



# Vampire Solstice (Vampire Girl #5)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** We fell in love in the quiet moments between his pain.

Beyond the realms of time, a village suffers under an unbreakable winter curse.

In the kingdoms of Inferna and Avakiri, a queen struggles with the aftermath of a war.

Now, as winter solstice approaches, these two worlds collide.

A witch. A tree. A new curse.

Ari and Fen must discover the truth of this cursed village or suffer the curse's fate.

And Myra... she must prevent the Midnight Star and the Moonlight Prince from killing the beast that hunts her people—even if it means never breaking the curse.

This holiday season, fall in love all over again, and discover a new love to root for.

**Total Pages (Source):** 11

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:55 am*

## Chapter 1

### The Witch

When I was working as a waitress in Oregon, trying to make ends meet, I never imagined a few years later I would be the queen in a magical land full of vampires and fae.

But here I am. And it's not what I expected.

To be a queen is to serve a kingdom, to carry the weight of countless lives with every choice I make. The crown rests on my head, but its true burden presses on my soul. To be a mother is to serve my child, her needs as constant and insistent as the sun rising each day.

To be both is to be torn in two.

This morning is no exception. I stand before the mirror in my chambers, my reflection a blur as I twist my hair into a braid that refuses to cooperate. The room around me is warm with morning light, but my thoughts are already racing ahead to the endless tasks awaiting me.

“Kayla is expecting my help with Solstice planning,” I mutter, more to myself than to Fen. “And the Keeper’s report is in—it’s practically a novel at this point. While I’m glad he’s enjoying his adventures, does he have to document every flower he sees? Oh, and the trade delegation—”

Strong arms slip around my waist, and the steady heat of Fen's presence stills my rambling. He turns me to face him, his piercing eyes locking on mine.

"And I," he says softly, his voice a low rumble that sends a shiver through me, "should not need a team of planners to get a moment alone with my wife."

I exhale a laugh, the tension easing from my shoulders. "You're right. I'm sorry. I miss you too."

His lips quirk into the faintest of smiles. "Then perhaps we could—"

The sharp cry of our daughter slices through the quiet intimacy.

Baron—a white wolf much larger than any normal wolf—stirs from his nap by the fire and begins to whine as he makes his way to my daughter. He's been her protector since she was born.

The baby dragon that was napping on his back is startled into the air. I grin as Yami squawks indignantly, but joins Baron nonetheless.

I groan, letting my forehead rest against his broad chest for a moment before pulling away. "And there goes that plan. Rock, paper, scissors to see who changes the Royal Princess's diaper?"

Fen arches an eyebrow, his expression both bemused and exasperated. "I will never understand this strange human game of yours."

I hold up my hand, already forming the first gesture. "That's because you keep losing. Rock, paper—"

Before I can finish, Fen's large hand closes into a fist.

“Paper,” I declare with a grin. “And paper beats rock. Daddy’s turn.”

Fen growls softly, leaning closer, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. “One day, Arianna, I will claim victory in this ridiculous game.”

I kiss his cheek with an exaggerated smacking sound. “Good luck with that, Your Majesty.”

Baron nudges Fen’s legs as he stalks toward the cradle, grumbling under his breath. I watch him go, a tender smile tugging at my lips despite the chaos of the morning.

Soon, I tell myself. Soon, there will be time for just us again.

But not today.

As Fen takes over diaper duty, our daughter’s delighted giggles echo through the chamber, a rare reprieve from the ever-looming weight of the day ahead. He lifts her effortlessly, holding her high as her tiny hands clutch at his pointed fae ears.

No one was more astonished than Fen to discover he wasn’t just a vampire, but fae, and a powerful one at that.

“Clean and content,” Fen announces, his earlier stoicism softened by the tenderness he reserves for her. He presses a kiss to her forehead before turning his sharp gaze on me. “Though she seems to have inherited your stubbornness.”

I smirk, brushing the last strands of my braid into place. “You mean her brilliance and charm? Absolutely.”

“She also howls like a wolf when she’s hungry,” he retorts with a teasing glint in his eye.

“She definitely gets that from you.” I cross the room to press a kiss to our daughter’s soft cheek. Her bright laughter fills the space between us, a reminder of what we’re fighting to protect. “Don’t listen to him, my little star. You can howl as much as you’d like.”

Before Fen can respond, there’s a light knock at the door, followed by Kayla’s entrance. Her colorful braid swings behind her as she strides in, a pile of parchments in hand, her expression brisk but tinged with amusement as she takes in the scene.

“The castle is bustling,” she says without preamble. “Ace is in the courtyard constructing the platform for the Solstice ceremony. He claims he has a ‘brilliant’ idea to make it unforgettable.”

Fen’s brow arches skeptically. “Unforgettable in the way of his last invention?”

Kayla snorts. “I’m already running interference. I’ve reminded him of the safety precautions... which he doesn’t seem thrilled about.”

“And I’m not thrilled about explosions,” I reply, shifting my daughter back into Fen’s arms. “Make sure he follows through, Kayla. I don’t need another disaster in the middle of Solstice preparations.”

“Your queenly instincts are as sharp as ever,” Fen murmurs dryly, bouncing our daughter gently. “Though I do question the wisdom of appointing someone who loves chaos as your chief builder.”

My brother-in-law may be the Prince of Sloth... but he’s always at work on new inventions. Fen is right. Prince of Chaos would have been a more apt curse for him I think.

“Wisdom?” I smirk at my husband. “You’re forgetting I chose you as king. My track

record isn't that bad."

Fen huffs out a soft laugh, shaking his head as Kayla's voice grows more formal. "Your Majesty, the line of petitioners is long today. Given the Solstice preparations, I'd say it's twice the usual length."

"Wonderful," I mutter, adjusting my gown and trying not to think about how many hours this day will drag on.

The bustling noise of castle life surrounds us as Kayla and I make our way toward the throne room. Servants hurry past with trays of spiced cider and garlands of winter greenery, their faces flushed with activity. The faint hammering of Ace's construction carries from the courtyard, accompanied by the occasional cheer or shout.

"I much prefer being out and about," I say, glancing at Kayla as we pass a cluster of advisors deep in discussion. "Talking to people in their homes, in the context of their lives. These formal audiences are so exhausting."

"Tradition," Kayla replies simply, though the humor in her tone isn't lost on me.

"Tradition," I echo with a sigh. "It's a miracle any of us survive it."

Kayla chuckles as we approach the grand doors to the throne room. The air shifts, the noise outside fading into a heavy silence as the guards push open the doors. The vaulted chamber beyond is filled with petitioners, their voices dropping to murmurs as I enter.

Kayla steps forward, her voice ringing out over the assembly. "All rise for Her Majesty, Arianna Spero Vane, High Queen of Inferna and Avakiri, Midnight Star."

The formalities always feel like a performance, a title-heavy script meant to reinforce

the authority of the crown. But I straighten my shoulders and take my seat on the throne, Fen's absence beside me an ache I try to ignore.

Yami, dozing on my shoulder, wakes to nuzzle my hair. The dragon's way of soothing me when he senses I'm stressed.

The first petitioner approaches—a fae man with hollow cheeks and a weathered appearance. His hands shake slightly as he clutches his hat, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Your Majesty, the snow came early this year. Our crops didn't yield enough to last the winter, and the Outlanders... they come in the night, stealing what little we have. We can't survive like this.”

I lean forward, frowning. “We've sent supplies to the outer villages. They should have arrived days ago.”

“They did,” the man says, his voice tight with frustration. “But the Outlanders move like ghosts. They take what they want and vanish into the snow. We're outnumbered and defenseless.”

I stifle a frustrated sigh. The Outlanders have historically been rebel fae, who refused to bow to the rule of the vampires. Not that I blame them. That was the whole point of the war we had not too long ago. To free them from slavery.

I had hoped that since we defeated the vampires who wanted to keep them enslaved, they would join us. Many did. But some still refuse. They don't trust the part of me that is now vampire. They despise that I married one of the original vampire princes—despite him actually being born fae.

Still, I won't give up on the hope of peace with them. They are still my people. I

glance at Kayla, who shifts uncomfortably beside me. “We’ll increase patrols,” I say firmly, my voice carrying through the room. “And we’ll ensure every village gets what they need to survive. I won’t let anyone starve this winter. Including the Outlanders.”

The fae bows, murmuring his thanks, but the tension in the room doesn’t ease.

As he steps away, Kayla leans closer, whispering, “This is the last petitioner of the day.”

“Thank the goddess,” I mutter, slumping slightly. “Why do thrones have to be so uncomfortable? My bum feels like it’s been turned to stone.”

“The weight of the crown is a heavy one,” Kayla quips, smirking.

“Fen says the same thing,” I reply with a rueful grin. “Probably why he wanted nothing to do with it.”

Kayla nods. “Power should go to those who respect it, not crave it.”

I smile at her. “Yet another reason I was brilliant to appoint you as the new Keeper of High Castle.”

The sound of heavy boots echoes through the chamber as the final petitioner steps forward. But before he can speak, the air changes. A low hum vibrates through the room, growing louder until the very walls seem to shudder.

“What is that?” I ask, gripping the arms of the throne.

Kayla stiffens, her hand flying to her blade. “Protect the queen!”



The hum crescendos into a sharp, deafening crack, and a blast of icy wind sweeps through the room. The torches lining the walls flicker and die, plunging us into near darkness. In the center of the chamber, a figure begins to take shape, her silhouette wreathed in shadow and frost.

The woman's form solidifies—a hunched figure cloaked in tattered robes, her gnarled hands clutching a staff carved with glowing runes. Her eyes, dark and unyielding, lock onto mine.

“By fire and ice,” she intones, her voice reverberating through the chamber, “I gather here to curse the queen and king to the realms of the forgotten. Come sunset, may the curse upon us become your curse, until such is resolved. This I decree by blood and magic.”

The air around her crackles with energy as she thrusts her staff forward. A flash of light blinds the room, and the air is filled with the howling of wind. When the chaos finally subsides, the chamber is deathly still.

I blink, trying to focus as Kayla steadies me.

“What... what does this mean?” I ask, my voice shaking.

Kayla stares at the center of the room, her face pale. “That... cannot be possible.”

I follow her gaze and gasp. A massive, gnarled tree stands where the witch had been moments before, its roots twisting into the stone floor, its branches scraping the vaulted ceiling.

The doors burst open, and Fen strides in, his expression sharp as his gaze darts to me. “Ari, are you safe? What—”

He stops short, his eyes widening as he takes in the sight before him.

“Is that—” Fen begins, his voice low.

“Yes,” Kayla replies grimly. “The Mythos tree.”

“It hasn’t been seen since the vampires first arrived in this land centuries ago,” Fen says, his voice gruff.

“A witch summoned it,” I say quietly. “Along with a curse.”

## Page 2

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### Chapter 2

#### The Mythos Tree

“Clear the room!” I shout, my voice cutting through the rising panic.

Kayla doesn’t hesitate, barking orders to the guards. “Get everyone out, now! Seal the doors behind you!”

The guards rush to herd the remaining petitioners out of the throne room, their shouts mixing with the murmurs of fear from the crowd. The heavy groan of the tree and the faint cracking of stone beneath its roots grow louder with each passing moment.

As the Mythos pulses again, a faint glow spreads from its base, crawling outward like veins of molten fire. But instead of light, it leaves decay in its wake. The stone blackens and cracks, the air growing colder, heavier, as if the tree itself is sucking the life from the room.

“Kayla!” I call, urgency tightening my voice. “Send someone to the nursery. Make sure the princess is safe.”

Kayla nods, signaling a guard, who sprints from the room. “She’ll be fine, Ari. We’ll handle this.”

Yami shifts uneasily on my shoulder, letting out a soft, nervous trill. Baron growls low beside Fen, his fur bristling as he steps protectively between us and the tree.

“What’s it doing?” I ask, my eyes locked on the spreading rot.

Fen moves closer to the Mythos, his every movement cautious. “It’s growing,” he says grimly. “Feeding. But on what?”

Ace rushes in, his red hair tousled and his face streaked with soot. He stops short at the sight of the Mythos, his jaw tightening. “What in the name of—”

“No time for commentary,” Kayla snaps, her dagger still drawn. “What do you see?”

Ace approaches the edge of the rot, kneeling to examine the cracks spreading across the stone floor. “It’s pulling energy from the room,” he mutters. “From everything around it. Look at the decay—it’s not random. It’s following a pattern, drawing power back to the tree.”

“From us?” I ask, a cold dread settling in my stomach.

Ace nods grimly. “And whatever it’s doing, it’s getting stronger.”

I take a step closer, ignoring the sharp chill that radiates from the Mythos. Its glow intensifies, and I feel it now—a pull, faint but insistent, like an unseen hand tugging at the edges of my soul.

Fen grabs my arm, stopping me. “Don’t get too close,” he warns, his voice low and steady. “Whatever this is, it’s tied to us. The witch said the curse was for us, Ari. This isn’t random.”

“But what does it want?” I ask, my frustration boiling over. “We need Kal. He’d know what to do.”

“Kal’s halfway across the realm chasing down that lead on the ruins,” Kayla says

sharply. “We can’t wait for him to stroll back with a book. We have to deal with this now.”

Ace straightens, his expression unusually grim. “This isn’t just a tree,” he says. “It’s doing something. Look.”

He points to the base of the Mythos, where the glow has gathered into a swirling mass of light and shadow. The air around it ripples like heat rising from stone, but the room is growing colder by the second.

“What’s happening?” Kayla asks, her voice tight with tension.

The glow expands, the swirling energy picking up speed. The pull grows stronger, dragging at my clothes, my hair, my very being. Yami takes flight from my shoulder, chirping in alarm as he circles above me.

“It’s opening something,” Ace says, backing away.

“What?” Kayla snaps. “Opening what?”

“I don’t know!” Ace shouts, his frustration as raw as mine.

The Mythos groans again, the sound deep and resonant, reverberating through my chest. The roots dig deeper into the floor, and the spreading decay reaches the walls, cracking the stone with ominous precision.

“Sunset,” Fen murmurs, his gaze shifting to the high windows of the throne room.

I follow his line of sight. The last rays of sunlight stretch across the room, their golden glow stark against the cold blue light of the Mythos. The shadows deepen as the sun dips below the horizon, and with it, the energy in the room shifts.

The pull intensifies, dragging me forward. Fen's arm wraps around my waist, holding me back as the swirling vortex at the base of the Mythos grows larger, brighter. The cold seeps into my bones, stealing the breath from my lungs.

"Ari!" Kayla's voice cuts through the chaos. "What do we do?"

I shake my head, my mind racing. "We have to stop it!"

"Brilliant plan," Ace snaps. "Got any details on how?"

Before I can respond, the vortex surges, and the pull becomes irresistible. My feet skid across the floor as I'm dragged toward the Mythos. Fen's grip tightens, but even his strength isn't enough to fight the force.

"Fen!" I cry out, panic clawing at my throat.

"I won't let go," he says fiercely, his other hand gripping his sword as if he can cut through the magic itself.

The light from the Mythos is blinding. The roar of its energy drowns out every other sound.

"Ari!" Kayla's voice is distant now, lost in the chaos.

The last thing I see is Kayla and Ace fighting against the pull, their faces pale with fear. Then the world tilts, and everything goes dark.

When I open my eyes, the first thing I notice is the cold—sharp, invasive, and nothing like the chill of the throne room. The stone beneath me is rougher, jagged, and damp with frost. My breath puffs out in front of me, misty and quick as panic sets in.

This isn't High Castle.

I push myself up, my palms stinging from the raw texture of the ground. We are at the center of a village courtyard. The dying Mythos Tree nearly collapsing against a giant statue.

A fae woman on the back of a dragon, sword held high.

The Midnight Star. But not me, I realize. A predecessor. Or at least a representation of one. The statue hasn't been maintained well.

"Where... where are we?" My voice comes out hoarse, the words barely above a whisper.

Fen is already on his feet, his stance rigid, every muscle coiled with tension. His hand rests on the hilt of his blade as he scans the quiet village. "Not anywhere familiar," he mutters. His voice is as sharp as the frostbitten air. "This place... it feels wrong. Cursed."

I can feel it too, a heavy weight pressing down on me. It's not just the cold—it's the air itself, thick and humming with the same strange energy that pulsed through the Mythos. My chest tightens as I glance around, searching for any sign of something familiar. I call upon my magic, trying to summon Yami, but he does not appear. How could that be?

Fen's eyes narrow, his gaze fixed on a section of wall where the stone has been stripped bare, frost creeping up its surface like veins. "This isn't any of the villages in Inferna, Avakiri or the Outlands that I've seen," he says. "Look at the architecture. It's older. And the stars..." He looks up at the darkening sky. "They're wrong."

I follow his gaze, shivering as a sky I don't recognize. I think of my first time in this

world, the first time I learned other worlds existed. How the sky was the most unsettling part of it all.. The constellations were different, alien, their strange patterns stirring unease in my gut.

Just as now.

“What does this mean?” I whisper, wrapping my arms around myself. My thoughts race to the Mythos, to the curse. And then to my daughter.

“Our baby,” I choke out, my breath catching. “I sent someone to make sure she was safe, but what if—what if the curse reached her too?”

Fen steps closer, his hand brushing my arm. “Ari,” he says firmly, his voice grounding me. “Baron and Yami are with her. Kayla is there. They’ll protect her.”

I nod, clinging to his words like a lifeline, but the doubt lingers.

A sudden sound tears through the silence—a deep, guttural howl that seems to reverberate through the stones themselves. My heart leaps into my throat as I instinctively move closer to Fen.

“What was that?” I ask, my voice trembling.

“Something that doesn’t want us here,” Fen says grimly. He draws his blade, the familiar ring of steel against leather bringing a fleeting sense of security. “We need to find shelter. Now.”

I nod, forcing my legs to obey even as the fear weighs them down. But as we move toward the buildings of the village, the wind picks up, sudden and ferocious. Snow and ice lash against us, the air shifting from bitter cold to unbearable.



“A blizzard?” I shout over the roar of the wind. “Out of nowhere?”

Fen shields me as best he can, his arm wrapping around my shoulders. “It’s not natural,” he growls. “Stay close.”

The storm intensifies, the snow thick and relentless, obscuring everything beyond a few feet. The cold cuts through my gown and cloak, biting into my skin like tiny daggers.

“There!” Fen points through the storm, his sharp gaze catching something I can barely make out—a cluster of dark shapes huddled together in the distance. Small, squat cottages sag under the heavy weight of snow. As we approach, a young fae boy, no older than eight, freezes. His eyes wide, he turns and runs, disappearing into a nearby cottage. “Well, that’s not ominous,” I mutter, my breath visible in the freezing air.

Fen’s hand tightens on his blade as he surveys the cottages. “Stay alert. We don’t know who—or what—lives here.”

Before we can move, the door to the boy’s cottage creaks open. A young woman steps out, her face pale but resolute. Her brown cloak flutters in the wind as she hurries toward us. She’s dressed in drab, beige clothing, except for a single spot of color in her hair. A bright red ribbon with one end fraying like it had been torn.

“You...” Her voice trembles, her words barely audible over the storm. “You must come with me.”

I exchange a wary glance with Fen. “Who are you?” I ask.

She hesitates, her gaze darting between us and the storm. “I’m Myra. My grandmother... she said you would come. There isn’t much time.”

Her words hang heavy in the air, laden with urgency I can't ignore. I glance at Fen again, his expression unreadable, but he gives a slight nod.

"Take us to her," I say, pulling my cloak tighter around me.

The young woman doesn't wait for us to follow. She turns quickly, leading us toward a larger house at the edge of the village. The building looks sturdier than the others, though no less weathered by time. The windows are fogged with frost, and smoke rises faintly from the chimney.

The inside of the house is dim and close, the faint warmth of a fire doing little to drive out the deep chill that clings to the air. A single candle flickers on a bedside table, its weak glow barely illuminating the room.

In the corner, an old woman lies in a low bed, her frail frame swaddled in threadbare blankets. Her skin is as pale and brittle as the frost outside, her sunken eyes sharp despite her fragile appearance. Her breath comes in shallow, uneven gasps, the sound rattling like dry leaves.

She is familiar.

"You," I say, my word an exhale. "You're the witch who cursed us."

The old woman's eyes flicker open, and her lips curl into a faint, satisfied smile. "At last," she rasps, her voice barely more than a breath.

I take a cautious step forward, the weight of her gaze pressing down on me. "Why have you brought us here?"

Her smile fades, replaced by a look of profound weariness. "It was time," she whispers, her voice carrying a note of finality. "The curse could wait no longer. We

need the Midnight Star and the Moonlight Prince.”

Beside me, Fen stiffens, his eyes narrowing. His hand rests on the hilt of his blade, a subtle but unmistakable gesture of distrust. “What curse?” he demands.

The old woman’s eyes drift toward the frost-covered window, and her words, when they come, are barely a whisper. Her breathing is slow, so slow. And labored. She doesn’t have long.

“The curse that binds this place. Break it and free us.”

“What happens if we don’t?” Fen asks.

The old woman’s hand lashes out, grabbing my wrist with brittle fingers. “Then you will join in the fate of all who live here. You will be trapped forever.”

## Page 3

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### Chapter 3

#### The Curse

I exchange a worried glance with Fen. “Tell me about the beast,” I say.

“Every time someone tries to leave the village, the blizzard drives them back,” the young woman says, her voice trembling. “The beast... it won’t let us go.”

I turn back to the old woman. “What do we need to know about this creature? How do we stop it?”

Her eyes close briefly, her chest rising and falling with effort. “My—” she begins coughing violently, her slight frame shaking. “My jou—” She can’t speak. Each time she tries, the coughing gets worse.

“Stop! She’s dying. Leave her be.” Myra runs to her grandmother, holding her hand as she kneels by her side. “Don’t try to talk.”

“The Mythos called you,” Myra says, still keeping her gaze locked on her grandmother. “If you do not break the curse, you will never be free.”

My breath catches, and my thoughts race to our daughter, safe (I hope) back at the castle. We can’t stay here.

“I’ll do it,” I say, my voice steady despite the knot in my throat.

“Ari,” Fen snaps, his tone sharp with frustration.

I turn to him, meeting his glare with one of my own. “We have no choice, Fen. You heard her. If we don’t do this, we’ll never see our child again.”

His jaw tightens, and for a moment, I think he’ll argue. But then he exhales sharply, muttering under his breath. “Damn it, Ari.”

The old woman’s faint smile returns, even as her eyes flutter closed and her breathing becomes impossibly shallow.

She doesn’t speak another word as the last wisp of a breath slips from her lips, and then she is gone.

There is a long silence in the room, then the young woman lets out a low cry from deep within her core. She holds her grandmother’s hand, her tears flowing freely.

Fen and I stand silently, holding space for this moment.

“She said you would come,” the young woman says, her voice trembling. “She believed you could save us. She used the last of her power to call to you.”

The last of her power. She gave her life for us to be here. As angry as I am that I’ve been ripped away from my child and my responsibilities, I can’t help but feel a deep sadness for what this woman gave up to get help for her own people. Would I have done any differently?

“We will do everything we can to help you,” I say, meaning every word.

The woman nods, wiping at her eyes. “I can show you where the attacks happened,” she says. “But... not tonight. The storm is too dangerous. And—” she pauses, looking

at her grandmother again.

“And you need a moment to mourn.”

The woman nods. “Please make yourself at home here. There’s a room upstairs where you can rest. I’ll stay down here with her.”

I take Fen’s hand before he can start demanding more answers. “We will prepare in the morning.”

Upstairs, Fen paces while I sit in front of the bedroom hearth, warming myself.

“We need more information about this beast. About this curse. About these people. We’re at a severe disadvantage,” he says, worry lining his face. I have never even heard of this fae village.

“There’s nothing more we can do tonight,” I remind him.

The sound of the storm outside is relentless, the wind howling like a mournful wail.

Fen crouches beside me, his voice low. “I won’t let anything happen to you,” he says, his hand brushing against mine.

I nod, though worry still gnaws at me. “We have to help them,” I whisper. “For our daughter.” I look out the window to the village beyond. The people who are suffering. “And for them,” I say softly. I remind myself I am not solely a mother, but also a queen. These people need their queen.

The fire flickers, and I can’t help but wonder if it will be enough to keep the darkness at bay.

Morning comes slowly, the storm easing its grip but leaving the world outside blanketed in an oppressive silence. The house is colder now, the fire reduced to embers in the hearth. Fen and I descend the creaking stairs together, our boots whispering against the worn wood.

Myra stands in the center of the room. She's bundled in a dark cloak, her hands clasped tightly around a wooden pendant that hangs from her neck. Her face is pale and drawn, her eyes rimmed with red, but she carries herself with a quiet strength that makes me pause.

She doesn't look up immediately, her gaze fixed on her grandmother's still form. The old woman has been wrapped in heavy linens, her frail hands folded over her chest. A faint smell of herbs lingers in the air, mixing with the remnants of smoke from the hearth.

"I need to take her to the square," Myra says softly, her voice barely above a whisper. "The village will want to pay their respects before..." She trails off, her throat working as she swallows hard.

"Before what?" I ask gently.

"There's a ritual," she explains, her fingers tightening around the pendant. "We send our dead to the forest. To the beast."

I stiffen, my breath catching. "You give your dead to the thing that preys on you?"

"It's tradition," she says, lifting her chin. Her voice is stronger now, edged with defiance. "And it keeps the beast from attacking for a time."

Fen mutters something under his breath, shaking his head. I can see the tension in his shoulders, the way his hand twitches toward his blade.

“Do you want us to help?” I ask, trying to keep my voice neutral.

She shakes her head quickly, almost too quickly. “No. It’s a village matter. You wouldn’t understand.”

I exchange a glance with Fen, who raises a skeptical brow. There’s something she isn’t saying—I can feel it.

“Then what can you tell us about the beast?” Fen asks, his tone sharp.

Myra hesitates, her gaze darting to the floor. “There’s not much more to tell,” she says quietly. “It’s a creature of darkness. It hunts at night, preying on anyone who strays too far from the village. No one who’s seen it up close has survived.”

Fen steps closer, his presence imposing. “What about its habits? Weaknesses? Surely someone has fought it before.”

Her lips press into a thin line, her fingers gripping the pendant so tightly her knuckles whiten. “The beast can’t be fought. It’s too strong, too fast. Our weapons do nothing against it. That’s why we’ve stopped trying.”

I place a hand on Fen’s arm, drawing his attention back to me. “If we’re going to kill it, we need more than stories,” I say, trying to keep my tone calm. “Can you at least show us where the attacks happened? Where it’s been seen?”

Myra’s expression shifts, a flash of something unreadable crossing her face. “You can’t kill it. You have to find a way to break the curse another way. But... if you need to see it, there’s a place,” she says slowly. “Deep in the woods. That’s where it makes its den.”

“Can you take us there?” I ask.



She hesitates, her lips parting as if to refuse. But then she nods, her shoulders sagging slightly. “Yes,” she says quietly. “After the ceremony, I’ll take you there.”

Fen paces back and forth, his heavy boots thudding across the wooden floor. “Arianna needs a sword. We need warmer clothes. If there’s anything else we can use...”

She nods, her gaze flickering toward the corner of the room where an old chest sits. “There are tools in there,” she says reluctantly. “Blades, traps... things we’ve tried before. I’ll have Micas, the boy you saw last night, fetch you furs.”

Fen strides over to the chest, throwing it open with a single motion. Inside are rusted weapons and broken traps, their edges dulled by time and disuse. He picks up a long blade, testing its weight with a scowl.

“Useless,” he mutters, tossing the blade back into the chest.

“They’re all we have,” Myra says, her voice defensive. “You’re the Midnight Star. Isn’t it your job to protect us? We waited for you. For hundreds of years we waited. Where have you been?”

Her anger rolls over me, turning into waves of sadness. I had no idea these people were trapped here, but it was my duty to learn. How many others are suffering silently under my rule?

“I’m sorry,” I say, stepping forward. “We’ll make do with what we have.”

I look to my husband, my expression encouraging temperance. I hope. “Fen, we have our magic. You have your sword. We’ll take what we can use and figure out the rest later. We’ll scour the forest for tracks—”

“No,” Myra snaps, then looks down meekly, her cheeks flushing red. “You shouldn’t go without a guide. The woods... they change the deeper you go.”

Fen frowns, his eyes narrowing. “What do you mean ‘change’?”

Myra glances toward the window, her gaze distant. “The forest isn’t like other places. It’s alive. It shifts, twists. You could walk in circles for days and never find your way out. That’s why some never return.”

A chill runs down my spine. Whatever magic is tied to this place, it’s darker and more dangerous than I realized.

“We will wait for you,” I say.

Myra looks at me, her expression unreadable. For a moment, I think she might say something else, but she turns away, busying herself with preparations for the ritual.

Fen pulls me aside, lowering his voice. “She’s hiding something,” he says.

“I know,” I reply, glancing back at Myra. “But we don’t have time to figure out what. If she can guide us to the den, that’s enough for now.”

Fen doesn’t look convinced, but he doesn’t argue.

The rest of the morning passes in a blur of preparations. Myra leaves briefly to gather the village for her grandmother’s ceremony, returning with a few villagers who cast wary glances in our direction. They whisper amongst themselves, their fear palpable as they carry the old woman’s body from the house.

Fen and I watch from the doorway as they make their way toward the forest, the silence heavy between us. The storm has eased, but the sky remains dark, the air thick

with an unnatural chill.

“She’s scared,” Fen replies, his gaze fixed on the disappearing procession. “Fear makes people reckless.”

I nod, though the unease in my chest only grows. As the villagers vanish into the trees, I can’t help but wonder what Myra isn’t telling us—and what it will cost us when we finally face the beast.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:55 am*

### Chapter 4

#### The Cave

The forest is a labyrinth of gnarled trees and frozen shadows, the ground beneath our boots cracking with frost. The cold bites harder here, more relentless than it was in the village, as if the very woods are alive and determined to drive us back. Myra walks ahead of us, her cloak blending into the pale gray of the storm-worn landscape. She carries a lantern, its faint light casting long, flickering shapes across the snow.

“This path should lead to where the last attack occurred,” Myra says, her voice hardly audible over the hissing of the wind.

I exchange a glance with Fen, gripped by deepening worry. He frowns, his eyes narrowing as he scans for danger.

The silence stretches as we continue deeper into the woods. The storm has eased, but the air is heavy with an unnatural stillness. Every broken branch or crunch of ice is deafening.

“Are you sure we’re not being led in circles?” Fen mutters.

“I’m sure,” Myra snaps, her voice defensive.

But I can feel it too—that faint sense of disorientation, as if the forest is shifting around us. I glance over my shoulder, half-expecting to see the village far closer than it should be, but there’s only the endless expanse of trees and snow.

“We’re nearly there,” Myra says in a tight voice, fingers fidgeting with her red ribbon.

We crest a small hill, and I see it: a clearing, its edges marked by clawed-up snow and the dark, jagged remains of shattered branches. The air feels colder here, sharper, the stillness even more oppressive.

“This is the last place it attacked,” Myra says, stopping at the edge of the clearing. Fen steps forward, his sharp gaze sweeping over the scene. “How long ago?” he says, crouching to inspect the ground.

“Two months.” Myra tightens her cloak around her shoulders as she shifts her gaze to the side.

“A long time,” he mutters, his frown deepening. “We won’t find any tracks.”

“Are the attacks always so infrequent?” I ask, scanning the area for signs of an animal den.

Myra pauses, biting her lip, then shakes her head. “No. They used to come more often.”

“Perhaps something injured the beast,” I say.

Fen scowls. “Or it's hibernating.” He looks at Myra. “Do the attacks slow in winter?”

“I... I don’t know. Maybe.”

Fen stands, his eyes narrowing. “Maybe? Think your village would notice something like that—”

“It’s always winter here,” Myra says defiantly. “So I would have no way of knowing the beast’s behavior in other seasons. This is our weather year round.”

I can’t imagine living like this all year long. How do they even sustain themselves, I wonder. “What else can you tell us? Did anyone see what direction it went from here?”

She hesitates, her lips parting as if to speak, but then she shakes her head. “No,” she says, too slowly. “It always vanishes into the woods.”

I glance at Fen, his jaw tight with suspicion. Something about her answers doesn’t sit right, but I can’t bring myself to press her further. Not yet.

“We keep moving,” I say. “Its den can’t be too far from the village, if its curse is to hunt the people and keep them contained. And if the beast is watching us, staying here won’t help.”

Fen nods, though his gaze lingers on Myra for a moment longer before we continue.

The forest grows darker as we press on, the trees thickening around us as Myra leads the way. The lantern’s light is dim, barely cutting through the gloom, and the cold seems to seep deeper into my bones with every step.

I can’t shake the feeling of being watched. It’s subtle at first—a prickling at the back of my neck, the faint sound of branches shifting in the distance. But as we move deeper, it grows stronger, more insistent.

“Did you hear that?” Fen asks, his hand tightening on his blade.

I freeze, my breath catching as I strain to listen. And then I hear it: a faint, low growl, so soft I almost think I imagined it.

Myra's grip on the lantern falters, her knuckles white. "It's close," she whispers.

Fen moves to my side, his presence solid and grounding.

The growl comes again, louder this time, reverberating through the trees. It's a sound that doesn't belong, something too deep, too primal to be natural.

"Run!" Myra shouts, her voice breaking with panic.

Before I can react, she bolts, the lantern swinging wildly in her grasp as she disappears into the trees.

"Damn it," Fen growls, reaching for me. "We need to move!"

But it's too late. The ground beneath us shifts suddenly, the snow giving way with a deafening crack. I cry out as we're plunged downward, the world tilting as the ground swallows us whole.

When I open my eyes, the first thing I notice is the silence. The wind is gone, replaced by a suffocating stillness. The air is cold and damp, carrying the faint, metallic tang of stone.

I push myself up, my hands brushing against rough, uneven rock. My head throbs, but I'm otherwise unhurt.

"Ari?" Fen's voice cuts through the darkness, sharp with worry.

"I'm here," I say quickly, my heart racing as I search for him.

A faint glimmer of light catches my eye, and I see him a few feet away, brushing snow and dirt from his cloak. His sword is still in his hand, though the blade is nicked

from the fall.

“Are you all right?” he asks, his gaze sweeping over me.

“I think so,” I say with a shaky voice. I glance upward, my stomach sinking as I see the jagged hole above us. Snow and roots hang precariously over the edge, far out of reach. “Where are we?”

He scans our surroundings, his expression grim. “A cave,” he says.

“Yes, I can see that,” I say, my lips curling in amusement despite the seriousness of the situation. “I meant where in relation to town is this cave? I wonder how far it goes in either direction. Maybe this is how the beast gets around so easily without being seen.”

Fen moves to my side, his hand brushing against mine. “If it is, we need to stay alert. We’re now the hunted, rather than the hunter.”

“We need to work on your pep talks,” I say, but I don’t disagree.

Fen takes a slow breath, placing his head against the cave wall, and the earth seems to groan in response. “I can get us out,” says the earth druid, “If “need be.”

I shake my head, gesturing at a set of faint tracks in the dark. They are too large to be from some common animal. “First we go deeper. I suspect it’s how we find the beast.”

The cave is eerily silent, the damp walls glistening faintly in the dim light that filters down through the jagged hole above. Fen’s hand lingers on mine as we begin to move, each step deliberate and cautious on the uneven ground.



The sound of our breathing echoes softly, and for a moment, it's the only noise that breaks the oppressive stillness.

"We haven't been alone like this in a while," Fen says quietly, his voice low and calm as it cuts through the quiet.

I glance at him, his profile sharp and stoic in the faint light. "Trapped in a cave in a snow storm?" I say with a teasing lilt to my voice. "It has been awhile. Good times. Except for the part where you were poisoned and nearly died."

"Except for that part," Fen agrees with a low chuckle.

"Have we been an old boring married couple?" I ask.

He huffs out a soft laugh, the sound warming the cold air between us. "Or a very tired one," he says. "I never imagined raising a child while ruling a kingdom would be so exhausting."

I sigh. "We have lost a bit of ourselves, haven't we?"

His hand brushes against mine as we continue deeper into the cave. The walls begin to narrow, the air growing colder.

"We still have each other," he says.

"I know," I say. "And I cling to that. But... it's hard sometimes," I admit. "Balancing it all. Being a mother, a queen, a wife... sometimes it feels like there's nothing left of me."

Fen slows, turning to face me. His gaze is steady, piercing. "You're everything, Ari," he says, his voice soft but firm. "To me, to her, to the people. You hold us all

together.”

I feel the knot in my chest loosen slightly, his words cutting through the weight I’ve been carrying. “I couldn’t do it without you,” I say, reaching out to touch his cheek.

He leans into my touch, his eyes closing briefly. “You shouldn’t have to,” he murmurs. “I know it’s been challenging since the baby... since the war. But I’m here. Always.”

I step closer, our foreheads touching as the tension between us melts into something warmer, more intimate. “I know,” I whisper, my hand slipping into his.

For a moment, the cave fades away, the cold and the darkness forgotten. It’s just us, the rhythm of our breathing, the quiet reassurance of his presence.

His lips brush against mine, soft and tentative at first, but the kiss deepens, a slow burn that steadies the chaos inside me. My free hand finds the back of his neck, his fingers tightening around mine as we lose ourselves in each other.

When we finally pull away, our foreheads remain pressed together, our breaths mingling in the cold air.

“I’ve missed this,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Me too,” he replies, his voice raw with honesty.

The moment feels sacred, like something we’ve stolen back from the relentless demands of our lives. But it’s interrupted by the faint sound of claws clattering against stone.

We both freeze, our gazes snapping toward the source of the noise.

Fen draws his sword in one fluid motion, stepping protectively in front of me as we move cautiously toward the sound. The cave widens into a small chamber.

We both freeze, looking around. The beast isn't here, and the sound we heard is gone.

"Is this where it lives?" I ask. I take a step forward but Fen holds my arm, stopping me.

"Look," he says, pointing.

There are chains attached to the stone walls, with cuffs at the end. Four of them.

Dried blood stains the ground..

There are bones piled high on one side of the cavern, and a makeshift sleeping mat on the other.

On top the sleeping mat is a single red ribbon, one edge ripped and fraying.

The realization hits like a blow, the warmth of our moment together replaced by a cold sense of betrayal.

"Does that ribbon remind you of something?" I ask, my voice trembling.

"It does," Fen says, thinking the same thing.

"Why would the other half of Myra's ribbon be in the den of the beast?"

"I don't know," he says, his voice low, "but we're going to find out."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:55 am*

### Chapter 5

#### The Beast

We follow the path we believe the beast took, traveling deeper into the labyrinth of tunnels.

A low growl echoes through the cave, reverberating in my chest. It's primal, deep, and getting close. The oppressive silence that follows is somehow worse, pressing down on us as we strain to hear what might come next.

Fen moves forward with deliberate precision, his sword glinting faintly in the dim light filtering from above. His every step is calculated, his posture taut and ready. I flex my fingers, magic sizzling at my fingertips, my breath fogging the cold air as I follow.

The growl comes again, this time from another direction. My pulse quickens. Whatever it is, it's circling us. The sound of the beast echoes through the tunnels, making it difficult to identify a direction.

"Stay close," Fen murmurs, his eyes scanning the shadows.

"I'm not going anywhere," I reply, though my voice feels too loud in the suffocating stillness.

The faint light from above casts long, twisting shadows across the uneven walls, and for a moment, I think I see movement—a flicker of something darker than the

gloom. The growl grows louder, resonating like the low rumble of distant thunder, and the shadows shift again.

“Fen,” I whisper, my voice barely audible.

“I see it,” he says, his tone sharp.

The thing moves closer, just at the edge of the faint light. Its eyes appear first—two orbs of glowing amber, flickering like firelight. They lock onto us, unblinking and unnervingly intelligent. The rest of its form emerges slowly, as if the darkness itself is reluctant to release it.

It’s massive. Its fur is black as midnight, thick and matted, rippling as it moves. Its body is wolf-like, but twisted, wrong—too large, its limbs stretched unnaturally, claws scraping against the stone floor. Its breath fogs the air, carrying the scent of decay.

The beast.

“Back away, slowly,” Fen says, his voice low and controlled.

I take a step back, careful not to make any sudden movements, but the beast snarls, its lips curling back to reveal jagged, yellowed teeth. It lowers its head, its muscles coiling as if preparing to pounce.

“It’s not going to let us go,” I murmur.

“Then we fight,” Fen says grimly.

He’s about to say something else but his words are cut off as the beast lunges forward with terrifying speed. Fen pushes me back, meeting the creature head-on with a clash

of steel against claw. The force of the impact reverberates through the cave, and I stumble but manage to keep my footing.

“Fen!” I scream, my voice echoing off the cavern walls.

The beast snarls, swiping with claws as long as daggers, but Fen moves with precision, ducking under its swing and countering with a slash to its side. The blade cuts deep, black ichor spilling onto the ground, but the creature barely flinches. It rounds on Fen with a deafening roar, swiping at him again with enough force to send shards of stone flying.

“Stay back, Ari!” Fen shouts, his focus never wavering. “I can handle this!”

But I can’t just stand there as the beast lunges for Fen again.

“No!” I rush toward him, drawing the beast’s attention, its glowing eyes locking onto me. It snarls, baring its teeth, and I can feel the sheer weight of its hatred pressing against me. This thing isn’t just an animal. It’s something worse.

“Ari, now!” Fen’s voice snaps me into action, and I raise my hands, summoning the light within me.

The magic rushes through my veins, warm and electric, and I unleash it in a blinding burst. A spear of silver light arcs from my palms, slamming into the beast’s side and forcing it to stumble back with a pained roar. Its claws scrape against the stone as it regains its balance, but the light has left its mark—a burn along its flank that smokes faintly in the cold air.

“Keep it off me!” Fen calls as he circles around the beast, his blade poised for another strike.

I nod, my heart pounding as I focus on the creature, my magic flickering at my fingertips. The beast growls low, its glowing eyes narrowing as it stalks toward me, its movements predatory and deliberate.

I release another burst of light, aiming for its chest, but it dodges with inhuman speed, darting to the side and lunging toward Fen. He meets it with a powerful swing, his blade slicing across its shoulder, but the beast retaliates with a swipe that sends him sprawling.

“Fen!” I cry, panic clawing at my throat.

“I’m fine!” he shouts, rolling to his feet with practiced ease. “Focus on the magic, Ari. It’s the only thing slowing it down.”

The beast rounds on me again, its amber eyes burning with rage. It charges, its massive frame barreling toward me like a storm. I brace myself, raising my hands and summoning every ounce of magic I can muster.

The light explodes from my palms, brighter and stronger than before, slamming into the beast’s chest and forcing it back. It roars, the sound echoing like thunder, and for a moment, I think it might retreat.

But then it shakes itself, its massive body bristling with fury, and charges again.

This time, Fen is ready. He intercepts the beast mid-lunge, his sword flashing as he drives it deep into the creature’s side. The beast howls in pain, its claws raking across Fen’s shoulder, leaving deep gashes in his leather armor.

“Get clear!” Fen shouts, pulling his blade free and dodging another swipe.

I backpedal, my magic flickering as I try to catch my breath.

The beast roars again, its fury growing as black ichor drips from its wounds. It seems to grow larger, its movements more erratic, as if the pain is pushing it closer to some breaking point.

“Fen, we can’t keep this up!” I shout, my voice hoarse. “We need to end this!”

“Working on it!” he growls, parrying another strike and driving the beast back a step.

Desperation fuels my next move. I draw on the magic deeper within me, summoning a burst of energy that crackles at my fingertips. The light grows brighter, hotter, until it feels like it might consume me.

“Move!” I scream, and Fen dives to the side just as I release the magic.

The light arcs across the cavern, striking the beast with the force of a lightning bolt. It howls, the sound shaking the very stone, and stumbles back, smoke rising from its charred fur.

For a moment, it falters, its massive body trembling. Its glowing eyes dim, flickering like dying embers, and I think it might collapse.

But then it lets out one final, deafening roar, and disappears into the shadows.

The silence that follows is deafening, broken only by the sound of my ragged breathing and the faint drip of water from the cavern walls.

Fen is at my side in an instant, his hand steadying me as I sway on my feet. “Are you all right?” he asks, his voice sharp with concern.

I nod, though my limbs feel like lead and my chest aches from the effort of using so much magic. “It’s gone,” I whisper. “For now.”



He nods, his eyes scanning the shadows for any sign of the beast. “But it’ll be back. We need to get out of here and return to the village. I have a few questions for our gracious host.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:55 am*

### Chapter 6

#### The Villagers

The sun is close to setting and the village is in turmoil when we arrive. A cacophony of shouts, the clang of rusted metal, and the dull thud of boots stomping through the snow greets us as we step back into the square. The air is thick with tension, sharper than the cold that bites at my face.

“What now?” Fen mutters, his hand instinctively going to the hilt of his sword. His gaze sweeps the scene, and I follow it to the source of the commotion.

A mob has formed near the central statue of the Midnight Star. Torches flare, casting flickering shadows across the villagers’ angry faces as they swarm toward a single figure. Myra stands at the base of the statue, her arms spread wide as if to hold them back, though she looks impossibly small against the encroaching crowd.

“This doesn’t look goods,” I whisper, quickening my pace. Fen keeps close, his presence steady beside me.

“Enough!” Myra’s voice cuts through the noise, surprisingly strong, though it’s tinged with desperation. “You can’t go after him! You don’t understand what you’re dealing with.”

“We understand enough!” a burly man with a pitchfork shouts, his face twisted with fury. “That beast has taken too much from us already. We won’t stand by and let it happen again.”

“She’s defending it!” a woman cries, her voice shrill. “She’s always defended it. Just like she’s defending them!” Her finger jabs in our direction, and I stiffen as dozens of eyes turn on Fen and me.

“You brought the Midnight Star into our midst,” the man snarls, his grip tightening on the pitchfork. “Where has she been all this time? Why did it take her so long to come? It’s because of her we’re cursed in the first place!”

The words hit me like a blow. “What?” I say, my voice faltering. “That’s not true. I—”

“Don’t act ignorant!” another villager shouts. “You’re the reason we’ve suffered for centuries. The Midnight Star brought this curse upon us, and now she’s here to... what? Gloat?”

“Stop this!” Myra cries, stepping forward. “You don’t know what you’re saying. She’s here to help us. She can end the curse.”

The crowd surges forward, shouts of derision rising like a tide. “She’s done nothing but bring more suffering!” a woman yells.

Fen tenses beside me, his eyes narrowing. “This is getting out of hand,” he mutters.

I take a step forward, raising my voice to be heard over the din. “Enough!” I shout. “Let us—”

“This isn’t your business,” someone shouts back. “Go take a hike in the woods, Midnight Star, and leave us to deal with our own problems.”

Anger flares in my chest, but before I can respond, two men seize Myra by the arms, dragging her toward the small stone building. She struggles, her protests drowned out

by the crowd's jeers.

"Wait!" I shout, but no one listens. The heavy wooden door slams shut behind her, and the mob begins to disperse, their energy redirected into sharpening weapons and gathering supplies for a hunt they don't understand.

I turn to Fen, my hands clenched into fists. "We have to talk to her," I say.

He nods, his expression grim. "Let's go."

The jail is cold and dim, lit only by a single lantern that casts flickering shadows across the rough stone walls. Myra sits on a wooden bench, her head bowed, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. She doesn't look up as we enter.

"Myra," I say softly, stepping closer. "Why didn't you tell us?"

She lifts her head, her eyes red and hollow. "Tell you what?" she asks, her voice flat.

Fen leans against the wall, his arms crossed. "We found the other half of your ribbon in an underground cavern."

"On a bed," I say, softening my voice against Fen's anger. You catch more flies with honey than vinegar, as my mother always says. A lesson my warrior husband is still struggling to learn. "And there were chains in the walls. But why?"

Her face crumples, and for a moment, I think she won't answer. But then she takes a shaky breath and speaks. "I'm in love with him," she whispers, her voice breaking.

The words hang in the air, heavy and impossible. I exchange a stunned glance with Fen.

“In love?” I repeat, struggling to process what she’s saying. “With the beast?”

“He’s not... he’s not always like that,” she says, her voice trembling, hand clutching her ribbon “He was cursed when the village was cursed. He’s a good man. When the curse isn’t... when he isn’t...” She trails off, tears streaming down her face.

I’ll tell you everything.

## The Beast and Myra

The first time I saw Kael, he was a shadow in the snow, barely a shape against the blinding white. I remember it so vividly—the storm was raging, the kind of winter fury that turns the forest into a frozen graveyard. I had wandered too far from the village, my basket empty because the traps I’d set for rabbits had come up barren yet again. I was cold, angry, hungry, and desperate.

And then I saw him.

At first, I thought he was dead. His body lay crumpled near a thicket of trees, snow already beginning to cover his pale skin. I didn’t recognize him as the beast—not then. He looked like a man who had lost everything, his chest barely rising and falling with the shallow breaths of someone clinging to life. His dark hair was plastered to his forehead, his hands bloodied and raw.

I should have run. The stories we grew up with, the ones whispered around firelight, always began with foolish girls who didn’t run when they had the chance. But I was nineteen and reckless. Something about him—his vulnerability, his sheer humanity—called to me.

I dropped my basket and knelt beside him, my heart pounding as I reached out to touch his shoulder. His skin was like ice, and his body flinched at the contact. His

eyes fluttered open, and for a moment, I was caught in their depth—a sharp amber hue, almost glowing, like a predator's.

“Help me,” he whispered, his voice barely audible over the wind.

It was enough to shatter whatever fear I'd been holding onto. I pulled off my cloak and draped it over him, murmuring reassurances as I tried to figure out how to drag him back to the village. He was heavier than he looked, his body dense with muscle, and it took all my strength just to get him upright.

I didn't make it far before he stopped me, his hand gripping my arm with surprising force. “No,” he said, his eyes wild with fear. “Not the village. They'll... they'll kill me.”

I didn't understand what he meant then, but something in his voice convinced me to listen. Instead, I helped him to a hollow beneath a fallen tree, shielding him from the worst of the storm. I gathered what little wood I could find and built a fire, sitting close to him as the warmth slowly returned to his face.

He didn't say much that night. He didn't have to. I saw the scars on his body, the haunted look in his eyes, and I knew he had been through something unimaginable.

When the storm eased, I left him there with promises to return.

I went back the next day, and the day after that.

At first, Kael was cautious, his answers clipped and guarded. He told me he had been a soldier, a protector of the village during the ancient wars between vampires and fae. He spoke of battles fought in the dead of night, of friends lost, of betrayals real and imagined. But the details were sparse, his pain too raw to share.

Still, something about him drew me in. Maybe it was the way his voice softened when he thanked me for bringing him food, or the way his lips curved into the faintest of smiles when I teased him about his terrible jokes.

It didn't take long for me to notice the strange patterns in his behavior. Some days, he was strong and sharp, his wit quick and his movements precise. Other days, he was distant, his eyes clouded with something dark.

I remember the first time I saw him change.

It was late, the moon high in the sky, and I had brought him a blanket I'd stitched from scraps of fabric. He had smiled when I handed it to him, but then his face twisted, his body jerking as if some unseen force had taken hold.

"Run," he choked out, his voice strangled. "Get away from me."

I didn't understand at first, but then I saw it—his hands, clawing at the ground, his body contorting in ways no human body should. His screams turned guttural, animalistic, as fur sprouted along his arms and his jaw elongated into a snout.

I should have been terrified. I should have run and never looked back.

But I stayed.

"Kael," I whispered, my voice trembling. "It's me. You're safe."

His amber eyes locked onto mine, wild and feral, and for a moment, I thought he would attack. But then he stilled, his massive form trembling as if holding back some deep, primal urge.

I stepped closer, my heart pounding. "You're still you," I said, more to convince

myself than him. “This... this isn’t who you are.”

The beast growled low in its throat, but it didn’t attack. It simply watched me, its gaze filled with a sorrow so deep it nearly broke me.

When the transformation finally reversed, Kael collapsed into my arms, his body limp and trembling. He didn’t speak that night, but the way he clung to me said everything.

Over time, I pieced together the truth.

Kael had been cursed by the Midnight Star, but why, I wasn’t sure.

“I would never betray this village,” he told me one night, voice breaking. “I would die for them. So why? Why did she turn me into this immortal beast?”

I didn’t know what to say. How do you comfort someone who has been broken so completely?

All I could do was stay by his side.

We fell in love in the quiet moments between his pain.

I showed him the beauty of the forest, the way the snow sparkled in the sunlight, the way the trees swayed in the wind like they were dancing. He taught me to listen to the sounds of the woods, to hear the whispers of the animals and the creak of the branches.

It wasn’t easy. The curse hung over us like a shadow, and there were days when I thought it would consume him entirely. But we found ways to hold onto each other, to remind ourselves that there was still light in the darkness.



I tried to break the curse. I searched the forest, the village, the old stories for anything that might help. But the answers were always just out of reach, the magic too ancient and tangled to unravel.

“Why do you stay?” he asked me one night, his voice heavy with guilt. “You could have a life, a future. You don’t have to waste it on me.”

“I stay because I love you,” I said simply. “And I’ll keep fighting for you, no matter how long it takes.”

But now, years later, the Mythos tree is dying, and the curse is growing stronger. Kael’s transformations are more frequent, his control slipping further with each passing day.

I’ve tried to save him. I’ve done everything I can.

But I can’t do it alone.

“You knew all this time,” Fen says, his voice cold. “You knew, and you didn’t tell us.”

“I was trying to find a way to break the curse,” she says desperately. “I convinced my grandmother that only the Midnight Star could do it.”

The mention of the Midnight Star sends a chill down my spine. This clearly happened long before I was born. There have been many Midnight Stars over the ages. But it was one of my family. And it is my legacy, and now, my problem to fix.

Before I can process what she’s said, a low, mournful howl cuts through the night, sending a shiver down my spine. Myra goes pale, her eyes wide with fear.

“He’ll attack tonight,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’ve kept him chained at night to stop him from hurting anyone, but tonight... I won’t be there to stop him. You have to save him. And the village. No one else can die.”

Her plea pierces through my shock, her desperation igniting something fierce within me. I glance at Fen, his jaw tight, his eyes burning with determination. Now we know why the attacks stopped the last few months.

“Is there anything else you can tell us? About the beast or the curse?” I ask before we leave her. “Your grandmother, she was trying to tell us something before she passed. Do you have any idea what it could have been? She said ‘jou’. Does that mean anything to you?”

She starts to shake her head, then pauses. “Wait, maybe. My grandmother, she kept a journal. I never read it. But she put everything into it. I know she’s been obsessed with breaking this curse, though not for the same reasons as me.” Myra pauses. “She never would have understood our love. It would have killed her. But I guess in the end, it did just that anyways.”

Myra wipes away a tear, and my heart can’t help but break for all she’s gone through.

“Where is the journal?” Fen asks, and though I can tell he used his nice voice, no one else would be able to.

“I’m not sure,” she says. “She was always very private about it.”

“We’ll look for it,” I promise, as we sprint back to her cottage.

The howl rises again, louder this time, and I steel myself for what’s to come. Tonight, we face the beast—and whatever truths lie hidden within the curse that now binds us all.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:55 am*

### Chapter 7

#### The Journal

Fen and I burst through the cottage door, the storm outside whipping snow against the windows as if the wind itself were urging us to hurry. The interior is dim and silent, save for the crackling of dying embers in the hearth. Fen moves with purpose, his sharp eyes scanning the cottage. “Where should we begin?” he asks.

“We don’t have time to tear this place apart. Let me see if I can use my magic.” With the help of Kayla, I’ve been practicing my magic over the last year or so and developed quite a few practical uses for it. Including finding things, which is especially helpful when you have a wolf and a dragon who like to play hide and seek with your daughter’s favorite toys from time to time.

I pull a small crystal from my pocket and close my eyes for a moment as I hold it in front of me.

I channel my magic into it, then open my eyes.

“Find me the grandmother’s journal,” I say, as I keep my intent focused.

The crystal begins spinning slowly. I walk through the cottage, noting when the crystal slows, and following the path when it speeds up. As I approach the hearth, the crystal spins furiously.

“It’s somewhere near here,” I say, hovering the crystal over various parts of the stone.

The crystal is most reactive when I approach what looks like a slightly loose floor board near the hearth. “Fen, looks at this.”

He approaches, studying the floor as I pry the board off with my fingers.

“Nice trick, he says with a smirk. “Could you use that to find the beast?”

I shake my head. “No. It only works in a small area.” The board gives way, revealing a small, leather-bound journal nestled in the hollow beneath.

I pull it out and show Fen triumphantly, my fingers brushing the cracked leather of the cover.

“Read quickly,” he says. “I’ll get us some food, even if I have to hunt it myself. We need all our strength for what’s coming.” He’s right. We’re both part fae, but we’re also vampire, and it’s been a while since we’ve had blood.

I nod, clutching the journal tightly. “Be careful.”

He leans in, brushing a quick kiss against my forehead. “Always.” With that, he’s gone, the door closing behind him with a thud that leaves the cottage feeling eerily quiet.

I stoke the fire, then sink into a chair near the flames, the flickering firelight casting dancing shadows across the pages as I open the journal. The handwriting is delicate and precise, each word penned with care. Myra’s grandmother’s voice seems to whisper to me as I begin to read.

The first entries detail the village’s history—its struggles during the original vampire/fae war, the desperation of its people, and their hope for aid from the Midnight Star. My fingers trace the ink as the words grow darker, heavier with regret.

"We denied her. The Midnight Star came to us, seeking each of us, young and old, to pick up a weapon and fight for her. But we could not send our farmers and children into guaranteed death. We could not even send our greatest warrior, for who would defend us then? And so, she labeled us traitors and cursed us."

The next entry chills me to my core.

"The curse came swiftly. She warned us as she departed: 'Your champion will rise to protect you, but your cowardice will twist his heart. He will defend you no more, for you shall bear the burden of your own betrayal.'"

I turn the page, my breath catching as the entries shift to the beast's transformation. The village's defender, a warrior of unmatched strength and loyalty, was twisted by the curse into the very creature that now torments them.

"He fought for us, bled for us, and we repaid him with cowardice. Now he is both our punishment and our shame. Each attack is a reminder of what we did—what we failed to do."

Tears prick my eyes as I read of his suffering—his mind slipping away with each full moon, the battle between his humanity and the beast within him growing harder to fight. The final entry is a plea.

"If the Midnight Star ever returns, tell her this: We were wrong. We see that now. She is the only one who can free him."

As I continue to read, my breath catches. The rest of these words are meant for Myra.

I close the journal, my hands trembling. The room feels colder now, the weight of the truth pressing down on me. The Midnight Star who cursed this village may not have been me, but the legacy of her actions is now mine to bear.

The door creaks open, and Fen steps inside carrying two goblets of fresh blood.

I take one and drink deeply, the blood giving my magic and strength a definite boost. "Where did you find the blood? Or the goblets for that matter?"

Fen winks. "I have my ways. I think some of the villagers fear me more than the beast." He takes a deep drink of his own cup, then purses his lips. "Did you find anything useful?"

"Yes," I whisper. "The village... they were cursed for refusing to help the Midnight Star during the war against Lucian. Their defender, Kael, was turned into the beast as punishment. He's not a monster, Fen. He's a victim."

"And now?" he asks.

"Now," I say, setting the goblet down, "I'll need to channel the Midnight Star to win this battle. And you..." I meet his gaze, my voice steady despite the storm raging inside me. "You'll need to fight like the Moonlight Prince. The one who placed the curse is gone, yet something still sustains her magic. We need to find what. This isn't about killing the beast. It's about freeing him."

Fen nods, his eyes gleaming with determination. "Then we'll free him," he says. "Together."

The howl rises again, a haunting cry that shakes the very air around us. I grip Fen's hand, drawing strength from his unwavering presence.

"Together," I repeat, and the firelight flickers as we prepare to face the darkness once more.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:55 am*

### Chapter 8

#### The Preparation

The air in the village is tense, crackling with fear and defiance. Snow swirls through the narrow streets as Fen and I make our way to the central square, where villagers gather in chaotic clusters. The sound of sharpening blades and the clatter of rusted armor fills the cold night air.

“They’re going to get themselves killed,” Fen mutters, his voice tight with frustration.

“They’re scared,” I reply, though I share his worry. “Fear makes people do reckless things.”

We step into the square, where a burly man—the same one who had accused Myra earlier—is rallying the crowd. “No more waiting!” he shouts, his voice carrying over the murmur of voices. “The beast will come, as it always does. But this time, we’ll be ready. We’ll kill it and end this curse ourselves.”

A chorus of agreement rises from the villagers, their faces set with grim determination. Pitchforks and rusted swords glint in the faint torchlight.

I step forward, raising my voice to address the crowd. “Listen to me!” I call, but my words are met with glares and muttered insults.

“Why should we listen to you?” a woman sneers, her knuckles white around the handle of a scythe. “You’re the Midnight Star. You’re the reason this happened to

us.”

“That’s not true,” I say firmly, though the accusation cuts deep. “I’m here to help you. But if you face the beast like this, you’ll only get yourselves killed. Please, barricade yourselves inside...” My eyes scan the village. “There. The meeting hall. It’s the safest place, and we can defend it together.”

“Hide like cowards?” the burly man scoffs. “No. We’ve waited long enough. We’ll end this tonight.”

Fen steps beside me, his voice low and dangerous. “You’re not prepared for what’s coming. That beast is stronger, faster, and smarter than any of you realize. You won’t stand a chance.”

The man meets Fen’s gaze with a defiant glare. “We’ve faced it before. We’ll face it again.”

“And how many have you lost?” I ask, my voice soft but piercing. “How many more are you willing to sacrifice?”

A heavy silence falls over the crowd, but it’s short-lived. “You don’t belong here,” another voice calls out. “This isn’t your fight.”

Fen’s jaw tightens, but I place a hand on his arm, shaking my head. Arguing with them will only push them further away. “Do what you must,” I say, my voice resigned. “But when the beast comes, remember this: it doesn’t have to be this way.”

We leave the square, the weight of their stubbornness settling heavily on my shoulders. Back in the relative quiet of the cottage, I set the journal on the table, its pages worn and familiar. I’ve read it twice already, but I flip through it again, searching for anything I might have missed.



Fen stands by the window, his silhouette framed by the frost-covered glass. He's watching the square, his expression unreadable. "They're fools," he says after a long silence.

"They're desperate," I reply, though my voice lacks conviction. I turn back to the journal, my fingers brushing over the passage about the Midnight Star's curse. "There has to be something we're not seeing."

My gaze drifts to the statue of the Midnight Star in the square, visible through the window. Its weathered surface glows faintly in the torchlight, the figure's outstretched hand pointing toward the forest.

"I need some fresh air," I murmur, rising from my seat.

The snow crunches under our boots as I guide us to the dying Mythos tree and the statue of my predecessor. Up close, its details are even more striking. The Midnight Star stands tall and proud, her features serene yet commanding. Her hand points toward the dark woods, her expression resolute.

I run my fingers over the cold stone, desperate for answers, for guidance, for the wisdom to end this.

Fen stands beside me, his eyes scanning the surrounding area. The sun sets, golden torches and pale moonlight lighting the village. The cold grows colder. Another blizzard is coming.

A chilling howl echoes through the village, sending a shiver down my spine. It's closer than I expected—closer than it should be.

"It's here," Fen says, his voice low and tense. His hand goes to his sword, his body coiled and ready for a fight.

The villagers' shouts ring out moments later, followed by the unmistakable sound of chaos—screams, the clash of metal, the thud of bodies hitting the ground. The beast has arrived, and it's wasting no time.

The burly man who challenged me before is the first to flee, screams tearing from his throat.

The rest follow, and the beast gives chase.

Their torches light the night, snuffed out as they fall to the snow one by one.

"We have to stop this," I say, turning to Fen. My heart pounds in my chest, the weight of the moment pressing down on me. "Before anyone else gets hurt."

We rush forward, placing ourselves in front of the beast. I notice the young boy, Micas, stumble past us, and gesture for him to hide. He runs to the meeting hall.

Fen's voice cuts through the growing blizzard. "Ari, look out—

The creature leaps at me, and Fen lunges between me and the creature.

The beast runs straight toward us, leaping into the air as Fen places himself between me and the creature.

My magic crackles from my hands, ready to fight. But our intent isn't to kill, though the beast's surely is.

That puts us at a disadvantage.

Releasing short bursts of my magic, I keep the beast at bay as I try to figure out what to do.

It isn't until the creature breaks through Fen and slashes at me, clawing crimson lines into my flesh, that I realize what I must do.

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### Chapter 9

#### The Battle

As the beast's claws rake across my side, pain explodes through me. My blood sprays against the cold, weathered stone of the Midnight Star statue, and for a moment, the world narrows to that single, crimson splash. The statue begins to glow faintly, a flicker of light in the darkness. My breath catches as I realize what it means.

"Ari!" Fen's shout pulls me back, his sword flashing as he parries a blow from the beast. His movements are fluid and deadly, but the creature is relentless, its primal fury impossible to contain.

"It's not the beast," I whisper, the realization sinking in. My blood pulses with magic, and the statue's glow responds. "It's the statue. The tree. I have to..."

Fen doesn't hear me over the beast's roar, but it doesn't matter. I press my hands to the stone, ignoring the searing pain in my side, and let my magic flow into it. The warmth beneath my palms intensifies, spreading through the statue like fire through dry tinder. The light grows stronger, illuminating the square in golden radiance.

"Ari, stop!" Fen's voice is filled with panic as he fights to keep the beast at bay. "You're draining yourself!"

"I have to," I say, my voice trembling but resolute. "This is the only way."

The glow envelops the statue, and I feel it pulling at me, demanding more. My magic

pours out, faster and faster, until it feels like I'm being hollowed out. My vision blurs, my knees weaken, but I don't let go.

Fen's sword clashes against the beast's claws, his frustration and fear evident in every movement. "Damn it, Ari, hold on!" he shouts, but he can't leave the fight to help me. The beast is too strong, too close to breaking through.

I sag against the statue, my strength nearly gone, when a voice cuts through the chaos—sharp, angry, and ancient.

"You dare?"

A figure materializes before me, formed from the light of the statue itself. Her presence is commanding, her face both beautiful and wrathful. She radiates power, her eyes burning with a mixture of pain and fury. The Midnight Star who came before.

"You betray me," she says, her voice resonating like thunder. "This village... they turned their backs on me, on our people, when we needed them most. They deserve their torment."

Her words cut like shards of ice, but I force myself to stand, meeting her gaze despite the trembling of my body. "And what about the innocent lives?" I ask, my voice cracking. "The children born into this curse? The man you turned into that beast? Do they deserve this?"

She hesitates, her anger flickering. "They should have fought for me. For the fae. They chose their cowardice."

"And you chose vengeance," I counter, my voice gaining strength. "But vengeance doesn't heal. It doesn't undo what was done to you. Keeping them imprisoned like

this... it's cruelty. It's unnecessary. Let them go. Let this curse end."

The Midnight Star's form shifts, her fury battling with something deeper, more fragile. "Why should I? Why should I forgive?"

"Because I will," I say, stepping closer despite the strain. "I will forgive them, and I will fight for them. I've already given everything I have to save them. You can too. You were their champion once. Be that again."

Her gaze softens, the weight of her anger finally giving way to sorrow. "You would sacrifice yourself... for them?"

"I would," I whisper, my magic flickering like a candle in the wind. "Because they deserve a chance to make it right."

For a moment, silence hangs between us. Then, she reaches out, her hand brushing against my forehead. A surge of power floods through me, overwhelming and radiant. "Then take my strength," she says softly. "Finish this."

The warmth becomes a blaze, filling every corner of me with light. My body feels weightless as I rise into the air, the glow emanating from me like the sun itself. My blood boils with power. My bones tremble, threatening to break under the flood of energy. The blizzard fades and snow melts, shadows retreat, and the curse begins to unravel. The beast lets out a final, mournful howl as the light engulfs it.

When the light fades, I collapse into Fen's waiting arms, my breath ragged but steady. The square is silent, the villagers frozen in awe. The snow has melted, revealing the earth beneath. The oppressive weight that hung over the village is gone.

At the base of the statue lies a man, his chest rising and falling with shallow breaths. His features are sharp and regal, his hair dark and wild. Myra appears, having

escaped or been set free from her prison, and runs toward him with tears streaming down her face.

“Please,” she sobs, falling to her knees beside him. “Please wake up. Please be alive.”

The man stirs, his eyes fluttering open. Myra lets out a choked cry, cradling his face in her hands. “You’re free,” she whispers. “You’re finally free.”

Fen tightens his grip on me, his voice low and filled with relief. “You did it, Ari.”

I lean into him, exhaustion threatening to pull me under. “We did it,” I murmur, my eyes drifting closed as the warmth of the sun—real and unbroken—spreads across the village for the first time in centuries.

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*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:55 am*

### Chapter 10

#### The Lovers

The morning after the battle dawns clear and warm, the first true sunlight this village has seen in centuries. It touches every corner of the square, banishing the lingering shadows and illuminating the faces of the villagers as they gather around the Mythos tree in the center of the village, now vibrant and alive, its branches reaching high into the sky. It feels like a different world.

Fen and I stand near the newly freed man—Kael. His skin still holds a pallor from years of the curse, but his eyes are bright as he gazes at Myra, who hasn't left his side since last night. Her hand remains entwined with his, her touch a lifeline.

"Thank you," Kael says, his voice rough but sincere as he looks at me. "For freeing me. For freeing all of us."

Myra steps forward, her eyes glistening with tears. "I don't know how to repay you."

I reach into my cloak and pull out the journal Myra's grandmother had hidden for so long. I press it into her hands, holding her gaze as I speak.

"Read it," I say softly. "Your grandmother knew. She knew you loved Kael, and that he wasn't evil. She didn't bring us here to kill him; she brought us here to free him so you two could be together. She wanted nothing more than for you to find happiness."

Myra's lips tremble as she clutches the journal to her chest. A sob escapes her, and



she steps forward, wrapping her arms around me in a fierce hug. “Thank you,” she whispers. “Thank you for everything.”

I hug her back, my throat tight with emotion. When she pulls away, she looks between me and Fen, her expression resolute. “There’s something I want to show you,” she says.

She leads us to the Mythos tree, its bark glistening with a faint golden sheen. The air around it hums with magic, vibrant and alive. Myra places a hand on the tree’s trunk, her fingers glowing faintly as they make contact.

“Its power is restored,” she says. “My grandmother’s magic passed to me when the curse was broken. I can use the tree to send you back to your world.”

Fen steps closer, inspecting the tree with a cautious expression. “You’re sure it’s safe?”

Myra smiles faintly. “It brought you here, didn’t it? Trust me, it will take you home.”

I glance back at the villagers, who stand in small clusters, their faces still marked by wonder and hope. Turning to Myra, I take her hands in mine. “We’ll send supplies,” I promise. “You won’t be alone. And if you’d like, you’re welcome to join us for the Solstice celebration at High Castle.”

Myra’s eyes widen slightly, and a small smile tugs at her lips. “We’ll think about it,” she says.

Fen rests a hand on my shoulder, his touch grounding. “It’s time,” he says gently.

I nod, turning back to the tree. Its magic calls to me, a faint pull in my chest that feels like both a farewell and a welcome. Myra steps back, her hands glowing brighter as

she channels the tree's power. The golden light intensifies, wrapping around Fen and me in a warm, comforting embrace.

"Goodbye," Myra says, her voice steady but tinged with emotion. "And thank you."

The light swallows us whole, the world dissolving into a blur of warmth and magic. When it fades, we find ourselves back in the throne room of High Castle.

Chaos greets us. Advisors and courtiers rush about, their faces marked with panic. Kayla is ordering people around, but she freezes when she sees, her eyes widening.

"You had just disappeared. Now you're back. What happened?" she asks.

I frown. "Kayla, how long have we been gone?"

"I don't know. A few minutes. I was about to form a search party," she says.

I look to Fen and shrug. "Breaking the curse must have reset time somehow?"

Kayla's frown turns to a look of confusion. "What curse? What are you two talking about?"

I smile. "We'll explain everything. But first, we need to add a village to our maps and get a convoy of supplies out to them right away."

### Chapter 11

#### The Solstice

The solstice night arrives with a crisp chill in the air and a sky glittering with stars. High Castle is alive with celebration, the great hall transformed into a shimmering display of garlands, candles, and frosted greenery with the new Mythos Tree the centerpiece. The sound of laughter and music fills the air as guests gather, their faces bright with anticipation.

I stand on the raised platform at the front of the hall, Fen by my side, his steady presence a source of comfort. Kayla stands at my other side holding our baby who I haven't wanted out of my sight since we returned.

Yami is perched on my shoulder. He was miserable without me. And Baron has been pacing back and forth between us since we returned.

The crowd quiets as I raise my hands, a warm smile spreading across my face.

“Tonight, we celebrate the longest night of the year,” I begin, my voice carrying across the hall. “But also the promise of the sun’s return. Just as the sun rises after even the darkest night, so too must we rise together—stronger, braver, and united as one.”

I pause, my gaze sweeping over the crowd. “This is not just a night for reflection. It is a night for growth, for love, for family—not only the family we are born into but the family we choose. Let us honor this night with joy, with laughter, and with the hope

that we can grow together into a future of true happiness.”

As the words leave my lips, a golden light begins to emanate from the Mythos Tree at the center of the hall. Gasps ripple through the crowd as the light intensifies, its glow warm and radiant. The tree hums with energy, and then, as if by magic, figures begin to emerge from its base.

Myra steps through first, her eyes wide with awe as she takes in the scene. Behind her is Kael, looking healthy and whole, his hand resting lightly on her shoulder. They are followed by more villagers, their expressions a mixture of wonder and hesitation.

I smile, my heart swelling as I step forward. “Welcome,” I say, my voice warm. “You’ve come a long way to join us. Tonight, you are part of this family.”

The villagers’ tension eases, and murmurs of excitement ripple through the crowd. I turn back to the assembled guests, raising my voice once more. “This is what it means to find family. To open your arms to those in need, to build bridges instead of walls. Let us honor them and honor this night with joy. Eat, dance, celebrate. Tonight, we are all one.”

The hall erupts into applause and cheers as the music swells. I step down from the platform, making my way to Myra and Kael. Myra throws her arms around me, laughing through her tears.

“You kept your promise,” she says, her voice trembling with emotion. “I can’t thank you enough.”

I hug her tightly. “I’m so glad you could make it,” I say, pulling back to look at her. Myra glances at Kael, her smile soft and full of love. “It’s a new era for our village,” she says. “We want to be part of this kingdom. Part of this community.”

“You always will be,” I reply.

As the night wears on, the celebration grows more jubilant. Laughter and music fill the air, and the hall is alive with dancing and feasting. It is during one of these quieter moments that Kael drops to one knee before Myra, holding a small, simple ring in his hand. The hall falls silent as he looks up at her, his expression full of devotion.

“Myra,” he says, his voice steady but thick with emotion. “You stood by me when I was at my worst, when I was something no one could love. Now that I’m free, I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?”

Myra’s hands fly to her mouth as tears spill down her cheeks. “Yes,” she whispers, and then louder, “Yes! Of course, yes!”

The hall erupts into cheers and applause as Kael rises, slipping the ring onto her finger before pulling her into a kiss. The joy in the room is infectious, and I find myself laughing and clapping along with everyone else.

Later, as the night begins to wind down, Fen and I retreat to our chambers. The warmth of the celebration lingers, but there is a quiet intimacy in the space we now share. I step into his arms, leaning against him as the weight of the night finally eases.

“You were incredible tonight,” Fen says, his voice low and full of affection.

“So were you,” I reply, looking up at him. “I couldn’t have done any of this without you.”

He brushes a strand of hair from my face, his touch gentle. “I’m proud of you, Ari. Of everything we’ve built together. And everything we’ll continue to build.”

I smile, my heart full. “I love you, Fen.”

“And I love you,” he murmurs, leaning down to kiss me. The world fades away as we lose ourselves in each other, the warmth of our love carrying us through the longest

night and into the promise of a brighter tomorrow.

The End