the careful calculation in her eyes as she weighed her options, Vael'Zhur felt something change within him, something different from before.



The beast wanted to consume her, to add her essence to the endless hunger that gnawed at his insides. But the man—the buried, nearly forgotten man—whispered of possibilities long denied.

Company. Conversation. Purpose beyond mere survival.

“So be it,” Ceryn said finally, rising slowly to her feet. She stood barely to his chest, fragile as a sparrow before an eagle, yet strong as the rock she was named for. “I will stay.”

The words settled over the great hall like a spell, and Vael’Zhur felt the castle itself respond. Doors that had remained locked for years stirred on their hinges, chambers long dark suddenly seeming less oppressive. Or perhaps it was merely his imagination, desperate for change after centuries of sameness.

“Elodia will see to your quarters,” he said, gesturing to the shadows near the doorway where a woman hovered. “You will dine with me tonight. We have much to discuss.”

As Ceryn turned to follow the silent woman, Vael’Zhur called after her. “Ceryn Vale?”

She paused, glancing back.

“Run, and I will hunt you.” The promise emerged soft as death. “And unlike this visit, our next meeting will end with your blood upon my claws.”

Her eyes widened and she paled before nodding once. She then disappeared into the shadows, leaving him alone with the echo of her name and the fading warmth of her scent that teased him.

The fire crackled in the hearth, consuming the silverfruit he’d thrown into its depths.

Beyond the castle walls, night deepened, bringing with it the familiar weight of solitude. But for the first time in years, the silence felt different.

He no longer felt alone.

Vael'Zhur moved to the window, his reflection a monstrous shadow in the glass. His fur ruffled gently as he contemplated the darkness beyond, the forest that had become both his kingdom and his prison.

"You've chosen a dangerous path, my lord."

The voice emerged from the air itself, carrying the musical quality of wind through willows. Lady Elodia manifested beside him—not fully solid, never fully there, but present enough. The castle's ancient guardian, bound to this place longer even than he.

"I know," he replied without turning from the window.

"She is not like the others who came before," Elodia continued, her ethereal form drifting closer. "There is something different about her."

"All humans are the same. Liars, thieves, cowards," he said, though doubt crept into the words.

"No." Elodia's hand, insubstantial as mist, passed near his arm. "This one is different. She walks like someone who's already chosen her grave."

The observation sent an unexpected chill through him. "What do you mean?"

"You sense it too, don't you? That she came here for more than theft. That her purposes run deeper than she admits. And she has accepted that it may end in her

death.” Elodia’s laugh was sad and knowing. “She may yet surprise us both, beast-king. Or she may be your undoing.”

Vael’Zhur’s claws scraped against the stone windowsill, leaving deep grooves in the ancient rock. Another mark to join countless others, physical manifestations of his frustration, his rage, his endless imprisonment.

But now, for the first time in years, something was different.

A woman bearing his enemy’s name had entered his domain. A thief who had not fled. A fragile human who had met his gaze without flinching.

And despite every instinct warning him against hope, Vael’Zhur felt the faintest stirring of something that had died the day he was cursed.

Curiosity.

A dangerous thing for a beast to possess.

### Chapter Three

Ceryn had expected her welcome in the beast's castle many different ways as she made her way through the forest. Being escorted to the dungeons. Ensconced in a torture chamber. Slaughtered before she even set foot on the castle grounds was the most likely. Instead, a spectral servant had led her to a chamber that might once have belonged to a noblewoman.

The room was surprisingly intact despite years of clearly being uninhabited. Ceryn could only assume no one had lived there in decades since she had seen no other living being, beyond the beast and the ghostly being who escorted her to the suite, though she thought she spied faint ghost-like beings as they weaved their way through the halls to this chamber. A fine layer of dust covered most surfaces, but beneath it lay evidence of former luxury—a canopied bed with faded silk hangings, an ornate dressing table with a cracked mirror, tapestries depicting forest scenes that seemed to shift when viewed from the corner of one's eye.

“You must dress for your dinner with the master,” Elodia said, her voice echoing strangely as if coming from a great distance. The ghostly woman's form shimmered in the dying light, translucent yet somehow substantial enough to open the wardrobe, revealing gowns of another era. “You will find suitable attire here.”

Ceryn stared at the phantom, shocked that the beast would have a formal meal and expect some kind of bizarre ritual to be followed as she'd heard the wealthy did for the evening meal. “You expect me to dress for dinner? With him?”

Elodia's expression remained impassive, her hands folded in front of her. “The

master has rules. Centuries of solitude have not diminished Vael'Zhur's expectations. I will send someone to freshen the room for you while you dine and turn down the bed."

She snapped her fingers and the fire roared the life, along with the candles around the room, brightening the dim room. Ceryn stepped back eying the grate warily. Magic was not something she ever ran across in her daily life and she didn't know how to handle all of these changes.

After the servant departed, Ceryn examined the gowns with reluctant curiosity. They were beautiful, if outdated—heavy velvet and silk in jewel tones, embroidered with silver thread that caught the light like the veins in the silverfruit. She had never been near such extravagance, had never wanted anything so fancy. She had no place to wear such dresses, no need for them. As she fingered the fine material, she thought of her sister Maeva and how she would have loved to play dress-up with the clothes. Shoving thoughts of her family deep in a box, determined to figure out the mystery as quickly as possible to save them, she squared her shoulders and eventually selected the simplest one, a deep forest green that reminded her of the woods she knew so well.

As she dressed, her mind raced. The beast—Vael'Zhur, Elodia had called him—clearly wanted information about Aldaric. His reaction to the warlord's name had been visceral, violent. There was history there, perhaps even the key to understanding his curse. The very information Aldaric had sent her to find.

But something else troubled her. The way Vael'Zhur had looked at her, not just with rage or suspicion, but with interest was disconcerting. The heat of his gaze had stirred something unexpected within her, something that had no place in her desperate mission.

A soft knock at the door announced Elodia's return. "If you are ready, I will escort

you now.”

Elodia appeared to be a woman of Ceryn’s mother’s age, but time and circumstances had been kinder to her, or maybe that was because she was a ghost. She was beautiful in an otherworldly way, her form composed of shimmering light rather than flesh. While an apparition, she seemed almost solid, though Ceryn could see the stone wall through her luminous form.

“You may have captured our lord’s interest for now,” Elodia said, her voice melodious yet somehow empty of true warmth. “But few who enter these walls leave them again.”

“I didn’t exactly choose to stay,” Ceryn replied, lifting her chin.

Elodia’s smile didn’t reach her eyes. “Indeed not. Yet here you stand, alive and whole, when so many before you lie buried in the orchard soil. Tread carefully, Ceryn Vale. The line between life and death is a thin one.” The spectral woman gestured toward the corridor. “Come. He does not like to be kept waiting.”

As they walked through the castle’s winding passages, Ceryn tried to memorize the route, noting potential escape paths should the need arise. The building was vast, a labyrinth of halls and stairways that seemed to shift and change when she wasn’t looking directly at them.

“Your efforts to map these halls are futile,” Elodia commented, apparently reading her thoughts. “The castle obeys its master, not its guests. It changes routes and rooms on a whim. You will find your way only where he wishes you to go.”

“What is this place?” Ceryn asked, running her fingertips along a wall adorned with faded murals. “What happened here?”

“This was once the summer palace of the northern kings,” Elodia replied, her form drifting slightly ahead. “Before the curse. Before the beast. Before time itself seemed to forget this corner of the world.”

“And Vael’Zhur? Was he always as he is now?”

The ghostly woman paused, turning to regard Ceryn with eyes that seemed to pierce through flesh to soul. “You ask questions that could cost you your life, Ceryn Vale.”

“I’m already a prisoner. What more can I lose?”

“Perhaps the illusion that you control your own fate.” Elodia’s form shimmered ominously. “I have served this castle for centuries. I have watched empires rise and fall beyond these walls. And I have seen what becomes of those who seek to unravel mysteries not meant for mortal understanding.”

Before Ceryn could press further, they arrived at a set of massive double doors carved with scenes of the hunt and harvest. Elodia waved a translucent hand, and the doors swung open silently.

The dining hall beyond was cavernous, its ceiling lost in shadow despite the dozens of candles that lined the walls in tarnished silver sconces. A table that could have seated fifty stretched down the center, though only two places were set—one at the head, scaled to accommodate the beast’s massive frame, and another to its right, where a normal-sized chair awaited.

And there he was, standing by the roaring fireplace, his massive silhouette framed in firelight. Vael’Zhur had shed his tattered rags for something more formal. Dark silk clung to broad shoulders and a powerful chest, the fabric straining as if reluctant to contain him. His trousers rode low on his hips, molded to the inhuman angles of his legs, emphasizing the strange, primitive power in his stance. He was a beast draped in

the illusion of civility, or perhaps a man barely restrained by his monstrous form—and she couldn't decide which was more dangerous. Or more tempting. He turned as they entered, amber eyes gleaming in the firelight. For a moment, he simply stared, his gaze traveling slowly from her face to the green gown and back again.

“Leave us, Elodia,” he commanded without looking away from Ceryn.

The spectral woman bowed and faded from sight, though Ceryn sensed her presence lingering at the edges of the room, watching, waiting.

“You clean up well for a thief,” Vael’Zhur said, his deep voice rumbling through the chamber.

Ceryn forced herself to meet his gaze. “And you dress well for a monster.”

To her surprise, a sound emerged from his throat that might have been a chuckle. “Sit,” he said, gesturing to the place set for her. “Eat. Despite appearances, I do not intend to have you for dinner.”

She approached cautiously, sliding into the chair as he took his seat at the head of the table. From nowhere, spectral servants appeared, placing covered dishes before them. When the silver domes were lifted, the aroma that rose made Ceryn's stomach clench with hunger. Roasted meat, fresh bread, vegetables she hadn't seen since the early autumn harvest.

“How is this possible?” she asked, looking from the feast to the beast. “The castle is abandoned. The kitchens must be?—“

“Magic has its privileges,” Vael’Zhur replied, tearing a chunk of bread with clawed hands that seemed ill-suited to such delicate work. “The orchard sustains more than just my unnatural life.”



Ceryn hesitated, then took a small bite of the roasted fowl. The taste exploded on her tongue—more vivid, more satisfying than any food she'd eaten before. Her appetite faded and she set her fork down, eying the plate with wariness. Was it enchanted, like the fruit? Would it bind her to this place somehow?

As if reading her thoughts, Vael'Zhur smiled, revealing sharp teeth. "The food is safe, Ceryn Vale. Had I wished to enthrall you, I would have forced the silverfruit past your lips when I had the chance."

She took another cautious bite. "Why didn't you?"

The question hung between them, unanswered for several long moments. Vael'Zhur's amber eyes studied her face with unsettling intensity.

"Tell me about Aldaric," he said instead of answering. "What does he want with my fruit?"

Ceryn carefully set down her fork. This was dangerous territory, but also an opportunity. Information for information.

"He believes it grants unnatural life," she replied honestly. "Power. Magic. He thinks it might be the source of your condition."

"My curse," Vael'Zhur corrected, his voice hardening. "Call it what it is. I am cursed, not diseased." He leaned forward, massive forearms resting on the table. "And how does Aldaric know of the silverfruit? Few beyond these walls have seen it and lived to tell the tale."

"I don't know," Ceryn admitted. "He seems to know much about this castle. About you."

“And he sent you to steal it? Why you? What makes you special, Ceryn Vale?”

The directness of his question caught her off guard. She decided to go with honesty and hoped it would earn her truth in return. “I’m not special. I’m expendable.” She met his gaze steadily. “I know these woods better than most. I’ve hunted in them for years, feeding my family since my father died. Aldaric took my mother and sister hostage to ensure my cooperation.”

Something flickered in Vael’Zhur’s eyes—recognition, perhaps. Or memory.

“And if you fail? If you do not return with what he seeks?”

“Then my family dies,” she said simply. “And so do I, I imagine.”

Vael’Zhur was silent for a long moment, studying her with those unnerving amber eyes. “So you entered my domain not out of greed or curiosity, but out of love.” His massive head tilted slightly. “Fascinating.”

“Is it? Would you not do the same for those you care about?”

His expression darkened, and for a moment, the beast seemed to overshadow the man. “I have no one left to care about.”

The bitterness in his voice was palpable, opening a window into centuries of rage and pain. Here was the connection she sought—the link between the warlord and the beast’s curse.

“What happened to them?” she asked softly.

Vael’Zhur’s clawed hand tightened around his goblet, the metal crumpling in his grip. Wine the color of blood spilled across the tablecloth.

“That, little thief, is a tale for another time.” He rose abruptly, towering over her. “You have answered some of my questions. For now, that earns you your life, if not your freedom.”

Ceryn stood as well, though the top of her head barely reached his chest. “I’ve told you the truth. I’ve kept nothing from you.”

“Haven’t you?” He stepped closer, invading her space with his massive presence. The heat from his body washed over her, along with that strange spiced scent. “I can smell lies, Ceryn Vale. I can smell fear, and desperation, and...” He inhaled deeply, his face mere inches from her hair. “...desire.”

Her heart lurched traitorously in her chest. “You’re mistaken.”

“Am I?” His voice dropped to a rumbling whisper. One clawed finger lifted to trace the air beside her cheek, not quite touching. “There is something between us. Something neither of us expected.”

Ceryn stood her ground, though every instinct screamed for her to flee. Not from fear—at least, not entirely—but from the strange, unwelcome heat building within her at his proximity.

“I came here for the silverfruit,” she said, her voice steadier than she felt. “Nothing more.”

“And yet you tremble when I stand close.” He circled her slowly, predator assessing prey. “Your heart races. Your cheeks flush. Is it merely fear, I wonder? Or something else?”

“You flatter yourself,” she retorted, turning to keep him in view. “I’m trembling because I’m in the lair of a monster who could kill me with a single blow.”

Vael'Zhur laughed then, a sound so unexpected and strangely human that it momentarily stripped away the horror of his appearance. "You have spirit, little thief. Most would be on their knees begging for mercy."

"Would that help?"

"Not in the slightest." His smile was all teeth, yet somehow held genuine amusement. "But it might satisfy my vanity and other... appetites."

Despite herself, Ceryn felt the corner of her mouth twitch upward. This was madness—exchanging barbs with the creature who held her life in his massive hands. Yet there was something almost comfortable in their verbal sparring. As if they had done this dance before.

"Tomorrow," he said suddenly, "I will show you the orchard. You will learn about the silverfruit—what it is, what it does. What it costs."

"Why would you share such secrets with me?"

Vael'Zhur's expression grew serious again. "Because Aldaric seeks what he does not understand. What he cannot control. And that ignorance makes him more dangerous than you know." He stepped back, creating distance between them. "Go now. Rest. Dawn comes early in this place."

Ceryn hesitated, caught between the need to learn more and the instinct to retreat from the confusing emotions his presence stirred. "And my family? What of them?"

"Their fate remains tied to yours," he said, his voice softening fractionally. "But know this, Ceryn Vale, whatever game Aldaric plays, whatever lies he has told you, the truth is far darker than you imagine."

She nodded once, then turned to leave, feeling his gaze burning into her back as she walked to the door.

“Ceryn,” he called after her.

She paused, glancing back.

“The gown suits you,” he said quietly. “Green, like the forest you love so well.”

Something warm and unwelcome fluttered in her chest at his words. Without responding, she slipped through the doors and into the corridor where Elodia waited, a knowing smile playing on her translucent lips.

“Be careful, mortal,” the spectral woman whispered as they walked back toward Ceryn’s chamber. “The beast may be cursed, but it is not his heart you need fear.”

“What do you mean?”

Elodia’s form shimmered in the dim light. “Curses can be broken, but truth—once known—can never be unknown again.” She gestured to Ceryn’s door. “Sleep well, thief. Tomorrow you begin to learn why some secrets are better left buried.”

Alone in her chamber, Ceryn sank onto the edge of the canopied bed, her mind racing. She had come to discover the beast’s weakness, to find the source of his power for Aldaric. Instead, she found herself caught in a web far more complex than she had imagined.

And somewhere beneath the fear, beneath the desperation to save her family, something else had taken root. Something dangerous. Fascinating. Forbidden.

An attraction to the beast who held her captive. To the man trapped within the

monster.

To Vael'Zhur.

\* \* \*

Moonlight filtered through the tower window, casting silver patterns across the chamber floor. Vael'Zhur stood silently, gazing at the forest beyond the castle walls, his massive form reflected darkly in the ancient glass. In his clawed hand, he held a goblet of wine he had not touched since pouring it hours ago.

Ceryn Vale unsettled him.

Of all the emotions he had expected to feel when confronting the thief, confusion had not been among them. Rage, yes. Bloodlust, certainly—the beast within him always hungered for violence. But this disquiet was unfamiliar, an echo of humanity he thought long extinguished.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, my lord,” Elodia’s spectral form materialized beside him, her ghostly luminescence painting the stone walls with pale blue light.

“I play no games,” he growled, though the lie tasted bitter on his tongue. What else could he call this strange dance with the woman? This extension of her life when all others had forfeited theirs immediately upon trespass?

“No?” Elodia drifted closer, her insubstantial form passing partially through a chair. “Then why does the thief still breathe? Why did you agree to show her the orchard? Why did you gaze upon her as if she were?—“

“Enough.” The word emerged as a snarl that would have sent any living servant fleeing. Elodia merely arched an eyebrow, unperturbed by his display of temper after

centuries of witnessing it.

“She is Aldaric’s pawn,” Vael’Zhur continued more quietly. “Through her, I might finally understand what game that serpent plays.”

“And that is the only reason you spare her?” Elodia’s voice carried a note of gentle mockery. “Your interest has nothing to do with how she reminds you of?—“

“I said enough!” He hurled the goblet against the wall, where it shattered in a spray of crystal and dark wine that resembled blood in the moonlight. “She reminds me of nothing and no one. The past is dead, as are all who dwelled in it.”

Elodia observed the destruction with the patient gaze of one who had witnessed countless similar outbursts. “If you truly believe that, then why does her presence disturb you so? Why does the beast within you both hunger for her flesh and hesitate to take it?”

The question struck too close to truths he had no wish to examine. Vael’Zhur turned back to the window, claws scraping against the stone sill.

“Seventy years,” he murmured. “Seventy years since Aldaric began his quest for the source of the curse.” His reflection in the glass showed him what he had become—a grotesque amalgamation of man and beast, neither fully one nor the other. “And now he sends this woman to my door, seeking the fruit’s power.”

“A curious coincidence,” Elodia agreed. “Or perhaps no coincidence at all.”

The thought had already occurred to him. After centuries of isolation, after years of increasing monstrosity, of the curse accelerating, why now? Why this particular woman with her fierce eyes and unbroken spirit?

“She said he took her family hostage,” Vael’Zhur reflected. “Her mother and sister.”

“A familiar tactic,” Elodia replied. “He has always understood that love makes the best chains.”

The observation struck a chord of memory that resonated painfully through his chest. Yes, Aldaric had always known precisely which threads to pull, which bonds to exploit. It was how he convinced so many to overcome their fear and attack the beast over and over in his own domain.

“She claims her father died at Aldaric’s hands,” he said. “Seven years past.”

“The last thief,” Elodia noted. “None have dared enter your domain since then. What will she do if she discovers he died at your hands?”

Vael’Zhur closed his eyes, remembering. The final phase of the curse had descended upon him like a black tide, drowning what remained of the man he had once been. For the last seven years, he had been more beast than human, driven by instinct and rage, sustained only by the silverfruit’s magic.

Until today. Until her.

“She refused the fruit,” he said softly, still puzzled by that moment. “Even knowing it might appease me. Even fearing for her life.”

“Wisdom, perhaps,” Elodia suggested. “Or something else. Not all prizes are worth their cost.”

No one had ever refused the silverfruit before. Those who sought it—treasure hunters, would-be immortals, Aldaric’s previous pawns—had grasped for it with naked greed, drunk its essence without question. Their fates afterward had been



unpleasant. The fruit gave power, yes, but twisted those who consumed it without understanding its nature. Her father had accepted it. It had killed him.

Yet Ceryn had denied it. Had looked upon its glowing flesh with desire but turned away.

“I will show her the orchard tomorrow,” he said, more to himself than to Elodia. “I will show her what the silverfruit truly is. What it does. What it has done to me.”

“A significant risk, revealing such secrets to an enemy’s agent.”

Vael’Zhur’s lips curled back from his teeth. “What does it matter now? Centuries, Elodia. Centuries of solitude and monstrosity. The curse is nearly absolute. Soon, nothing human will remain within me at all.”

“Unless...” The ghostly woman let the word hang in the air between them.

“Unless what?” he demanded, though he knew precisely what she implied.

“Unless the prophecy speaks truth. Unless the answer to your salvation walks these very halls.” Elodia’s form drifted closer, her spectral hand hovering near his massive shoulder. “You know the words as well as I. ‘When the beast devours the last of the man, only love freely given can restore what was lost.’”

“Fairytale,” Vael’Zhur scoffed, but the dismissal lacked conviction. “Who could love this?” He gestured to his monstrous form, to the antlers that scraped the ceiling, to the claws that destroyed everything they touched.

“Perhaps no one,” Elodia conceded. “Or perhaps someone who sees beyond appearance to the soul beneath.”

“If any soul remains to be seen.”

“You know it does. You felt it stir tonight, at the dinner table. When she challenged you. When she met your gaze without flinching.”

Vael’Zhur turned away from the window, pacing the length of his chamber like the caged predator he had become. The beast within him was restless tonight, but differently than usual. Not with bloodlust or rage, but with something altogether more dangerous.

Hope.

“She cannot be the one,” he muttered. “She comes as Aldaric’s tool, seeking the fruit’s power for his use.”

“Yet she refused to taste it herself,” Elodia reminded him. “Curious, for one so desperate to save her family.”

The contradiction had not escaped his notice. Nor had the way Ceryn’s scent had changed when he stood close to her—fear giving way to something warmer, more complex. He had not imagined that racing pulse, that flush upon her cheeks that spoke of more than simple terror.

“Even if—“ he began, then stopped himself. No. He would not entertain such foolish fantasies. “She is here to steal what Aldaric covets. Nothing more.”

“Then why keep her alive?” Elodia pressed. “Why dress for dinner? Why compliment her appearance? Why feel the stirring of emotions you thought long dead?”

Each question was a blow that landed with unerring accuracy. Vael’Zhur snarled, a sound more pain than threat.

“Because I am still as much a fool as I was when Sylaine first cursed me,” he admitted. “Because some part of me—some weakling remnant of humanity—still believes there might be an end to this curse. An escape from this half-life.”

There. The truth laid bare, pathetic as it was. After centuries of rage and resignation, of accepting his fate as the monster of legend, a single woman with defiant eyes had rekindled the most dangerous ember of all: desire for redemption.

“And if she is the key?” Elodia asked softly. “If, by some twist of fate or design, she is the means to your salvation?”

“Then the joke is crueler than I imagined,” Vael’Zhur replied bitterly. “For she would have to betray her own family to save me. Love freely given, Elodia. How free can love be when coercion shadows every choice?”

The spectral woman was silent for a long moment. “Perhaps that is the final test,” she said at last. “For both of you.”

Vael’Zhur moved to the massive bed he rarely used, sinking onto its edge with a creak of ancient wood. For the first time in years, exhaustion pulled at him, a human weakness he had almost forgotten.

“Tomorrow I will show her the orchard,” he said. “I will tell her of the curse, of the fruit’s true nature. I will reveal to her what Aldaric truly seeks.” His massive hands curled into fists on his knees. “And then I will see what choice she makes.”

“And if she chooses Aldaric? If she chooses her family over your salvation?”

Vael’Zhur closed his eyes, the weight of centuries pressing down upon him. “Then I will know, once and for all, that the curse cannot be broken. That the beast will consume what remains of the man. That this half-existence is all that awaits me until

the stars themselves burn out.”

“And her fate?”

A vision flashed in his mind—Ceryn’s throat beneath his claws, her life bleeding out on the orchard soil, joining the ones who had come before her. The beast within him growled in hungry anticipation, but the man... the man recoiled in horror.

“I don’t know,” he whispered, and it was perhaps the most human thing he had said in years. “I truly don’t know.”

Elodia’s form began to fade, her duty as companion and conscience fulfilled for the night. “Consider this, my lord,” she said as she dissipated into mist. “For the first time since the curse began, you spoke to another as a man, not a monster. For the first time, you desired something beyond revenge or blood or solitude.”

Her final words hung in the air after she had vanished completely: “Perhaps it is not the woman who needs to make a choice, but you.”

Alone in the moonlight, Vael’Zhur lifted a clawed hand before his face, studying it as if it belonged to a stranger. Beast’s paw, man’s fingers—caught forever between two natures, two existences.

Unless.

Unless Ceryn Vale, with her fierce eyes and unbroken spirit, could somehow see past the monster to the man trapped within. Unless she could offer what the prophecy required. Unless she could love what no sane person should.

Or unless she would be the one to damn him forever, to drive the final nail into the coffin of his humanity.

Tomorrow would bring the first steps toward an answer. Tomorrow, in the silver glow of the enchanted orchard, he would begin to learn which fate awaited him.

Salvation... or eternal damnation.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:18 am*

### Chapter Four

Dawn in the orchard arrived not with birdsong, but with silence so complete it felt like the world had paused to listen. Ceryn had returned to her room to find a welcoming fire crackling and the room freshly cleaned. The bed was turned down and the mattress so much more comfortable than the lumpy hay mattress she shared with her sister. And Maeva kicked like an ornery mule.

Though, she missed her sister, including bony knees and cold feet against her back deep in the night.

Ceryn didn't sleep much all night despite the heavenly bed, tossing and turning, the room illuminated by the low light of the fire that never seemed to run out of fuel. More of that magic the Beast talked about. She must have fallen asleep close to dawn because she awoke to a tray with a steaming cup of tea and porridge loaded with fresh fruit and nuts, that tasted nothing like anything she had ever had before. She examined it closely to ensure no silverfruit was mixed in, but it appeared to be regular berries.

She had barely dressed in the woolen trousers and top that hung outside the wardrobe when Elodia appeared and wordlessly escorted her to the silent orchard and the beast. Vael'Zhur. She needed to stop thinking of him as a mindless beast because he was so much more. He was not human, not man, but he was no slaving beast that mindlessly slaughtered all he met. He was too perceptive for that. He saw through her, through the lies she told to the truth beneath, and she had revealed far too much too soon. Instead of tossing her out, he kept her.

To what end?

She wandered the orchard aimlessly, trailing her hands over the trees, their bark, their leaves, and the heavy fruit. The trees stood in perfect rows, their bark a strange, warm bronze, their leaves dark as midnight silk. The fruit hung heavy on the branches, each one glowing faintly with the same eerie pulse Ceryn had felt in her chest since being confronted with it the previous day.

A heavy presence alerted her to Vael'Zhur and then he was beside her, his shadow falling over her. The fruit glowed brightly under her fingertips, almost blinding, as if it sensed the beast nearby.

He fell into step beside her, silent, his footfalls strangely quiet for someone so massive. No chains bound her wrists. No guards flanked them. Yet she knew this was no stroll—it was a test. Perhaps a seduction. Maybe both.

“The orchard reacts to intent,” he said finally, his voice low. “Touch a fruit in hunger, and it feeds. In greed, it withers. In violence, it poisons. It was not always so. Once, it grew from joy. From love.”

“Until the curse,” Ceryn said softly.

“Until betrayal,” he corrected her. “The roots remember blood, and pain. As do I.”

They stopped before one of the oldest trees—its trunk wider than a cottage, its fruit nearly silver-white.

“Have you always lived here?”

Vael'Zhur placed his clawed hand against the bark. The tree pulsed beneath his palm. “Yes, I lived here long before the curse, long before your village existed. I was not

always as you see me now,” he said, his tone taking on a dream-like quality, as if reliving a memory. “I was a scholar, a magister of the realm. I studied all types of magic and nature to uncover its secrets. I discovered the silverfruit and its properties, experimenting with it to discover the key to immortality.”

Ceryn’s eye’s widened. “You cursed yourself?”

He shook his head. “Nay, I refused to share the secret with another witch. Sylaine was my lover, one who I thought loved me, and I didn’t know that she desired power above all else. When I refused to share the secret, she cursed me to be bound to the orchard, only to be sustained by the silverfruit yet cursed by the rage that it also feeds.”

Ceryn inhaled sharply, the pain in his voice almost visceral, yet the story seemed unfinished, incomplete. “Can it be broken?”

“The curse? Maybe, but time grows short. Aldaric is the most recent in a line of men who are seduced by the power of the silverfruit, and are corrupted by it. I have endured many such seekers for its power and all have been defeated.”

His words were devastating. Aldaric specifically commanded her to find a way around the curse. Yet, the Beast had survived despite it. “How have you endured the curse without falling victim to it?”

“Who says I haven’t, little thief? There are bodies buried in this orchard, bodies that sustain the life of these trees, that prove the curse is real. I cannot leave the grounds of this castle without the rage taking over. If I leave, I become a mindless beast, given over to death and destruction. More than I already am. None would survive me.”

Her blood ran cold at the thought of him rampaging through her village. “What if someone took the fruit and left?”



He bared his teeth at her in a semblance of a smile. “They would also be fueled with such rage, that none could stop them. Only death and destruction would be in their wake until all lie dead.”

\* \* \*

Vael’Zhur watched the thief’s mind work over the curse and the information he’d shared, deliberately telling her of the mindless rage that consumed him and all who ate the fruit. Even now he felt the pull of the fruit, calling him, taunting him to eat, to give in to the beast and destroy the beauty standing in front of him. She, who walked into his lair so willingly, so trusting, without the terror that so many before her and been saturated with. They had stunk of fear and piss, the smell offensive to his nose.

Aldaric had chosen his champion well this time, a young woman who appealed to the male in him, unlike the warriors he had sent in the past. Warriors who battled their way in but all died the same, crying and pleading for their lives. None had had half the courage this young woman possessed. Though maybe none had had the same reason to live that she had.

If only Vael’Zhur was not bound to the orchard or he would seek the coward Aldaric and free her mother and sister. But if he left the grounds, the rage would take over and he would be as likely to kill her family as he would destroy Aldaric. He could not risk harming innocents, though in his experience there are few guiltless people in their world. Everyone wanted something. It was only a matter of time before Aldaric moved openly against him. He’d seen it before.

He had not lied when he spoke of the curse, how the orchard lay on bloody ground. Ceryn didn’t know how bloody that ground was. He prayed she never discovered the truth. It would both damn him and destroy her.

As she walked away from him, among the trees in the orchard that he was bound to

protect and serve, he watched the trees sway in the breeze, the branches subtly shift towards her, reaching for her. Anyone could be mistaken for the movement as something natural, but he knew the truth. The orchard was already reshaping to include Ceryn, to accept her as one of them.

Elodia materialized next to him, faded in the sunlight. “She walks as if she belongs here.”

He growled as a branch dipped low enough to brush Ceryn’s shoulder. “This place will destroy her.”

“As it did you?” Elodia asked quietly.

He snarled but didn’t reply. Elodia continued. “She could be your salvation.”

“I could be her doom.”

“Or you could save each other.”

He couldn’t afford to let hope bloom in his chest. The disappointment would be too devastating.

### Chapter Five

Ceryn spent most of the day exploring the castle. As Elodia predicted, it was never the same place twice. She swore she had traveled certain hallways but the end result was often different, leading her to new rooms and places to discover. She didn't know how far she'd walked but when the sun was high in the sky, somehow she found herself at the great hall with a meal of bread, meat and cheese on the table, and fresh cool water to drink. On cue, her stomach rumbled, as if she hadn't realized how hungry she'd been, and she fell on the meal, devouring it in due course. Yet Vael'Zhur didn't make an appearance, though she sensed him near, as if stalking her every step.

Instead of feeling stalked or threatened, she felt safe, protected. Which made sense, given the story he'd shared. He was a protector—of the castle, of the orchard. And he'd been cursed for it.

Something about his story didn't add up. Where did Aldaric fit in? How had he found out about the silverfruit? When would someone tell her the entire truth?

Sunlight streamed in the stained glass windows casting colored shadows on the stone floor. It was too nice a day to stay inside and she wasn't learning enough about the curse to waste more time inside. The curse was tied to the orchard so she needed to return there and see if anything more was hidden among the trees. Besides, she felt an irresistible pull to the place, demanding her presence. She was tired of fighting it.

She walked among the trees but something drew her to the back corner. At the far end of the orchard, in the shadowed back, tucked away in an overgrown area of the

orchard was a stone structure encased in vines and branches until it was almost completely obscured.

The air felt different here—thicker, older, heavier. The silverfruit trees grew gnarled and close together, their roots weaving through cracked stone and buried walls long reclaimed by moss and time. Vines clung to everything, tangling around broken columns and sunken arches, swallowing ruins the castle wanted forgotten.

At the base of a ruined wall half-swallowed by a copper-barked tree, she caught a glint of something smooth beneath the ivy. Her fingers reached for it instinctively, brushing back layers of leaves and brittle vines. The greenery resisted her, almost sentient in its grasp, but she yanked harder until the growth tore away. She brushed away the vines and tendrils to the ancient stone underneath, exposing the worn words and images carved into the gray stone. She traced the letters, mouthing them as she went.

Beneath it, carved into stone so weathered it bled dust at her touch, was a name.

At least, the remains of one.

AURE—

The rest had been gouged away, violently, as though something with claws had tried to erase it from the world. Deep rents scarred the stone, slicing through the letters, fracturing them like a scream.

But a name was there.

Barely.

“Auren,” she whispered aloud.

The word lingered in the air like a breath held too long.

A chill passed through her, followed by a heavy silence. Not the peaceful kind. The kind that presses against your back. Watches you.

“That name,” came a voice behind her, low and rough, “is not meant to be spoken. Ever.”

Ceryn turned slowly, heart in her throat.

He stood a few feet away, massive and unmoving, shadowed by the tree canopy. The light caught the gold in his fur, but there was no warmth in him now. His eyes were molten—anger and memory barely leashed.

She took a step back, the stone cold and rough, unyielding, against her back. “I didn’t mean to?—”

“But you did.” He stepped forward, claws curling slightly at his sides. He towered over her, menacing and dangerous, yet she was still not afraid. “You said it. My name.”

She swallowed hard. “Then it’s true.”

A long silence. The wind rustled, carrying the scent of fruit and something older—ash, perhaps. Grief.

“It was mine,” he said finally, voice softer. “Once. Auren.”

He looked past her, to the broken carving in the wall, and something in his shoulders shifted. Not anger. Not threat.

Something close to sorrow.

“Sylaine carved it there,” he said. “She marked this place when we thought it sacred. When it was still ours.”

Ceryn said nothing, afraid that if she moved, he might stop speaking.

“She loved me once,” he continued, eyes far away. “Or said she did. And I... I believed her. I gave her knowledge, truth, magic. I showed her the orchard when it was still young—before the fruit learned to bleed silver.”

His voice caught. Just barely.

“But it wasn’t enough. She wanted power. She wanted the fruit. I told her it was dangerous, that it could not be harvested without cost.”

He stepped past her, crouching near the stone. His clawed fingers hovered over the name, but didn’t touch it. He cleared the dirt and vines from the area, freeing the space to the light once again.

“So she cursed me.”

Ceryn stiffened. “With the name?”

He nodded once. “Names have power,” he said, turning to her. “There is an old magic—the First Tongue. It doesn’t just cast spells. It remakes truth.”

He looked at her then, and there was no fury in his face—just exhaustion.

“She spoke a name not meant for me. A name of fire and ruin. Vael’Zhur. And in that moment, the orchard changed. So did I. Sylaine spoke mine with hatred and rewrote

my soul. You—” he hesitated, “—spoke it without knowing, and it did not burn me. She didn’t turn me into a beast. She named me one. And I became it.”

Ceryn dropped to her knees beside him, the words sinking in like cold water. “So when I said your real name...”

“It didn’t burn,” he said, voice barely a whisper. “That’s how I knew. You didn’t use it as a weapon.”

He looked down at the carving, eyes unreadable. “She did.”

They sat in silence for a long moment. Somewhere, a silverfruit dropped from a branch, hitting the earth with a soft thump.

“Why gouge it out?” she asked finally, her voice quiet.

His claws flexed. “Because it hurt to see it. The memory, the word.”

Another pause.

“Because I didn’t think anyone would ever speak it again. I couldn’t bear to hear it spoken aloud. There are none who know the name anymore. Save one.”

She met his gaze. “I didn’t know. But I felt it.”

He shifted closer. “You speak lies well. But your body tells me truth. You felt it. As I did.”

Her heart thundered. “And what did you feel?”

“That I was not alone,” he murmured. “That someone saw not the beast, but the

man.” He reached out, claws hovering beside her cheek. “That I could want again.”

Ceryn’s breath caught. “You shouldn’t trust me.”

“I don’t,” he said. “But I can’t ignore this.” His hand dropped to his side. “And neither can you.”

The air between them crackled. Her fingers brushed the stone beside his. The trees bent closer as if responding to her very presence, the fruit on the end of the branch glowing bright. She turned to him, eyes wide.

“I didn’t mean to?—”

“You didn’t have to mean it,” he said. “This place knows desire.”

She rocked back on her heels. “What does that mean for me?”

“That you are no longer just a thief.” His voice deepened. “You are becoming something else. Something the orchard recognizes.”

Her pulse raced. “And what do you want from me?”

He leaned in. “The truth.”

Their lips nearly touched. But just before contact, he pulled away. “You’re not ready,” he said. “And neither am I.”

“Auren,” she said again, carefully. Intentionally.

His breath hitched.



“Do not say it unless you mean it.”

She met his gaze. “I wouldn’t.”

He got to his feet and disappeared into the orchard, leaving her alone among the trees that whispered her name and pulsed with knowledge she did not yet understand.

Ceryn exhaled, trembling. She had come for answers. But in the orchard’s quiet glow, she had found something far more dangerous.

Hope.

And something perilously close to longing.

\* \* \*

V ael’Zhur stared at the dancing flames in the grate of his library, the mug of wine in his grasp all but forgotten as memories flooded his mind. Flashes of the past, of betrayals, of the long years of his life, haunted him, his regrets and misdeeds reminding him of who he was now and how his past was lost to him forever.

Dinner was many hours past. He had avoided Ceryn and the meal, even as he had demanded she not hide in her room for meals. Instead he was the coward who avoided her since the intimacy of their time in the orchard that afternoon, unable to face her, unwilling to answer what was sure to be painful questions about his past. The moon had risen, casting shadows outside. It was almost full now. Ceryn was sure to be asleep by now. He could leave the sanctuary of his study and answer the inextricable pull towards her, checking on her from the secret passages used by the once-living servants in the castle, now overgrown with webs and dust.

“So this is where you hide. Your castle was determined to keep me away from you

tonight.”

Her voice came from the door behind him and he sighed heavily. “I’m not fit company tonight. Go back to your rooms and leave me in peace.”

She walked around until she stood in front of him, blocking the fire from his view. “After what I went through to find you? I think not. Now, pour me a glass of that wine and stop being an ass.”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “Most people are afraid of me, you know.”

She reached for the decanter and poured a generous portion into the second glass that appeared on the tray. Even his castle obeyed her wishes, ignoring his desire for privacy.

“Then you’ll have to remove me yourself. I dare you.” She eyed him, a hint of challenge in her eyes, and deliberately took a sip of her wine.

He grunted and resumed staring at the place where the fire should be, only he was left looking at her deep green velvet skirts with gold embroidery. She had changed from the more casual trousers and top she’d worn earlier into something richer, more formal—deep green velvet with gold embroidery that caught the firelight. The castle had provided it, no doubt. His home had always had a meddlesome will of its own. After a moment, she settled in the chair next to him. He tensed, waiting for her to speak, but she said nothing.

The silence stretched between them, not uncomfortable as it should have been, but oddly peaceful. The crackling fire and occasional clink of her glass against the side table were the only sounds. Her scent—forest and female and something indefinably her—teased his senses, more intoxicating than the wine he’d barely touched.

“You showed me the orchard today,” she said finally, her voice soft in the stillness. “You revealed secrets I suspect few living souls have witnessed.”

Vael’Zhur’s claws tightened around his goblet. The afternoon spent walking among the silverfruit trees, explaining their nature, watching her face as she understood the magnitude of what Aldaric truly sought had left him feeling exposed in ways violence never could.

“Knowledge is a double-edged blade,” he replied, still not looking at her. “What you choose to do with it will determine whether it cuts you or serves you.”

“And which would you prefer?” she asked, leaning forward slightly in her chair.

This time he did look at her, finding her eyes intent upon his face. Only curiosity and a hint of heat were reflected in her gaze. No fear, no revulsion, no pity. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of Ceryn. It had been far too long since a woman had looked at him with anything other than disgust.

“What I prefer ceased to matter centuries ago,” he said.

“I don’t believe that.” She set her glass down and regarded him steadily. “If your preferences truly didn’t matter, I would be dead. Or locked in a dungeon rather than drinking your wine in your private sanctuary.”

Vael’Zhur’s lips twitched despite himself. “Perhaps I simply find you more entertaining alive than dead.”

“Is that all I am to you? Entertainment?”

The directness of her question caught him off guard. In his long centuries, few had dared speak to him so boldly, even before the curse, when he had been merely a man.

Powerful, feared, but a man nonetheless.

“You are...” he began, then paused, searching for words that would not reveal too much. “A curiosity. A puzzle I have not yet solved.”

“Liar,” she said, but there was no malice in the accusation, only a knowing smile that made an answering heat stir in his chest.

He growled softly. “Careful, little thief. You tread dangerous ground.”

“I’ve been on dangerous ground since the moment I scaled your orchard wall.” She rose from her chair, wine glass in hand, and began to wander the library, trailing fingertips over leather-bound spines. “These books—have you read them all?”

Vael’Zhur watched her move, the graceful sway of her skirts, the elegant line of her neck as she tilted her head to read titles. “Most. Time is something I have had in abundance.”

“Lonely occupation, reading.”

“Preferable to mindless bloodshed.”

She glanced back at him, eyebrow raised. “Is that what you did before? Mindless bloodshed?”

“Would it surprise you?” He set his goblet down and rose, his massive form casting long shadows as he approached her. “Would it shock you to learn that even before the curse, I was not a good man, Ceryn Vale?”

She stood her ground as he loomed over her, her face upturned to his. “Few truly good men achieve power in this world. And you were powerful once, weren’t you?”

Before Sylaine's betrayal."

Vael'Zhur's breath caught. How much had she pieced together from their conversations, from the orchard, from the very nature of his curse?

"You presume much," he said quietly.

"Am I wrong?"

He could smell the wine on her breath, see the pulse fluttering at her throat. She was not fearless—he could scent the adrenaline coursing through her veins—but neither was she cowed.

"No," he admitted. "I was powerful once. A magister, first of my kind. Consulted by kings and lords of all kingdoms. I sought knowledge and power. Was greedy for it." His voice dropped lower. "And yes, there was bloodshed. I killed for my knowledge. The things men do to secure their legacies."

"And now?" she asked. "What legacy remains for the beast in the forgotten castle?"

The question struck deeper than she could know. Legacy. The very thing he had sacrificed everything to secure, now dust in the wind of centuries.

"None," he said, turning away from her. "The man who sought a legacy died long ago. Only the beast remains."

She moved suddenly, stepping in front of him, forcing him to halt or risk colliding with her. "Then why save me?" Her voice was urgent, almost angry. "Why show me the orchard? Why share your wine and your knowledge if nothing human remains within you?"

Vael'Zhur stared down at her, at this fragile mortal woman who dared challenge him, who looked past his monstrous exterior to demand answers from the man buried within. Who had haunted his thoughts since the moment he'd caught her scent in the forest.

"Because you—" He stopped, uncertain how to finish that sentence without revealing too much.

"Because I what?" she pressed, moving closer until her skirts brushed against his legs. "What am I to you, Vael'Zhur? Truly?"

His name on her lips undid him. How long since anyone had spoken it? How long since it had been uttered with anything but fear or disgust?

"You are an impossibility," he growled, his control fraying. "A woman who should flee but stands her ground. Who should tremble but challenges. Who should despise the monster but seeks the man."

"Perhaps I see what others do not," she whispered, close enough now that he could feel the heat of her body.

"And what do you see, Ceryn Vale?" His voice was raw, vulnerable in a way he had not allowed himself to be in centuries.

Her hand lifted, hesitated, then came to rest against his chest where a heart still beat beneath fur and flesh. "I see someone who has suffered. Who has lost. Who has been alone far too long." Her fingers curled into the fabric of his shirt. "I see someone who remembers what it was to be human, even as he denies it."

Something broke within Vael'Zhur—a dam holding back emotions he had buried for lifetimes. Without conscious thought, his clawed hand rose to cover hers, engulfing it

in his massive grasp.

“If you truly saw me,” he said hoarsely, “you would run. You would flee this castle and never look back.”

“I’ve never been very good at doing what I should,” she replied, the hint of a smile playing at her lips. “Why start now?”

The air between them seemed to compress, heavy with tension and possibility. Her scent changed subtly, desire threading through fear and defiance. She swayed toward him, or perhaps he toward her—he could not tell which. All he knew was that the distance between them was shrinking, her face tilted up to his, her eyes flickering from his eyes to his mouth and back again.

“This is madness,” he whispered, even as his hand moved of its own accord to cup her cheek, mindful of his claws against her delicate skin.

“Probably,” she agreed, leaning into his touch, her eyes half-closing. “Does it matter?”

It should. It should matter that she was Aldaric’s pawn, sent to steal the fruit’s power. It should matter that his curse made any connection between them impossible. It should matter that he was beast more than man, that his touch could tear her apart without meaning to.

But in that moment, with her warmth against him, her pulse quickening under his palm, nothing mattered but the ache of centuries of solitude and the promise of connection in her eyes.

“Ceryn,” he breathed, her name a prayer and a warning both.

She answered by rising on her toes, closing the final distance between them, and pressing her lips to his.

The shock of it froze him for an instant—the softness of her mouth against his, the scent of her overwhelming his senses, the impossible intimacy of the contact. Then instinct took over, and he was kissing her back, his massive form bending to accommodate her height, his hands moving to her waist to steady her.

The kiss was gentle at first, tentative—the beast afraid to harm, the woman afraid to be consumed. But as she wound her arms around his neck, as she pressed closer with a soft sound in her throat, gentleness gave way to hunger. Centuries of isolation, of touch denied, of humanity suppressed, all channeled into the desperate meeting of lips and breath.

Vael'Zhur lifted her effortlessly, one arm around her waist, the other tangling in her hair. She gasped against his mouth, then kissed him deeper, her fingers threading through the thick fur at his neck, finding the man beneath the beast as surely as if she could see through his cursed form to the soul within.

Time lost meaning. There was only her softness against him, her heartbeat thundering in time with his own, her taste—wine and woman and life itself—filling his senses until he was drunk on it. He backed her against a bookshelf, his massive body caging her smaller one, growling low in his throat when she nipped at his lower lip, bold even now.

The beast within him stirred, hungry for more than kisses, demanding possession, claiming, marking. And with a clarity that cut through the haze of desire like a blade, Vael'Zhur realized the danger of what they were doing.

He broke away abruptly, setting her down and stepping back, his chest heaving with ragged breaths. Ceryn stood dazed against the bookshelf, her lips swollen from his



kisses, her eyes wide with confusion at the sudden withdrawal.

“Go,” he rasped, fists clenching at his sides to keep from reaching for her again.  
“Now.”

“Vael’Zhur—“

“GO!” he roared, the sound rattling the windows, his control slipping with every moment she remained within reach. “Before I forget myself entirely. Before the beast takes what the man knows it can never have.”

Hurt flashed across her face, quickly masked by a cool dignity that made him ache to bridge the distance he had just created. Without another word, she gathered her skirts and fled the library, the door slamming behind her with a finality that echoed in the sudden silence.

Vael’Zhur stood motionless, listening to her retreating footsteps, the rapid beat of her heart growing fainter as she put distance between them. When he could no longer hear her, he sank to his knees in the center of the room, head bowed, clawed hands pressed against the floor.

“What have I done?” he whispered to the empty air.

No answer came, save the quiet crackling of the fire and the relentless ticking of a clock marking time in a life that had long since lost its meaning.

Until now. Until her.

Ceryn Vale, who had kissed the beast and, for one impossible moment, found the man within.

### Chapter Six

Ceryn didn't see Vael'Zhur for the next two days and the stress was weighing on her. Her deadline was approaching and she worried for her sister and mother in the care of the warlord, but she was no closer to figuring out how to save them. She now knew the silverfruit was the source of Vael'Zhur's immortality and power, but it came at a terrible price. She sensed the warlord knew this already and had yet to find a way around the curse, though, knowing his ruthless ways, she didn't think mindless rage was necessarily a detraction. He just needed to harness it and direct it in ways he could focus and control it for his own gain. He never minded killing or terrorizing for his own gain.

It was a small price to pay to never die, she supposed.

But that wasn't what occupied her thoughts as she paced the floor of her chamber for the hundredth time. It was the memory of Vael'Zhur's mouth on hers, the impossible gentleness of his massive hands as they'd held her, the raw need in his eyes before he'd pushed her away.

The kiss had changed everything. It had made real what she'd been denying to herself—her growing fascination with the cursed lord of this forgotten castle. With the man trapped inside the beast.

Ceryn stopped at the window, pressing her palms against the cool glass. Somewhere in this labyrinthine structure, Vael'Zhur was hiding from her. Avoiding her. After that searing moment of connection in the library, he had vanished as completely as if the castle itself had swallowed him whole.

Perhaps it had. The more time she spent within these walls, the more convinced she became that the building was as alive as its master—watching, listening, perhaps even guiding.

She turned from the window, decision made. “I need to find him,” she said aloud, not certain if she spoke to herself or to the sentient walls around her. “Take me to him.”

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, slowly, the candlelight in her chamber dimmed, save for a single flame near the door that burned brighter than before. An invitation. A guide.

Ceryn followed.

The castle led her through corridors she had never seen before, down staircases that seemed to appear from nowhere, past chambers closed off for centuries. The lone candle flame remained always just ahead, appearing in wall sconces as she approached, extinguishing behind her as she passed.

She lost track of time and direction, surrendering to the castle’s guidance, trusting it in a way she could not fully explain. Finally, the path ended at a heavy wooden door bound with iron. Steam leaked from beneath it, carrying a scent of herbs and minerals.

The bathing chamber. The castle had led her to Vael’Zhur at his most vulnerable.

Ceryn hesitated, her hand on the latch. She could still turn back, return to her room, continue the fragile dance of avoidance they had maintained these past two days. It would be the sensible choice. The safe choice.

But safety had never been what drew her into the forbidden forest, what compelled her to hunt where others feared to tread. And it was not what she sought now.

She pushed open the door. Steam rolled over the threshold like mist from another world, warm and heady and laced with something earthy and spiced.

And then she saw him.

The chamber was vast, cavernous. The stone walls dripped with condensation, veins of gold flickering faintly beneath polished black marble. A massive pool took up most of the room—more hot spring than bath, fed by pipes that sang with heat and magic. The water shimmered silver in the low light, glowing faintly where it lapped against the edge.

And in the center of it?—

He reclined, chest-deep, golden fur slicked down to reveal the massive shape of him. His arms rested along the rim of the pool, muscles coiled but loose, his head tilted back as if the heat had drawn the beast into rare stillness. His mane—wet and darkened—hung in tangled strands down his back and shoulders.

Ceryn should have turned around.

But she couldn't.

The water clung to his skin like a lover's hands. With his fur soaked, she could see the lines of muscle beneath—the way his chest rose and fell with slow, controlled breaths. His torso was broad, shoulders impossibly wide, and where the water lapped lower, she caught the barest glimpse of his abdomen, ridged and carved like marble, marked faintly by old scars and shifting patterns of silverfruit magic that glowed just beneath the surface.

He was monstrous.

And he was beautiful.

Vael'Zhur turned his head then, slow and deliberate. His golden eyes locked onto hers through the mist, and the stillness shattered.

"Enjoying the view, little thief?" he asked, his voice a low growl that rumbled through her bones.

Heat flooded her face, but she didn't look away. Couldn't.

"I didn't know you were here," she said, forcing her voice to sound steadier than she felt. Even though she had been looking for him, this was the last place she had expected to find him.

"And yet, here you are. Lingerin'." He shifted slightly, the water rippling outward in waves. "You didn't run."

"Would you have chased me?" she asked, meaning it as a jab.

But his expression darkened, and his voice dropped lower.

"Only if I wanted to catch you."

The words curled around her like steam—slow, deliberate, dangerous.

She took a step closer, drawn in despite herself. The water lapped at the stone edge just inches from her boots. Her eyes trailed over him again, over the strength in his arms, the way his fingers curled slightly against the slick marble, claws retracted but ever-present.

"You bathe like a man," she said softly.

“I remember what it was to be one.”

“You don’t look like one.”

“Is that fear in your voice, Ceryn Vale?”

Her breath caught.

“No,” she whispered. “Not fear.”

Something else entirely.

The air between them crackled. The flickering light gilded his wet fur in firelight, and for a moment, all she could hear was the lap of water and the steady pulse in her throat. He leaned forward, rising just enough that his chest emerged above the surface—bare, slick, powerful. Scars mapped his ribs. Silverfruit veins shimmered faintly across his collarbones.

“Then come closer,” he murmured. “And say my name.”

Her heart thundered at the longing in his voice. Not Vael’Zhur. The name that mattered.

“Auren.”

He growled low—not with threat, but with something far more primitive. The sound pulled at something deep in her belly.

“That name,” he said, “will always sound different from your lips.”

She didn’t know who moved first—her, or him—but suddenly the distance between

them didn't feel so vast. He stood slowly, the water sluicing down his form in rivulets, revealing more, but still shrouded in mist and magic. She couldn't see everything. But she saw enough.

And she wanted more.

"How did you find this place?" His voice echoed off the stone walls, deeper than usual in the enclosed space.

"The castle showed me the way," Ceryn replied honestly, remaining close to the edge of the pool. "I think it's tired of our avoidance."

A rumbling sound emerged from his chest—not quite a laugh, not quite a growl. "Meddlesome pile of stones." But there was something like affection in the words. "Leave me, Ceryn. This is not a place for you."

Instead, she took a step closer. "You've been avoiding me."

"With good reason." He turned his body partially away, as if to hide himself from her gaze. "What happened in the library was a mistake. One that cannot be repeated."

"Was it?" Another step closer to the pool's edge. "It didn't feel like a mistake to me."

Vael'Zhur's hands curled into fists beneath the water's surface. "You don't understand what you're doing. What you're risking."

"Then help me understand." She was at the edge of the pool now, looking down at him, at this strange being who was neither fully beast nor fully man. "Because all I know is that you've been in my thoughts since the moment I saw you in the forest. That I came here to steal from you but find myself unable to betray you. That I kissed you, and for the first time in years, I felt?—"

“Stop.” The word was harsh, pained. “Whatever you felt was an illusion. A trick of the curse, perhaps, or your own desperation to save your family.”

“Is that what you tell yourself?” Ceryn knelt at the pool’s edge, bringing her face level with his. “That what’s growing between us isn’t real?”

His amber eyes met hers, filled with an agony that went beyond the physical. “It cannot be real. I am not a man, Ceryn. I am a monster wearing the remnants of a man’s form, a beast whose very nature is to destroy what he touches.”

“Yet you haven’t destroyed me.” She reached out slowly, giving him time to withdraw, and brushed her fingertips against his wet cheek. “You could have killed me in the orchard. You could have forced the fruit upon me. You could have locked me away. Instead, you showed me your world. You shared your wine. You kissed me as if I were precious.”

His eyes closed at her touch, his massive frame trembling. “I am trying,” he said, each word seemingly torn from him, “to protect you. From Aldaric. From the fruit’s curse. From myself.”

“And who protects you?” she whispered. “Who soothes the man beneath the beast? Who touches you not with fear but with desire?”

His eyes opened, naked longing replacing the anguish. “Ceryn,” he breathed, her name a warning and a plea.

She had a choice in that moment. She could retreat, maintain the fragile boundary he sought to establish between them. She could remember her mission, her family held hostage, her duty to the warlord who held their lives in his cruel hands.

Or she could follow the pull that had drawn her to this creature from the first, the



inexplicable connection that defied logic and caution.

Ceryn had never chose the safer path.

She rose, her hands moving to the laces of her gown. Vael'Zhur's eyes widened as he realized her intent, but he seemed frozen, unable to stop her, unable to look away as she loosened the bodice, as the heavy fabric slipped from her shoulders to pool at her feet. The chemise followed, then her undergarments, until she stood naked before him, illuminated by candlelight, vulnerable yet unafraid.

"What are you doing?" he asked hoarsely.

"Choosing," she said simply. Then she stepped into the pool.

The water lapped at her skin like warm breath, sinuous and alive, wrapping her in silken heat as she waded deeper into the bath's embrace. Behind the steam, Vael'Zhur stood motionless, but not unaffected—his golden eyes tracked her every movement with a hunger barely leashed. He backed away when she undressed, as if giving her space. But now, he watched her approach like a man standing at the edge of a precipice, torn between reverence and ruin. Disbelief darkened his gaze, yes—but beneath it pulsed something far more dangerous. Desire. Worship. And the ache of a creature who had denied himself the touch of another for far too long.

"You should leave," he said, but the conviction had fled his voice. "You should run from this place. From me."

"I'm tired of running." She moved closer, the water now at her waist. "Tired of fear. Tired of doing what others demand of me."

When she reached him, she placed her hands on his chest—part fur, part skin, all heated male. His heartbeat thundered beneath her palm, as rapid and desperate as her

own. “Tonight,” she whispered, tilting her face up to his, “I choose you.”

For a single suspended heartbeat, Vael’Zhur didn’t move. He stared at her with eyes lit from within—torn between shadow and light, man and monster, restraint and ruin.

Then he broke.

With a growl that rolled up from his chest like distant thunder, he surged forward, sweeping her into his arms with feral grace. His mouth crashed down on hers—not gentle, not polite, but desperate, a kiss born of starvation and surrender. His tongue thrust past her lips, demanding and claiming, tasting her like he had waited lifetimes for this moment.

This wasn’t a kiss. It was a possession.

She gasped into him, her body arching into the solid wall of his chest. His fur was slick with steam, coarse in places, silken in others, clinging to her like velvet soaked in heat. Her hands scrambled over his shoulders, threading through the thick mane of his hair, holding him there as if the world might shatter should they part.

“Do you know,” he rasped between kisses, his voice hoarse with restraint, “what you’re doing? What this means?”

“No,” she breathed, lips brushing his jaw. “But I know what I want. And I know who I want.”

He made a sound of pure masculine torment as she sucked lightly beneath his ear, his claws curling into her hips.

“And what is it you want, little thief?” His voice was wrecked, a whisper of broken control. “What do you crave from this beast?”

She drew back just enough to meet his gaze, her storm-gray eyes dark with certainty. “The man beneath the monster. The one who touches me with reverence. Who looks at me like I’m salvation.”

A low snarl of longing escaped him. He cradled her as if she were made of starlight and bone, carrying her through the warm water to a submerged ledge. There, he sank into the shallows and guided her astride his lap, their bare skin sliding together, her thighs spreading around the solid width of his.

Between them, his cock stood hard and heavy, thick and glistening, pressed hot against her core. She felt the thrum of his pulse there, matching her own, her slick heat coating him as she rocked against the length of him with a shuddering breath.

“If we do this,” he growled, his voice trembling with effort, “there’s no undoing it. My magic... the orchard’s magic... it marks. It binds.”

Her hands framed his face, thumbs stroking the sharp line of his cheekbones. “Then bind me,” she whispered. “Make me yours.”

That final thread of restraint snapped. He surged up to meet her kiss, his claws skimming along her spine as his mouth devoured hers. One massive hand cupped her breast, his thumb circling the peak until she gasped, arching into his touch. His other hand slid down, between her thighs, fingers parting her folds with exquisite care, teasing her slick entrance with knowing pressure, his claws retracted to not hurt her, but only cause the most exquisite pleasure.

“You’re already mine,” he murmured, voice husky with awe. “So wet. So ready. Gods, I’ve dreamt of this.”

Her hips bucked at the slow stroke of his fingers inside her, thick and deliberate, curling to find that spot that made her cry out. His thumb circled her clit in lazy,

maddening spirals, never quite enough.

“Please,” she begged, her voice ragged, her body trembling. “I need?—”

“I know.” His voice was reverent now. “I know.”

He guided himself to her entrance, the blunt crown of his cock pressing against her heat. She gripped his shoulders, breathless, then slowly—inch by inch—she sank down onto him, impaling herself on his thick length.

He was huge, stretching her impossibly wide, the pressure almost too much—until it wasn’t. Until her body adjusted, accommodated, welcomed him like he belonged with her.

“Oh—gods—” she sobbed, burying her face in his neck.

Vael’Zhur held himself utterly still, trembling. “Ceryn...” he choked, her name like a sacred vow. “You... you feel like heaven.”

When she began to move, slow at first, rising and falling, the world narrowed to the friction between them, the exquisite ache of fullness, the way his hands gripped her hips, guiding her, grounding her, the feel of his claws pricking her skin. She rode him with growing abandon, water lapping around them, her breasts bouncing with each thrust, his mouth descending to claim them in turn—licking, sucking, biting just hard enough to make her whimper.

Their rhythm grew wild, primal. The sound of wet skin meeting skin echoed off the stone walls, joined by gasps, moans, the chant of her name on his lips.

“Let go,” he panted, his claws raking lightly down her back, just enough to sting. “Shatter for me, Ceryn. Come on my cock. Let me feel you fall.”

His filthy words undid her.

She came with a cry, head thrown back, her body clenching around him in pulsing waves that dragged him under with her. With a roar that echoed like a creature unchained, Vael'Zhur thrust deep and spilled into her, his heat flooding her, his arms wrapped so tight she could barely breathe—but she didn't want to.

She only wanted this.

They collapsed together in the water, still joined, bodies trembling with aftershocks. She rested her forehead to his, her hands cradling his wild, beautiful face.

“What have we done?” he asked, wonder and terror dancing in his voice.

Ceryn brushed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. “We've begun something neither of us can run from.”

His arms tightened. “Then I will never let you go.”

She smiled, closing her eyes, letting herself believe in that impossible promise—just for tonight.

\* \* \*

Vael'Zhur lay in the massive bed, Ceryn's warmth nestled against his side, her breathing soft and even in the quiet of his chambers. Her hand idly stroked over the fur on his chest, and she made no move to leave, seeming content to remain with him as long as he would let her. The canopy above them cast intricate shadows across her skin, pale and luminous in the dying firelight. He traced patterns on her shoulder with one careful claw, marveling at the contrast—his monstrous hand against her perfect flesh, unmarred despite his touch.

Impossible.

Everything about this moment was impossible. That she had sought him out in his sanctuary. That she had entered the water with such fearless grace. That she had welcomed him into her body with passion rather than fear. That she now lay in his arms as if she belonged there, as if the beast were worthy of such tenderness.

His cursed heart ached with emotions he had thought long dead, buried beneath centuries of rage and solitude. Hope. Affection. Something dangerously close to love.

Dangerous because hope was the cruelest of deceptions. Because this fragile peace between them could not last. Because Aldaric's shadow still loomed over them both, and the curse that bound him to this place remained unbroken.

"So," Ceryn's voice broke the silence, startling him from his reverie, "when will you tell me the truth about the curse?"

Vael'Zhur's body tensed, his hand stilling on her shoulder. "I have told you everything. The silverfruit?"

"Not everything," she interrupted, propping her chin on his chest to look up at him. Her eyes reflected the embers' glow, bright and perceptive. "I understand the silverfruit gives long life and yet also induces rage and violence. But I don't understand the curse and how you became bound here." She paused, her gaze steady on his face. "I know you can leave the grounds. You found me in the forest the day before I came here."

Cold spread through his chest, replacing the warmth of moments before. There it was—the question he had dreaded, the truth he had buried for centuries beneath layers of myth and half-explanation.

“Some truths are better left undisturbed,” he said quietly.

Ceryn pushed herself up on one elbow, her dark hair falling around her shoulders like a curtain of shadow. “After what we’ve shared, you still hide yourself from me? Do you still not trust me?”

Trust. Such a simple word for such a profound concept. When had he last trusted anyone? Before the curse. Before the betrayal. Before his heart had hardened into something as impenetrable as the castle walls.

Yet this woman had somehow breached those defenses without siege engines or armies. Had slipped past his guards with nothing but courage and unexpected tenderness.

Vael’Zhur exhaled slowly, the sound rumbling in his chest. “It is not a pleasant tale.”

“Few true stories are,” she replied, settling back against his side, her hand coming to rest over his heart as if to anchor him. “Tell me. Please.”

The please undid him. How long since anyone had asked rather than demanded? How long since anyone had cared enough to want to understand?

“Very well.” He stared up at the canopy, finding it easier than meeting her gaze as he excavated memories long buried. “The story begins in a kingdom whose name has been forgotten by all but me, in an age when magic flowed more freely through the world.”

He could feel her attention, sharp and focused, her body utterly still against his.

“I was not always... this.” A gesture encompassed his massive, cursed form. “I was once the First Magister of Evrahen, advisor to King Aldric the Fourth, master of

arcane knowledge and keeper of the royal libraries.”

“A scholar,” Ceryn murmured, surprise coloring her voice.

“Among other things.” A humorless smile curved his lips. “I was also prideful, ambitious, convinced of my own superiority. The perfect vessel for tragedy.”

He shifted slightly, gathering her closer as if her warmth could ward off the chill of remembrance.

“In those days, Evrahen was threatened by the armies of Nordmar to the east. Vast hordes of warriors, stronger and more numerous than our own forces. Defeat seemed inevitable. The king was desperate for any advantage, any weapon that might turn the tide.”

Vael’Zhur closed his eyes, the images of that time rising unbidden—the war council, the king’s haggard face, the maps marked with the enemy’s inexorable advance.

“There were rumors of a place of power within our borders. An orchard grown on an ancient battlefield, its soil nourished by the blood of fallen heroes, its fruit said to grant unnatural strength to those who consumed it. The king dispatched his most trusted advisors to investigate—myself and a witch named Sylaine.”

The name felt strange on his tongue after so many centuries unspoken. Sylaine. A friend. A lover. A betrayer.

“We journeyed here, to this very castle, then home to an ancient lord who claimed guardianship over the orchard. Lord Kalthir welcomed us with courtesy but warned us gravely against taking the fruit. ‘That which grows from death brings death in turn,’ he told us. But we were young, arrogant, certain that our magic could control whatever powers the orchard contained.”



Vael'Zhur's claws tightened unconsciously, and he forced himself to relax when Ceryn made a small sound of discomfort.

"Forgive me," he murmured, gentling his hold. "The memories are... vivid."

"Go on," she encouraged, her fingers tracing soothing circles on his chest.

"We studied the orchard for weeks. The trees, unlike any known species. The strange silver veins in the soil. The fruit itself, pulsing with power we could sense but not fully comprehend. Sylaine was fascinated, obsessed. She spoke of harnessing the fruit's energy to create an army of unstoppable warriors. I urged caution, insisted we understand the power fully before attempting to use it."

A bitter laugh escaped him. "Such wisdom, from one who would soon prove himself the greatest of fools."

He felt Ceryn's questioning gaze but continued without meeting it.

"One night, while Sylaine slept, I entered the orchard alone. I told myself it was for research, for the greater good of our kingdom. But in truth, it was hubris. I believed myself strong enough, wise enough, to taste the fruit's power without consequence."

Vael'Zhur's voice dropped lower, edged with self-loathing. "I took a single bite. Just one taste, to understand what we were dealing with. The effect was... immediate. Strength flooded my body, my senses sharpened, the world itself seemed to slow around me. I changed form, into a beast. Strong, powerful, immense. But with it came rage—boundless, mindless rage that burned through rational thought like wildfire. I nearly killed Lord Kalthir when he found me, barely restraining the beast that had awakened within."

He felt Ceryn shudder slightly against him but she did not pull away.

“When the madness subsided and I regained my humanity, I understood the terrible truth. The fruit did grant power, yes—power beyond imagining. But at the cost of one’s humanity. The more one consumed, the stronger the effect. An army fed on silverfruit would be unstoppable, yes, but also uncontrollable. They would be monsters, not soldiers. Weapons that would turn on friend and foe alike.”

“But Sylaine disagreed,” Ceryn guessed quietly.

“Yes.” Vael’Zhur’s eyes opened, fixing on a point in the distance only he could see. “When I told her of my experience, of my conclusion that the orchard must never be used, she was furious. She believed her magic could control the fruit’s side effects, could harness the rage and direct it toward our enemies. She spoke of power beyond imagining, of reshaping the very order of the world.”

His voice hardened. “I refused. I told her we would report to the king that the orchard was too dangerous to use, that we must find another way to defend the kingdom. She called me a coward, a traitor. Said I feared power that I was too weak to control.”

The memory of their argument, so distant yet so vivid, tightened his throat. “Perhaps she was right. But I had seen what lay down that path, and I could not follow it. So I used my magic to ban her from the orchard, to prevent her from taking the fruit without my consent.”

“And she cursed you in return,” Ceryn said softly, the pieces falling into place.

“She did.” Vael’Zhur’s massive body tensed with the recollection. “Not immediately. She left, returned to court, whispered in the king’s ear that I had betrayed them, kept power for myself that could save the kingdom. When soldiers came to arrest me, I fled back here, to Lord Kalthir, to the orchard I had sworn to protect.”

He exhaled heavily. “Sylaine followed, not with soldiers but with something far more

dangerous—knowledge. She had delved into magics forbidden even to the First Magister, had learned words in the First Tongue, the language of creation itself. And with those words, she bound me to this place.”

His voice dropped to a whisper. “Since you love this cursed ground more than you love your own people, your own flesh,” she said, “then bound to it you shall remain. Beast by day, man by night, guardian of that which you refuse to share, until love freely given breaks the chains you have forged.”

Silence fell between them, broken only by the soft crackle of the dying fire. Vael’Zhur could feel Ceryn processing his words, fitting this new understanding into her perception of him.

“But it’s not so simple anymore, is it?” she finally asked. “You’re not man by night and beast by day. The transformation has progressed.”

“Yes.” His hand resumed its gentle stroking of her shoulder. “Over the centuries, the beast has gained ground. At first, I could pass as human after sunset, could walk among ordinary people if I chose. But as time passed, as Sylaine and Kalthir and the kingdom itself faded to dust, the curse deepened. Now, beast and man exist simultaneously, with the beast ever-growing stronger.”

“And the silverfruit?”

“Sustains me. Binds me. With each passing year, I require more to maintain what humanity remains. Yet each consumption strengthens the beast within.” His lips twisted. “A particularly elegant torment, don’t you think? To be forced to feed the very monster I sought to prevent unleashing upon the world.”

Ceryn shifted, rising to look directly into his face. “Did you ever try to burn it? To destroy the orchard completely?”

A harsh laugh escaped him. “Many times, in the early years. Fire. Poison. Magic. Nothing works. The trees regrow overnight, stronger than before. The fruit returns, more potent with each attempt at destruction.” His eyes met hers, centuries of futility reflected in their amber depths. “Now I protect it with everything I have, bound to it for all eternity. Better a single monster guarding the source than an army of them unleashed upon the world.”

Understanding dawned in her expression. “That’s why you kill those who trespass. Why you’ve been so feared. You’re not just protecting your territory—you’re preventing others from taking the fruit.”

“Yes.” His massive hand came up to cup her cheek. “And why I cannot give you what you came for, Ceryn. Not even to save your sister and mother. The consequences would be too dire.”

He expected argument, anger perhaps. After all, her family’s lives hung in the balance. But instead, she simply nodded, her eyes sad but clear.

“I know,” she said softly, surprising him. “I’ve seen enough to understand what the silverfruit truly is. What it does.” She settled back against his side, her arm draping across his chest. “But that doesn’t solve our problem. Aldaric still has my family. His men still wait for my return.”

Vael’Zhur tightened his arm around her, protective and possessive. “We’ll have to find another way,” he said slowly. “Aldaric seeks the fruit’s power, believing it will grant him strength without consequence. But knowledge can be a weapon as surely as any blade.”

Ceryn lifted her head, curiosity bright in her eyes. “What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know yet. But perhaps it’s time Aldaric learned the true cost of what he

seeks.” Vael’Zhur’s voice was grim. “And that the Beast he has long dismissed as mere legend is very real indeed.”

She didn’t respond immediately, just nestled closer into his side, her warmth a balm against the chill of ancient memories and bitter truths. He could feel her mind working, weighing options, considering paths forward. Even in this, she amazed him—her strength, her adaptability, her refusal to surrender to despair.

“Dawn approaches,” he murmured, noting the faint lightening at the edges of the heavy curtains. “You should rest while you can.”

“And you?” she asked, her voice already heavy with impending sleep.

“I will watch over you,” he promised, pressing his lips to her forehead. “For as long as I can.”

For as long as fate would allow. For as long as this impossible reprieve from solitude might last. For as long as the woman in his arms continued to see past the beast to the man he had once been—and perhaps, against all hope, might be again.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:18 am*

### Chapter Seven

Ceryn moved along the outer edge of the castle walls, the chill of the stone at her back doing little to calm the storm rising in her chest. Her fingers trailed along the moss-covered stone as if grounding herself in something solid—anything that might anchor her against the tide of doubt and dread. Vael’Zhur’s words haunted her. The truth of the curse. The silverfruit’s legacy. Its seductive promise of strength laced with uncontrollable rage.

She had known—somewhere deep in her bones—that handing that power to Aldaric was a mistake. But hearing how it had unmade Vael’Zhur, how it carved out the soul and left only fury in its place... that had changed everything. Aldaric was already cruel, already hollowed out by ambition. What would he become with the fruit’s magic burning through him? What kind of monster would she be unleashing?

Not just her mother and sister would suffer. Everyone would.

Her steps slowed as a flicker of motion caught her eye—just beyond the treeline where the dense forest licked against the castle’s outer boundary. A figure stood there, nearly indistinguishable from shadow. Tall. Broad. Silent.

Her breath froze.

Rorik.

The warlord’s second-in-command.

Panic surged hot in her veins. Was he here to drag her back? To put an end to her betrayal before it truly began?

She hesitated, but her feet carried her forward, drawn toward the inevitable. Toward the man who had the power to destroy her—either with steel or with words. He turned and stepped deeper into the woods. She followed.

The forest swallowed them in a hush of branches and frost-laced leaves. No birdsong. No wind. Just the thud of her heartbeat echoing in her ears.

“Do you have the fruit?” His voice was low, sharp-edged.

She shook her head. “Not yet. There are... complications.”

His mouth twisted into something like disdain. “How hard is it to pick a piece of fruit and put it in a sack?”

“It’s not just fruit,” she snapped. “Did you know what it does to people? It burns through them—induces rage, violence. It twists them into something other.”

She watched his face. A flicker in his gaze. The briefest pause.

He knew.

Or at least suspected.

“The warlord believes he can leash the madness,” he said at last, eyes shifting to the dark branches overhead. “Magic will contain it.”

Realization hit her like a blow to the chest. Her breath left her in a harsh gasp.

“He’s going to give it to his soldiers. It’s not just for himself.” Her voice cracked. “He wants an army. An army of cursed men.”

Rorik’s expression didn’t change, but something in his jaw tightened.

“How can you follow him?” she demanded. “How can you let him do that to the men who trust you?”

His eyes snapped to hers, hard and unyielding. “What the warlord does with the fruit is none of your concern. You should worry more for your family.” He took a step closer, voice softening into something cold and cruel. “The dungeons are damp. Moldy. Your sister coughs all night.”

Her knees threatened to give out. “Do they live?” she forced out, voice tight.

“For now,” he said with a shrug, as if discussing livestock.

Then he looked over his shoulder—twice—checking the shadows. Slowly, he reached into his satchel and drew out a small dagger.

He handed it to her.

Bone-handled. Old. Etched with something delicate, almost sacred.

She turned it over in her hands. Her breath caught.

A name was carved into the grip.

Auren.

“What is this?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.



“If you stab the Beast with it,” he said, gaze hard, “it will weaken him. Take the fruit. Take as much as you can carry. Dawn. We’ll be waiting.”

Ceryn stared down at the dagger, heart hammering against her ribs. The name burned against her skin like a brand.

He leaned in, his voice dropping to a whisper. “You do realize, don’t you? Your life—and your sister’s—is already forfeit. Whether it’s the warlord or the Beast, death is coming.”

She looked up at him, her throat tight with grief and fury. “Then why give me this? Why pretend there’s still a choice?”

Rorik’s face was unreadable. “Because even faithless men want to be proven wrong.”

She narrowed her eyes. “How can you follow him?”

He exhaled through his nose, a bitter sound. “What choice do any of us have?” Then he stepped back, melting into the forest like mist, his final words carried on the cold wind. “Be there at dawn. Or bury your sister.”

Ceryn stood alone beneath the skeletal trees, the dagger clutched tight in her trembling hands, tracing the name carved into its hilt.

Auren.

Not Vael’Zhur.

The man beneath the monster.

And she would have to decide—would she damn him to save her family?

Or find a way to save them all?

\* \* \*

From the highest tower window, Vael'Zhur watched her.

She moved like a shadow through the edge of the trees, her slender figure half-hidden by branches gilded with the first touch of morning light. Sunlight caught her raven hair, igniting the strands with burnished copper, and his chest ached at the sight of her—so human, so mortal, so heartbreakingly not his. She had claimed she needed air, time to clear her thoughts. The words had seemed plausible enough.

But he had known. Something in her voice had been too smooth, too careful.

Now he saw the truth.

She paused near the edge of his lands, cast one last furtive glance over her shoulder, then disappeared behind a thick oak. Minutes passed—long enough for dread to sink its claws into his chest—before a second figure emerged deeper within the woods. Cloaked and hooded. But the wind betrayed him, tugging at his mantle just enough to reveal a familiar crest.

Aldaric's.

A low growl tore from Vael'Zhur's throat. His claws scored deep furrows into the ancient stone, splintering the windowsill. A red haze blurred the edges of his vision, his body vibrating with tension. The beast within him surged forward, howling for blood, demanding vengeance. Betrayal, it hissed. Betrayal again.

But was it?

They had shared heat. Shared stories. Shared something dangerously close to love—but never vows. Never oaths. He had known her mission, known that time hunted her heels. And still, he had let himself hope. Let himself feel.

A mistake.

Her family remained Aldaric's hostages. Her time grew short. What choice did she truly have? It was folly to assume she would choose a beast like him over her family, despite what they had shared. What did he truly have to offer her? A crumbling castle, a monstrous beast prone to fits of homicidal rage, and ghostly servants? Not much of a life, really.

When she returned, nearly an hour later, her shoulders were bowed beneath an invisible weight. Her eyes were red-rimmed. She sat beside the stream, trailing her fingers in the water, unmoving. Not hiding. Not smiling. Not free.

Good, he thought bitterly. If she was going to betray him, let it at least cost her something.

He turned from the window, shadows spilling around his massive form. He would not confront her yet. The beast raged, yes—but something more dangerous lurked behind that rage. Grief.

He waited.

He listened to her steps through the halls, light and familiar, until they faded into silence behind the door of her chamber. He felt her presence in the castle like a storm front pressing against his skin, and it wasn't until evening that her footsteps came again—down the corridor, toward him.

When she appeared in the library, her scent reached him first—pine and woman,

sorrow and fear, but also something new. Regret. The tension in her shoulders. The tremble beneath her stillness.

“You were gone a long time,” he said without turning from the fire. His voice was smooth, calm—ice over boiling water.

“I needed air,” she said, too quickly. “Time to think.”

He turned. She wore one of the green gowns the castle had provided, silk clinging to every curve, highlighting the strength and softness of her body. Her hair was braided over one shoulder, loose tendrils curling around her face. She looked like a forest goddess draped in moss and starlight. But her eyes avoided his.

“And did your thinking yield conclusions?” He approached slowly, watching the way her spine stiffened, how her fingers tightened in her skirts.

“Only that time grows short.” Her voice was low. “Aldaric expects my return in two days.”

Truth. But not the whole of it.

He circled her, silent but consuming, until he stood behind her, close enough for her to feel the heat of his body at her back.

“And will you return?” he murmured, his voice brushing her neck like a kiss and a threat all at once.

Her hands twisted tighter in the fabric. “What choice do I have? My family?—”

“Must be protected,” he finished. “At any cost.”

Her eyes lifted to his, shimmering now. “Vael’Zhur, I?—”

He pressed a single clawed finger to her lips. “No more words, Ceryn Vale. Not tonight.”

She flinched, but didn’t look away. Didn’t protest. Instead, her hand rose, trembled slightly, and cupped his cheek. Her fingers slid into his fur, the touch reverent, aching.

“Then let there be this,” she whispered.

Her kiss was raw, bruising, wet with unshed tears and fierce need. He growled against her mouth, his control unraveling by the second. She was heat and heartbreak and urgency all at once, her body arching into him, her mouth opening beneath his with a moan that cut straight through his fury.

His hands found her waist, dragging her up against him. She gasped as the thick ridge of his arousal pressed hard between them, already demanding, already starved. She wrapped her legs around his hips as he lifted her easily, carrying her through the fire-lit corridors until they reached his chamber.

They shed their clothes in silence. Her gown slipped to the floor, baring skin he had worshipped with reverence and would now claim with desperation. Her nipples peaked in the cool air, her thighs slick with arousal, already glistening as she reached to stroke him—long, slow, deliberate. His cock throbbed in her hand, a thick, veined beast of its own, and her lips parted in awe even as she guided him to the bed.

He laid her down gently, but there was nothing gentle in the hunger that followed. His mouth found her breasts, suckling one while his hand rolled the other, drawing cries from her throat as his fangs grazed her skin. She arched into him, needy and fearless, legs falling open in invitation.

He moved lower, spreading her with clawed fingers to bare the swollen folds of her sex, then dragged his tongue through her, groaning as she gasped and writhed beneath him. He suckled her clit slowly, torturously, until her hips bucked. Then faster. Her hands clenched in his hair, her thighs trembled around his head, and she came with a strangled cry, already unraveling before he even took her.

“Again,” he growled, kissing his way up her belly. “I want to feel you on my cock.”

She shuddered as he guided himself to her entrance and drove in with a single, deep thrust. She cried out, her hands clawing down his back as her body stretched to take him. Full. Too full. And yet, perfect.

He fucked her hard, relentless, claiming every inch of her with each powerful stroke. The bed creaked beneath them. Her breasts bounced with the rhythm, her nails raked down his furred chest, and he leaned down to take her lips again, swallowing her moans as he thrust deeper, faster.

But there was no laughter tonight. No whispered praise. No shy confessions.

Only the slap of flesh, the tangle of limbs, and the grief behind every thrust.

A single tear slid from the corner of her eye. He caught it with his thumb.

“Look at me,” he said, his pace slowing. “If this is the last time, give me the truth of your eyes.”

She met his gaze—startled, guilty, and then something softer. Something like love, if they’d had time.

“How did you?—”

“I know betrayal,” he murmured, thrusting again, deeper, the motion a dark promise. “I’ve tasted it across centuries. I feel its weight now even in your kiss.”

Her breath caught. “It’s not—” she began.

“Isn’t it?” His voice darkened, hips snapping into hers. “You met his man. You carry his dagger. You bring me your body like an offering for forgiveness.”

She didn’t argue. She only pulled him closer, wrapped her legs tighter, whispered a wordless plea.

He moved harder now, faster, driving her toward the edge again. “Tell me what you’ve done. What you plan to do. Tell me if you’ll go to him.”

But she was breaking already—trembling beneath him, her breath coming in sobs, her pussy clenching around him in pulsing waves.

“I—” she gasped.

He silenced her with his mouth, kissing her as she shattered around him, her cry muffled against his lips.

Then came the words, soft and broken, as he thrust deep one final time, spilling into her with a roar that left the windows rattling.

“Forgive me. Please.”

He buried his face in her throat as the last wave of pleasure wracked his body, his arms trembling, breath ragged. The beast inside him howled in grief and joy, torn by the sweetness of having her and the agony of losing her.

Later, they lay tangled together in silence. Her breath slowed. Her lashes fluttered against his skin.

Vael'Zhur pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"I love you, Ceryn Vale," he whispered, knowing she was already slipping into sleep. "And if betrayal is the price of loving you, I pay it willingly."

Outside, storm clouds gathered. The moon disappeared behind them.

But for now, he held her. For now, she was his.

And gods help them both... that would have to be enough.



### Chapter Eight

Ceryn woke alone in Vael'Zhur's bed, the first light of dawn still only a blush on the horizon. The sheets beside her were already cool. The emptiness where his massive body had lain felt too deliberate to be chance. She blinked against the heaviness in her eyes, the ache in her limbs. She had meant to slip away in the dark, to vanish without goodbye. But grief had wrapped around her like a shroud, pulling her into sleep before she had the chance.

He had known. Somehow, he had known. And he had spared her the final cruelty of watching her leave.

A neatly folded set of clothes waited for her on the chair—a pair of soft woolen trousers, a linen tunic, and a dark wool cloak she recognized from the cold mornings in the tower. A quiet, wordless offering. Her throat tightened.

She dressed quickly, the fabric brushing over skin still tender from the night before, from the memory of his hands, his mouth, his voice tangled with hers in the dark. Each movement felt weighted, like dragging herself through water. But she forced herself into motion, her heart already pounding with what must be done.

She crept through the corridor in silence, her feet finding familiar patterns in the worn stones. The scent of the orchard tugged at her even now—sweet and wild, steeped in magic and memory. But first, she needed something to carry the fruit. She turned toward the kitchens, hoping to find a sack or satchel, anything that might serve.

She paused at the threshold.

On the worn wooden table at the center of the room sat a large burlap sack, filled and waiting. Beside it, gleaming dully in the firelight, lay the bone-handled dagger.

And beside both, silent and still, stood Vael'Zhur.

He didn't speak at first. His golden eyes met hers, unreadable in their depth, his face carved from something colder than stone. Yet sorrow pooled beneath the surface, like stormwater behind cracked glass.

Her blood chilled.

"What is this?" she whispered.

"Your payment to Aldaric," he said quietly. "Do not return for more. I will not give it to you again. But this should secure your mother and sister... if he honors his word."

Her breath caught. "And if he doesn't?"

"You already know he will not."

The truth hung in the space between them like a blade. Heavy. Inevitable.

"I have to try," she said. Her voice trembled, but not with fear—with desperation. "I have to do something. You could come with me. Help me free them."

He shook his head slowly, the movement filled with sorrow and finality. "I cannot. You know this. I am bound to the orchard, to the curse. If I leave, I risk losing myself. I risk becoming what the warlord wants me to be—a beast without thought or will. I could kill them, Ceryn. I could kill you."

She clenched her fists, frustration burning behind her eyes. "You've resisted it this

long. You've fought it. I've seen you. I believe in you. I love you. Isn't that what breaks the curse? Isn't love supposed to be enough?"

His expression crumpled—just slightly. A crack in the armor. "Love is rarely enough, little thief," he murmured. "It was a dream. A beautiful one. But still a dream."

He gestured to the sack. "Go. Free your family. Live the life you fought for. And forget me. Forget this place. Be happy."

Her heart twisted painfully. "And you? What happens to you?"

He looked away, his jaw tight. "That no longer matters."

"It matters to me."

At that, he looked back. His eyes were impossibly soft. Wounded. "Then stay."

She stood frozen in the doorway, her hands trembling at her sides. Her heart screamed yes. But duty... love... they warred inside her.

"I can't," she whispered.

He nodded once, a sharp, broken motion. He turned to the rising sun bleeding through the treetops. "Then go," he said, his voice low and rough. "Go before I change my mind."

She lingered a moment longer, caught in the doorway like a soul between worlds. Then she moved, crossing the room and lifting the sack to her shoulder. The dagger remained where it lay.

"I will come back," she said quietly, her voice trembling. "Once I free them, I will

return.”

He turned then, slowly—too slowly—and the look on his face stole the breath from her lungs.

Fury. Pain. Despair.

“Never return,” he snarled, his voice no longer man, no longer lover. “If you come back, I will kill you. And all who come with you.”

She stumbled backward, the force of his rage like a blow. Her heart thudded painfully against her ribs, tears rising fast. She turned and ran, the sack heavy across her shoulder, the weight of her choices even heavier.

Behind her, his roar echoed through the stone halls, chasing her down the corridor like a warning—and a farewell.

She didn’t stop.

She couldn’t stop.

Tears blinded her, but she kept running, as if distance might dull the sound of her heart breaking.

\* \* \*

V ael’Zhur watched her leave from the turret, his massive hands braced against the cold stone as the distant figure of Ceryn moved toward the trees. Already, madness curled around the edges of his mind like fog creeping over a battlefield—insidious, relentless. The clarity she’d given him was slipping. Her scent still lingered on his skin, but her warmth was already fading from his bed. From his life.

A small, aching part of him had hoped—believed—she might turn. That she would stop, spin on her heel, run back to him. That she would choose him over duty, over blood. Over her family.

But he had asked too much.

She had to know, didn't she? That they were already lost to her. Aldaric lacked all sense of mercy. There was no honor in him, no humanity. He would hold Ceryn's family hostage only long enough to make her suffer. Long enough to let her believe she had a chance. Then he would kill them, precisely when the blade would cut deepest.

And still, Vael'Zhur had let her go.

"You let her go," Elodia said softly behind him, her voice as calm and ancient as the wind brushing the spires. She stood to his right, ever watchful, ever unshaken.

"I did," he replied, though the words scraped his throat raw.

"With silverfruit." No accusation in her tone. Just truth, spoken plainly. "Was it a test?"

"No." He exhaled slowly. "Though it really was."

Below, Ceryn hesitated at the edge of the forest. She glanced back, and his heart stalled. For a breathless moment, he thought—hoped—she would turn. That some sliver of feeling would pull her back to him.

But then she slipped beneath the trees, swallowed by shadow. And he exhaled, the sound hollow in his chest.

That was it, then. She had chosen. And, like everyone else in his long and cursed life, she had not chosen him.

Why would she? He had nothing to offer her but ruin. A crumbling castle bound to blood and magic, haunted by the dead. A tattered beast, cursed and breaking, with a name she had nearly saved but could never truly restore. He couldn't even blame her. He wouldn't want her to stay—not really. She deserved more. Light. Life. Freedom.

He turned from the window, shoulders heavy with the weight of heartbreak and failure. She had been his last hope. The final chance to unravel the name that shackled him. To remember the man he once was. The name Auren had meant something when she spoke it. Now, it would fade into history with the rest of him.

The curse had already begun to reclaim him, inch by inch. Soon, even his memories would belong to the beast. The line between man and monster blurred more with every breath. His thoughts splintered. His control slipped.

He looked at Elodia.

She stood with a few of the castle's other ghostly attendants—those who had lingered long after their deaths, bound to duty, to him. Their faces shimmered in the half-light, more emotion in their spectral eyes than many of the living had ever shown him.

He straightened, summoning what dignity he had left.

“I release you all from your servitude,” he said, his voice echoing through the tower, low and resonant. “You are free. Be at peace, my friends. You have served me well. I thank you for your honorable service.”

The words caught in his throat, and still he pushed through them.

These spirits had chosen loyalty over rest, had remained to help him when their lord passed the orchard into his hands. Now, there was nothing left to protect. Nothing but a battlefield waiting to bloom with blood.

Elodia's eyes did not leave his. "What of you, my lord?"

The question hung in the air like frost.

He gave a bitter smile. "I will be along soon enough."

The madness was coiling tighter now. His thoughts became a thrum of rage. His vision narrowed, darkening at the edges until the world reduced to movement, threat, blood. It took everything in him not to tear apart the stone beneath his claws. Soon, Aldaric would come. And then... he would no longer need to resist.

The curse welcomed him like an old friend. It would have its due.

He could feel it now—hunger blooming in his chest, heat rolling under his skin, muscle and bone shifting beneath the weight of ancient magic. The orchard pulsed in the distance, echoing the throb of his dying humanity. The beast no longer slumbered. It was awake. It was waiting.

His jaw clenched. His chest expanded with a final breath.

He threw back his head and let loose a roar that shook the stones beneath his feet, splitting the silence like a blade through flesh. The sound of it echoed through the castle and into the trees beyond, into the sky, into the roots of the orchard that had claimed him.

The transformation tore through him. Claws extended. Fangs bared. The fire in his blood consumed the last fragments of Auren.

The curse had won.

The end was nigh.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:18 am*

### Chapter Nine

A roar split the silence of the forest.

It tore through the trees like thunder, a sound soaked in pain and fury, and Ceryn froze—one foot lifted, breath locked in her throat. The ground seemed to vibrate with it, the cry of something not merely wounded, but lost. Not Auren.

Not anymore.

Vael'Zhur had risen.

The part of her that still clung to hope crumbled beneath the weight of that sound. The man she loved was gone, drowned beneath the curse and rage, and what remained would kill anything it touched. Even her.

She turned away from the castle.

From him.

She had a plan to finish. An end she'd chosen, whether she was ready or not.

A ripple of frost brushed the air beside her, and then—Elodia appeared, her form coalescing from light and fog like a memory given shape.

“You betrayed him,” the ghost said calmly.

Not accusatory. Just fact.

Ceryn swallowed, voice rasping. “We always knew I would.”

Elodia studied her, head tilted like a curious owl. Then, with a wave of her hand, a dagger materialized in the space between them, hovering midair, gleaming bone handle carved in runes too old for memory.

“You forgot this,” she said.

Ceryn stepped back instinctively. “That was meant for Vael’Zhur. I can’t use it now—not on him.”

Elodia’s smile was faint. “Then perhaps you should see the whole truth.”

The dagger floated toward her, slowly rotating.

With reluctant fingers, Ceryn caught the hilt.

Her breath caught.

Carved into the opposite side of the handle, barely visible in the dim light, was another name.

Aladar.

A sharp chill raced up her spine. “What... what does this mean?”

Elodia’s hands folded like a scholar delivering a lesson. “You may only use the blade once. No wound will miss its mark. One strike—fatal. But it will only kill the one whose name is carved into its hilt.”

“So who is Aladar?” she asked, heart thudding.

Elodia only stepped back, beginning to fade again. “You must discover that for yourself.”

“Is it Auren? Aldaric? Someone else?” Her voice shook now.

Elodia’s reply was solemn, gentle, damning.

“You must decide who your true enemy is, Ceryn. Who will you save?”

Then she vanished, her final words lingering like smoke.

“Who will you choose?”

Ceryn stood alone beneath the trees, the dawn pale and sickly at the horizon, the dagger cold in her hand. Somewhere far off, the roaring continued—closer now.

She spun toward the sound of footsteps and voices. Leaves rustled. Shadows emerged through the mist.

Aldaric.

Clad in full armor that shimmered like oil-slicked steel, he stepped into the clearing like he owned the world. His presence devoured the space—tall, imposing, radiating cruel confidence. Beside him, Rorik loomed, impassive, unreadable beneath his helm.

“Do you have what I want?” Aldaric’s voice was sharp, cold, the calm before a killing blow.

Ceryn’s fingers closed around the dagger, and she forced herself to slip it into her

waistband, covering it with her cloak.

“I brought it,” she said, lifting the satchel over her shoulder but not offering it. “Not until I see my mother and sister.”

Aldaric’s smile was thin and hungry. “You think you’re in a position to negotiate?”

He took a step forward, eyes gleaming. “I’m dressed for battle, girl. Do you know why?”

“Why?” she whispered.

“Because I don’t need you anymore.” He gestured, and two soldiers flanked her. One gripped her arm like iron. The other seized the satchel and handed it to the warlord.

Aldaric peered inside but barely glanced at the contents.

“You couldn’t break the curse,” he said flatly. “You found no cure. No true path forward.”

Ceryn said nothing. Her silence was its own truth.

“I also asked for a supply of the fruit,” he continued, holding the bag as though it were beneath him. “And as I suspected, it can only grow there. In that cursed orchard. This”—he sneered—“is a handful. Not a harvest.”

He turned to face the distant castle, where smoke now curled above the treetops.

“I will take it myself. My army surrounds the grounds as we speak. The beast—your beast—is enraged beyond reason. Mindless. Vulnerable. You’ve served your purpose well.”

Her chest tightened. “So this was all a trap.”

“Of course,” he said, grinning. “Never enter a bargain if you don’t already know the ending.”

“You said they’d be freed—my family.”

His eyes turned to ice. “You failed me.”

His hand struck her across the face, so hard that stars exploded behind her eyes. Only the soldier’s grip kept her upright. Before she could speak, another roar—deeper, louder, furious—shook the air.

It came from the direction of the castle.

Auren had heard.

Aldaric chuckled darkly. “How fitting. The monster still thinks you’re his salvation.”

“You’ll never survive him,” Ceryn spat, blood on her lip. “He will rip you apart.”

“I’ll never need to fight him. My soldiers will burn that place to ash. And if he comes for me...” He leaned in close, his voice a hiss. “I’ll bury you first.”

“Coward,” she hissed.

He smirked. “I’m a king in waiting.”

Then he nodded at Rorik. “Take her. Dispose of the mother and girl. Let the forest have them.”

The words shattered something in her. She lunged, struggling against her captors.

“You promised! I did everything you asked!”

He walked away, armor gleaming in the morning light.

“Curse you, Aldaric!” she screamed after him. “May your blood soak the orchard! May the fruit grow from your rot!”

He paused once, turning back just long enough to deliver his final cruelty.

“No, girl. It will be your blood feeding that soil. Yours... and theirs.”

Then he vanished into the forest, striding toward the castle.

Toward the Beast.

Toward the end.

\* \* \*

R orik wasted no time.

He led Ceryn through the fog-thick woods, boots crunching over damp leaves, until the trees gave way to a clearing shrouded in mist and silence. A half-collapsed barn stood hunched in the corner, a makeshift holding cell guarded by two stone-faced soldiers. He opened the door with a grunt and motioned her inside.

Ceryn’s breath hitched.

Her sister and mother were huddled in the straw-strewn corner, thin, filthy, and

trembling with exhaustion. Maeva looked smaller than she remembered—sunken-cheeked, her skin pale as milk. Her cough, wet and raw, echoed in the stone like a death knell.

But they were alive.

“Ceryn!” Maeva flung herself into her sister’s arms, sobbing, voice rasping from overuse and sickness.

“Oh gods, you’re here—you're really here?—”

Saraid followed, her embrace tighter than Ceryn had ever known. The three of them collapsed together, tears spilling as desperate, tangled words tumbled between sobs.

“I thought you were dead?—”

“They said you’d failed?—”

“He told us we’d be next?—”

They clung together, grief and relief knotting in their throats, the taste of survival still too bitter to feel like victory.

Rorik stood watch near the door, silent and still.

After a long moment, he cleared his throat. “I am ordered to bring you all to the front lines.”

Ceryn pulled away from her mother, studying Rorik through the haze of tears. But her eyes were sharp now. Knowing.

“He’ll kill us there,” she said quietly. “In front of Vael’Zhur. He wants the beast to see it. To finish breaking him.”

Maeva whimpered, and Saraïd gathered her close, whispering useless comforts.

Rorik’s jaw tightened. “No. Not kill you. He wants the beast to do it. Blood spilled in grief... it will complete the descent into madness.”

“You’ve seen what he becomes,” Ceryn said. “Aldaric wants to unleash that—to destroy him, or worse, become him.”

A flicker of pain crossed Rorik’s face. He looked toward Saraïd—just for a moment—and Ceryn saw something raw in his eyes.

“How does he even know Vael’Zhur?” she pressed.

“He doesn’t,” Rorik said. “Not truly. He’s pieced together half-truths. His mother was a witch of the old blood—her line traces back to Sylaine, the one who cursed the beast. She filled his head with dreams of legacy, of power. He’s been searching for decades.”

Ceryn’s voice turned sharp. “He thinks the orchard is a gift. It’s a curse, Rorik. He’ll feed it to his men—to you—and it will twist you all into monsters.”

Rorik’s expression hardened. “I don’t have the luxury of choice. My life is bound to his will, whether I like it or not.”

He stepped back, expression grim. “Say your goodbyes. Time is short.”

He moved to the soldiers, murmuring low orders to give them a moment of privacy, though the illusion was thin and fraying.



Ceryn's mind spun. The dagger was still tucked against her side, pressed close beneath her waistband. She could feel the handle through the fabric, the familiar ridges of Auren's name etched into one side.

But the other side...

"Ouch, Ceryn!" Maeva yelped as she leaned in again. "What do you have in your trousers? Is it sharp?"

Ceryn's heart slammed against her ribs. Her hand flew to the weapon. No one had searched her. She still had it. She turned the hilt in her palm.

The name. Not Auren. The other.

"Who is Aladar?" she whispered aloud.

The name wasn't meant for anyone's ears. But Rorik froze. Slowly, he turned. The blood drained from his face.

"Where did you hear that name?"

Ceryn straightened. "It's carved on the other side of the dagger's hilt."

"Say it again," he hissed, dragging her away from the others with shocking force. His voice dropped to a near growl. "Say that name aloud again and you'll sign your own death sentence."

"Why?" she demanded. "It's just a name."

Rorik looked over his shoulder, then leaned close, voice like broken stone.

“Because that is Aldaric’s true name.”

The air fled her lungs.

“His true name?” she echoed, stunned.

Rorik nodded, slow and bleak. “The name he was born with. The one he buried so no one could ever use it against him.”

The dagger. The enchantment. The binding power of names. And now... she knew it.

“Can you get me to him?” she asked, voice shaking with realization. “Protect my mother and sister. I think I can end this.”

He stared at her like a man torn in two.

“I’ve tried,” he said. “Gods know I’ve tried to stop him. There’s no way out.”

She tightened her grip on the dagger. “There might be. But I need to get close. I need to be at the front.”

A long silence.

Then Rorik sighed—bone-deep and soul-worn.

“The beast or the warlord. Either could kill you. But I’ll get you there.” His gaze flicked to Saraïd, to Maeva. “And I’ll guard them with my life.”

Ceryn nodded once, fierce and full of purpose.

“Then it’s time.”

### Chapter Ten

Vael'Zhur lifted his head from the wreckage, muscles quaking, breath sawing ragged through fanged teeth.

The castle was in ruins. His castle. Stone shattered, tapestries burned, windows gone to shards and smoke. The great hall that once echoed with forgotten music now reeked of blood, ash, and sorrow. His claws were slick with it. His fur singed. His body howled with the wounds of a rage he could no longer contain.

He had tried—gods, he had tried—to keep the beast chained. But the moment Ceryn disappeared, the moment he felt her betrayal echo through the orchard like a snapped string?—

He became ruin.

Marble crumbled beneath his feet. Ghosts had scattered. Even Elodia had vanished, her magic unable to soothe him. He had hunted through corridors like a storm given flesh, flung invaders from the ramparts, crushed men with his bare hands. Screams had faded. Silence had followed.

And still, the rage burned.

But now—through the red haze, something new pierced him.

Horns.

Shouts.

The pound of boots and spear shafts against the earth.

The ground trembled with their coming.

An army.

He rose to his full, monstrous height atop the parapet, smoke coiling around him, golden fur streaked with blood and soot. His eyes blazed as he looked down.

And saw him.

Aldaric. The architect of all this ruin. The coward. The leech. The man who used Ceryn to infiltrate what centuries of force and deceit had never broken.

Fucking bastard.

So this was the endgame. Weaken the beast with grief. Blind him with heartbreak. Then strike with steel.

Let them come. Let them all come. They would die like the rest.

He stepped forward on the ruined stone ledge, wind clawing at his mane. His roar split the sky—a sound of ancient wrath, wild and unbound. Below, men stumbled, some breaking rank. Even from this distance, he saw the whites of their eyes, smelled the stink of their terror.

But Aldaric stood at the rear, untouched. Commanding. Watching.

Of course. He never led. Only followed. Always from the shadows.

“Coward,” Vael’Zhur growled, voice booming across the clearing.

His claws dug into the crumbling stone.

“If you want the orchard, come claim it. If you want the fruit, face me alone. You want to be me?” His voice dropped to a snarl. “Then fight me. Unless you fear what you’ll become.”

Aldaric’s lips curled into a smirk. And then, to Vael’Zhur’s surprise, he stepped forward.

The army parted for him like reeds before a blade. He wore black armor chased with crimson and silver, too pristine, too ceremonial. A dagger gleamed at his hip, bone-handled and curved. The air around him shimmered with some kind of charm, blood magic old and bitter.

“I accept,” Aldaric called up. “But not as a coward. Not as a man.”

His eyes glinted.

“I’ve tasted the fruit.”

Vael’Zhur stilled. Something cold and ancient slid down his spine.

“We meet on even ground now,” Aldaric said. “Beast to beast.”

The warlord climbed the fractured stair of the gatehouse as if it were his throne. And then they met—on the shattered stone, beneath the broken sky.

Vael’Zhur lunged first.

Steel rang against claw. Magic clashed with muscle. Aldaric was fast—unnaturally so. The fruit had changed him. Strength bloomed in his limbs, his strikes precise and brutal. They tore through the wreckage of the castle, breaking columns and splintering stone, shaking the bones of the earth.

But Aldaric wasn't just strong—he was prepared.

His dagger flashed once. Vael'Zhur blocked it. Twice. Then—A slash. Too fast to see. Too late to avoid. It kissed his side. The pain was instant. Not deep. But searing. Wrong.

He staggered, limbs faltering. His vision swam.

“Poison,” he rasped, clawing at the wound.

Aldaric grinned. “A gift from my mother. A distillation of Sylaine's final breath.”

The witch. The curse. The bloodline.

“You wear her rage like a crown,” Vael'Zhur growled.

“And you wear her curse like a shackle,” Aldaric shot back. “But not for long.”

Vael'Zhur roared and struck again, but the poison was working fast. His limbs grew heavy. The strength that had carried him through centuries began to falter. He fell to one knee, claws gouging the rubble, trying to stay upright.

Aldaric raised the dagger, savoring it. “The orchard dies with you.”

Then—

A cry. Behind them.

“No. It dies with you, Aladar.”

Aldaric froze. His name. His true name. Spoken aloud. Spoken with knowledge. With intention.

He turned, face blanching—And Ceryn was there. Behind him.

The dagger plunged through his back, straight into his heart.

His eyes widened. “How?—?”

“You should never have used me,” she said, her voice trembling with fury. “You should never have touched my family.”

She twisted the blade.

“And you should never have hidden your name.”

Light burst from the wound—silver and white, cracking through him like a shattering mirror. Aldaric—Aladar—screamed. The sound was wrong, ancient, full of unraveling magic. His body bowed inward, collapsing beneath the weight of his truth. His name. His end.

Then he was gone.

Ash. Bone. Smoke. Nothing.

Ceryn stood alone in the aftermath, the cursed dagger clutched in her shaking hand.

Vael'Zhur collapsed fully now, weakened, panting. The rage burned dimmer, the beast quieted.

And in the silence that followed, he whispered, broken and in awe?—

“You remembered.”

\* \* \*

Ceryn dropped the dagger.

It hit the stone with a soft clatter, its power spent, its curse fulfilled.

Aldaric—or rather, Aladar—was gone. The air no longer felt suffocating with blood magic. The orchard, the castle, the world itself seemed to take a trembling breath.

And at the center of it all—Vael'Zhur lay broken.

He had fallen hard, the weight of battle and poison dragging his massive body to the fractured stones. Blood darkened the golden fur at his side. His breathing came in ragged shudders, and yet... his eyes were open.

Not mad. Not monstrous.

Just tired.

Ceryn dropped to her knees beside him, cradling his head in her lap, her hands trembling as they cupped his jaw.

“Auren,” she whispered. “Please... stay.”



He blinked slowly, golden eyes flickering. The slitted pupils had softened, no longer wild with rage.

“Ceryn...” His voice was hoarse, ruined from roaring. “You came back.”

“I never left you. Not really.”

She pressed her forehead to his, uncaring of the blood, the soot, the fur. Her fingers stroked his mane, tangled and scorched. He was immense, too large for the moment, too wild for the fragile tenderness she poured into him—but still, she held him like something sacred.

“I love you,” she said, voice barely a breath. “I love all of you. The man, the beast, the broken places. You are not a curse to me. You are the only truth I’ve ever known.”

A shudder rippled through him, deep and visceral.

Something shifted inside his chest—a loosening. The red haze that had gripped his mind like claws began to peel away. The poison that pulsed through his limbs dulled, not by antidote, but by her words, her voice, the way her hands touched him with reverence instead of fear.

The orchard responded.

Its light flickered, and then calmed. Trees ceased their trembling. The silverfruit no longer pulsed with fury, but glowed soft and steady. Like a heartbeat. Like hope.

He closed his eyes. For the first time in centuries, clarity returned.

And with it—peace.

“The madness...” he rasped. “It’s slipping away.”

She kissed his brow, fierce and sure. “Then let it go. I’ll hold the rest of you.”

A low sound, not quite a sob, escaped him. One of his massive arms came around her, claws retracted, trembling slightly as he pulled her into him, holding her like a lifeline. She pressed her hand to the wound at his side, and the orchard shimmered again, a soft exhale of magic that sealed the worst of the poison’s damage.

He wasn’t human. He would never be again. But he was whole.

The sound of boots on stone echoed behind them.

Ceryn turned, instinctively shielding Vael’Zhur with her body—though she had no strength left to protect anyone.

But it was Rorik.

He entered the space with slow, reverent steps, his dark armor stained from the skirmish, his face drawn with awe. He took in the scene—the Beast cradled in the arms of the woman who had undone a tyrant.

And then—Rorik dropped to one knee. Head bowed. Fist to heart.

“My sword is yours,” he said, voice steady. “My loyalty, freely given.”

Vael’Zhur stirred, shifting just enough to see the man kneeling before him.

“I don’t want your oath,” he said, quiet but firm.

Rorik looked up, startled.

Vael'Zhur's voice deepened, strong again.

"You've served enough masters. Too many who did not deserve you."

Silence fell like dust around them.

Then Rorik's expression broke, cracked open with something Ceryn didn't expect—relief.

"Then let me choose one who does," he said softly. "One who remembers what it means to protect, not rule. I would be honored to serve a creature who fought to stay kind... even when the world called him monster."

Vael'Zhur—Auren—studied him. Then nodded once.

"Not as a subject," he said. "As an ally."

Rorik bowed his head again. "As you wish... my king."

Ceryn leaned down, brushing her lips across Vael'Zhur's brow.

"Not a beast," she whispered. "Never again."

### Chapter Eleven

A few days later, after the smoke and dust had cleared and the army fled, they walked the orchard in silence, side by side.

Ceryn's hand was tucked into his—Auren's—his massive palm engulfing hers with gentle warmth. The sunlight filtered through the trees in shafts of gold, catching in the fur along his shoulders and mane. His footsteps were heavy, but steady now, unburdened by madness. Her steps were lighter too.

The orchard had changed.

The fruit no longer pulsed with that eerie, unnatural rhythm. Instead, it glowed soft and steady, like candlelight. The trees no longer leaned like watchers or hung with dread. They breathed now—living, not cursed. Their leaves shimmered with calm magic, no longer tinged with blood memory.

Even the wind felt different—less like a whisper of warning, more like a song.

“Do you feel it?” Ceryn asked softly, brushing her fingers along the bark of one of the ancient trees.

Auren turned toward her, golden eyes warm and knowing.

“For the first time in centuries... the orchard doesn't need to defend itself.”

They paused beneath the oldest tree, the one with the name he'd once clawed away.

The gouges remained—but the vine that had grown over them had receded, revealing the truth.

Auren .

Unmarred now. Whole.

“It should stay,” he said when she looked at him questioningly. “Let the scars be seen. So no one forgets how easily love turns to ruin... or how it can turn back again.”

The voice that answered was not Ceryn’s.

“Well spoken, my lord.”

They turned.

Elodia stood among the trees, ethereal as always, though her form shimmered brighter now. She looked... lighter. Less bound. The magic in the orchard had touched her too.

“You’re not fading anymore,” Auren noted.

“The curse was not only yours,” she replied. “The orchard, the castle, the guardians—we were all tethered to that name.”

Ceryn stepped forward. “So it’s really gone?”

Elodia smiled, wistful and radiant. “Not gone. Transformed. The curse wasn’t lifted by violence, but by choice. By naming. By truth. By love freely given, without hope of return. That was the old magic. That was the key.”

She looked between them.

“He gave you his name... and you gave it back. Without fear.”

Auren’s grip on Ceryn’s hand tightened, grounding them both in that truth.

Footsteps approached from the path behind, and Ceryn turned to see Rorik leading Maeva and Saraid toward them.

Maeva broke into a run, weaving between the trees like a child reborn into spring.

“Ceryn!”

Ceryn bent just in time to catch her sister in a tight hug. Maeva clung to her, laughing, coughing only once—less sharply than before.

“You’re safe,” Ceryn whispered. “We’re all safe now.”

Saraid followed more slowly, but her eyes were clearer than Ceryn had seen them in years. The grief hadn’t vanished, but it no longer hollowed her out.

She looked at Auren and gave a stiff nod.

“Thank you,” she said simply.

Then her gaze flicked to Rorik, lingering a little longer than expected.

Ceryn raised a brow and murmured, “You’re going to marry him, aren’t you?”

Saraid didn’t answer—but the way she flushed and turned away said enough.

“She’s still fierce,” Rorik murmured from behind, watching her with something almost soft in his eyes. “But I think she finally believes in something again.”

Auren chuckled low in his chest. “Pity the man who underestimates her.”

They walked together, the strange little party wandering through the trees with nowhere to run from and nowhere to go. Just time. Just peace.

Eventually, the castle rose ahead of them—still wounded, but healing.

Stone by stone, it was being rebuilt.

Auren was the one doing most of the work. He had no need for sleep and centuries of solitude had left him with nothing but time and knowledge. His claws could shape stone. His strength could raise beams. And the orchard seemed to help, creeping tendrils forming scaffolding where needed.

It would never be what it once was. But neither were they.

Rorik paused near the edge of the trees and turned back toward them.

“You need to come outside,” he said.

Auren frowned. “We are outside.”

Rorik just smiled.

“Not like this. Come. You need to see it.”

Curious, they followed him up the low rise past the orchard’s edge. The sun had dipped toward the horizon, casting the sky in hues of violet and gold.

And below—a sea of people.

Villagers. Survivors. Curious wanderers. Men and women with cautious steps and reverent eyes. Some knelt. Others wept. Children peeked from behind legs, whispering stories as if they already knew them.

Not one approached the orchard.

Not one crossed the boundary.

But they had come. To witness. To begin again. To offer their help and support.

Ceryn slipped her hand into Auren's.

“They’re not afraid.”

“Not yet,” he said softly. “But they will be. That is the nature of mortals.”

“Then we’ll remind them,” she said. “That the beast is not the monster. And the orchard is not the curse.”

Auren exhaled slowly, deeply.

“Then let this be the beginning, not the end.”



## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:18 am*

They say a girl went into the orchard one winter and never came out.

That she stole silverfruit and fed it to a beast. That she let him devour her heart.

They say she used the name of the old god—the one who lived in shadow, with eyes like fire and claws soaked in blood. And that when she spoke it, he bowed his head.

Some say the orchard still grows. That the fruit is sweeter now, but only if picked under moonlight. And if you wander too close to the castle ruins, you'll hear her laughing. Or moaning.

Mothers warn their daughters:

Never say the Beast's name aloud.

Never say Auren.

Not unless you mean it.

Not unless you're ready to be loved like a storm loves a broken ship.

Because once you say his name with your whole heart?—

He never lets you go.

\* \* \*

Do you love fairytale retellings? Read on for an excerpt from *The Princess and the Orc*, a *Princess and the Frog* retelling, available now!

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:18 am*

A malia laughed as the wind tore through her hair, the ribbons that had tied it back drifting behind her as they raced through the open field. Shergar had needed the run more than she had anticipated and they had outrun their guards and lost sight of the castle in short order. She pulled up on the reins to slow him down and he snorted, tossing his head up and in down in protest, but he stopped, stamping his hooves.

She looked around at the clearing and the trees that surrounded them. She knew every inch of the area around their castle. She had traveled much further than she'd thought. The castle was no longer in sight and she had even passed some of the villages. She glimpsed the pond through the trees where she used to spend time with her nanny. She had broken the rules. She had ridden too far, and now she could barely hear the shouts from her guards.

She tugged the reins to turn Shergar around and saw a horrible sight. A band of men on horses emerged from the trees in the distance behind her. They split into two groups; one headed for her and the other for the guards frantically riding to protect her, but they were too far. She froze for a moment, Shergar bellowing a challenge, his head tossing and his hoof pawing the ground.

“Run!” The word tore from her throat as she kicked Shergar into motion. The warhorse needed no encouragement, launching forward with powerful strides that ate up the ground beneath them. Behind her, she could hear the thunder of hooves and the cruel laughter of men who thought they had cornered easy prey.

Her heart pounded against her ribs as Shergar carried her toward the treeline. The forest. It wasn't safe. Her father's warnings about orc raiding parties echoed in her mind. But neither was staying in the open field where the attackers could surround

her. At least in the woods, Shergar's agility might give them an advantage.

Branches whipped at her face as they plunged into the shadows beneath the ancient trees. Shergar wove between trunks with the precision of a dancer, but their pursuers were gaining. These weren't common bandits. They rode like military men, and their coordination spoke of years of training together.

An arrow whistled past her ear, and Amalia ducked low over Shergar's neck. "Please," she whispered, her fingers white-knuckled on the reins. "Please, faster."

But even Shergar's legendary stamina had limits, and she had been riding him hard before the pursuit. His breathing grew labored, his stride less sure as they went deeper into unfamiliar territory. The sounds of the chase grew closer, and Amalia's eyes stung with helpless tears. She had been so foolish, so reckless.

A fallen tree loomed before them. Shergar gathered himself to jump, but his tired legs betrayed him. He stumbled on the landing, and Amalia was thrown forward. She hit the ground, stunned by the impact, and her horse took off, still gripped by fear. The thunder of hooves came closer now, shaking the ground, and rough voices called out in triumph.

"Nowhere left to run, Princess!"

"The client wants her alive, but he said nothing about unspoiled!" A mocking laugh accompanied the words, and her stomach clenched.

Amalia's mind raced, and her heart pounded in her chest. She could surrender, hope they truly meant to take her alive and not hurt her, or she could run on foot, though she knew that would only delay the inevitable. Her skirts would hinder her movement and there were too many men. They could easily change their mind and wound her to capture her.

Before she could decide, an inhuman roar shattered the forest's tension.

A massive shape erupted from the underbrush, a green figure of muscle and fury. Amalia's eyes widened in terror as she recognized the deep green skin, the massive tusks, the rippling arms thick as tree trunks. An orc warrior, easily eight feet tall, burst between her and the men, wielding a massive battle-axe as though it weighed nothing at all.

The first soldier barely had time to turn before the axe cleaved through his armor like parchment. The orc moved with shocking speed for something so large, spinning to catch another rider with a shoulder check that sent both horse and man flying into a tree with a sickening crunch.

“Orc!” One soldier screamed. “Fall back! Fall—” His words ended in a gurgle as the axe found his throat.

The remaining attackers tried to flee, but the orc was everywhere at once, a whirlwind of calculated violence. In mere moments, what had been an organized attack force was reduced to broken bodies and terrified horses fleeing into the woods. One rider escaped, galloping in the distance.

Then there was silence, broken only by the orc's heavy breathing.

Slowly, deliberately, the massive warrior turned to face her. Amalia struggled to her feet, swaying a little from the shock and impact. She stared at him, unsure of what he would do to her. Blood dripped from his axe and splattered his leather armor and skin, but his movements were controlled, almost graceful. His features were harsh, strange, yet somehow handsome. High cheekbones, a powerful jaw, distinctive tusks capped with studded metal. His eyes, when they met hers, were a startling black obsidian, intelligence burning in their depths.

“You are far from your castle walls, little princess,” he rumbled, his voice deep as

thunder, yet surprisingly articulate. He took a step forward, and Amalia flinched back. The orc stopped, and though his expression was hard to read, she thought she caught a flicker of something, possibly amusement. But why would he be amused? “I am Drogath, of the Broken Claw clan. And you are either very brave or very foolish to ride alone in these woods.”

Amalia's heart raced for entirely different reasons now. Everything she knew, everything she'd been taught, told her that orcs were monsters, mindless savages who lived only to raid and destroy. Yet this one had saved her life and now regarded her with an intelligence that defied all her preconceptions. His presence radiated power and danger, yes, but also something else. Something that made her pulse quicken and her cheeks flush.

“Thank you,” she managed, her voice barely a whisper. “For saving my life. Though I don't understand why.”

Drogath's tusked mouth curved in what might have been a smile. “Perhaps, princess, there is much about my people you do not understand.” He stepped closer again, and this time Amalia held her ground, mesmerized despite her fear. “Though if you wish to learn, these woods are my territory. And I would not be opposed to teaching you.”

\* \* \*

Drogath glided through the forest, his footsteps silent despite his massive frame. The morning's frustration still simmered beneath his skin. Three days he'd waited for an audience with King Henrik, and for three days the human guards had turned him away with increasingly flimsy excuses. As if he couldn't smell their fear, their instinctive revulsion at the sight of an orc approaching their precious gates. He couldn't afford to be away from his clan much longer, yet he also couldn't afford to fail in his plan, either. His people needed him to succeed. They couldn't fight a war on two fronts. Not alone.

The crack of branches and thunder of hooves pulled him from his brooding. His hand found the shaft of his axe as he moved toward the sound, keeping to the shadows of the ancient trees. As the shouting grew closer, he crouched behind a fallen tree and assessed the situation. The scents hit him first—horse sweat, human fear, and the acrid tang of malice that always accompanied those who enjoyed causing terror in others. Rage filled him and he moved out from the trees, hoping he was in time to help the poor soul who was under attack.

He crested a small rise and took in the scene at a glance. Six mounted soldiers pursued a lone rider on a black horse, a woman, judging by the skirt and hair flowing behind her. Their uniforms weren't those of either Henrik's guard or Drogath's enemy, yet the way they moved spoke of professional training. Mercenaries, then, or someone's private army. He feared for her if they caught her. While orcs were often touted as vile creatures, he knew all too well that humans often caused the most harm to their own.

Drogath didn't hesitate. Whatever game these humans played, it wasn't a fair hunt. He raced through the forest, hoping to intercept the action. The woman's horse leapt over a fallen log and stumbled, with the woman going over the horse's head and onto the ground. The horse took off, leaving the woman huddled on the ground. He burst from the cover with a roar that shook leaves from the branches, letting battle-rage fill him even as he kept his mind clear and tactical. The first two humans died before they could even turn their horses, toppling from them, dead before they hit the ground. The third managed to raise his sword before Drogath's axe separated his head from his shoulders.

The remaining soldiers broke and scattered, as humans so often did when faced with an orc warrior's fury. But Drogath was too quick, cutting them down before they could escape, save one who had turned tail like the coward he was as soon as Drogath had revealed himself.

He turned to the woman, expecting the usual reaction—screaming, fainting, or trying

to flee. Instead, she met his gaze evenly, chin raised despite the fear that radiated from her in waves. Her features were delicate, aristocratic, and startlingly familiar from the coins that bore her image. Princess Amalia herself. Well. This complicated matters.

“Thank you.” Her voice shook a bit as she spoke. “For saving my life. Though I don't understand why.”

Drogath smiled. Maybe he would finally get his audience with the king. King Henrik could hardly refuse to speak with the orc who saved his only daughter. “Perhaps, princess, there is much about my people you do not understand.” He stepped closer again, testing her courage, and she didn't flinch, though she smelled of fear, and something else. “Though if you wish to learn, these woods are my territory. And I would not be opposed to teaching you.”

“Take me home,” she commanded, her voice impressively steady. “At once.”

Drogath smirked. She was terrified. He could smell it on her, yet she dared to order him about like a common servant. More interesting still was the other scent threading through her fear. Arousal, sharp and sweet. His blood stirred in response, along with something else he hadn't expected to find and didn't dare name, not yet. Didn't dare to hope.

“Take you home?” he rumbled, letting his voice drop to its deepest register. “But I am an orc, little princess. Haven't you heard? We kidnap beautiful women for sport. Keep them, bind them to us forever.”

She paled further, her skin creamy under her fiery red hair, but lifted her chin higher. “You saved my life. You won't harm me now.”

“Such certainty.” He stepped closer, noting how her pupils dilated. “But there are brigands still searching these woods for you. The second force that had split from this



group. I hear them even now.” He did, too. Crashes through the underbrush, voices calling to each other in the distance. “I could protect you, escort you safely home... for a price.”

“What price?” Her fists tightened next to her body, but she didn't back away.

“Marriage.”

“What?” The word exploded from her in a most un-princess-like squawk.

“Absolutely not!”

Drogath shrugged his massive shoulders. “As you wish.” He turned, hefted his ax, and began walking away, counting silently in his head. One. Two. Three. Shouts were growing closer. Whether they were the enemy or her own guard, because there was no way the princess was out alone, he didn't know. But if he didn't know who it was, neither did she, which gave him an advantage. He had waited for an opportunity, leverage with the king. Now he had one in his claws. The princess herself. His victory would be sweeter if she came willingly.

“Wait!”

He smiled, then smoothed his expression before turning back. Amalia stood rigid, hands fisted at her side, face white but determined, her face tilted in a regal expression. Behind her, the voices grew closer.

“I accept.”

“Accept what, precisely?” He wouldn't make this easy for her. He needed her to say the words, to seal the bargain.

She swallowed hard. “I accept your offer of marriage.”

“Ah.” Relief flooded him. He had her.

Drogath moved closer until he towered above her, forcing her to look up to meet his eyes. “Then we must seal our bargain properly.” He reached for her, giving her time to pull away if she truly wished to refuse. When she remained still, he cupped the back of her head with one massive hand and drew her toward him.

“With a kiss.”

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The Princess and the Orc is available now!