

**Nor Curse Be
Found**

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D. Moonfire

Broken Typewriter Press • Cedar Rapids

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This novella contains no scenes of sexual assault.

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Chapter 1

The Beauty

As the last petal of the rose fell to the ground, the beast was revealed to a prince, the man she was destined to love forever.

—*Rose and Monsters*

The town of Fires Down Below was an mining town that had risen in the glory of fueling the fires of war before the embers were allowed to darken with peace. A century later, bonfires had been ignited once again in a desperate rush to mine iron deposits needed for the coming battles of magic and machine.

Beauty couldn't miss signs of the town's resurrection as they rode in from the south. Weathered signs bleached by sun and wind had fresh paint splashed over the faded symbols of old. The new life, however, didn't come with the graceful elegance of the old age. Letters were sloppily forms over neat print and former painted images had been replaced by crude symbols.

There was a sense of fatalism in the air, born by the knowledge that the town would snuff out months after the war ended. Everyone know it and they treated the rising

town as a temporary inconvenience in the quest for dominance.

She didn't have a good feeling for the town, but it was on the route her prince and she had planned out earlier during the season. Going through Fires Down Below would take them across the mountain pass and back into Gepaul for a month-long journey back to the palace and home.

Next to her, her prince sighed. "I miss my bed," he said in the warm voice of a cultured man who had been born to riches and luxury.

Beauty smiled at him. He always brought a joy to her heart, but it was tempered by a longing for his old voice, the snarls and growls that beat against the walls and caused her chest to tremble. "Only a few more months, my love."

A coil of Daman's hair blew across his face. He tilted his head to the side and it slid off, billowing behind him. He chuckled and went through the motion of pushing it away. Despite four days of camping and cold rain, his shirt and trousers remained pristine as if they had been freshly washed. Only one button had gotten lost to reveal his muscular but hairless chest.

Beauty admired him. He was exactly what she dreamed for as a young woman, the perfect man for the youngest daughter of an old merchant. "At least you get to enjoy the finest inn this town has to offer."

A faint darkness crossed his perfect blue eyes and then he shook his head with amusement. "Oh, yeah, how can I not enjoy the Royal Palace? That makes it what... nine on this trip?"

She smiled. "Ten, remember the one is Glaston?"

"That was the Royal Rider's Palace, an entirely different thing. That place was decorated with the ass end of a royal horse heading out to be turned into glue." His smile

brought a flutter to her chest. There was a hint of the creature's wry grin in his expression.

"I hope it smelled better."

He crinkled his nose. "No. These small towns have a poor idea of what is royal."

"Oh?" she asked wryly. "Thinking about getting rid of the castle and becoming an innkeeper?"

Daman leaned back and gestured to his body. "Looking like this? I would make a fortune. But I'd rather be back home with you."

Beauty reached out and held his hand. "I know, my love."

"Soon."

"Soon."

They both returned to ride their horses with their memories to keep them company. Soon, they reached the front gate and Daman took a slight lead as he guided their horses toward the opening.

A pair of guards stopped them, hands held up high and spears at the ready. "To the side!"

Beauty and Daman obeyed, they were in a foreign country and he had no sway over them. Gracefully, they backed their horses to the side just as a wagon rolled through the gate.

It was a massively-built monstrosity dragged by six drought horses that steadily pulled it forward. Large wheels pulverized rocks underneath as it rolled past them. A heavy canvas fluttered to the side revealing iron bars imprinted with the town's seal. A ton and half of metal to be shipped out for the Tarsan war machines.

One of the guards looked at Daman and Beauty sharply. His eyes dropped to focus on the hilt of Beauty's sword sticking out of her pack.

“It’s peace-bonded,” she said quietly. She already knew it would take her less than four seconds to make it deadly but he didn’t need to know that.

He grunted and stepped forward.

She moved against Daman and pressed her back to his chest.

Daman slipped his arm around her and pulled her tight. He bowed his head to rest it against her. His lips kissed her ear and she let out a happy sigh. He kissed her again then whispered to her, “I miss have you in my bed too, even like this.”

Her smiled faltered.

The guard inspected the weapon, testing it a few times, before shrugging. He glanced at Daman’s sword but didn’t bother checking it for safety. With a disinterest voice, he said, “Head on in.”

“Thank you, good sir,” Daman said smoothly in a voice that caused the guard’s chest to puff up with pride. Together, Beauty and her prince headed inside the gate with their horses following behind.

Inside, the view from the road didn’t make Fires Down Below look any prettier. Graffiti and grime fought for attention and obscured the old buildings that had managed to survive for decades. A fresh slap of paint didn’t hide the gilded edges and elegance from the prior years. Beauty saw a lot of half-done repairs, rope and patches.

Daman stopped and held out his hands. “This is where we go our separate ways.”

Beauty handed the reins of her horse before pulling off her back and sword. Setting the bag between her legs, she strapped her weapon around her waist. Once secured, she plucked out six knives from the saddle to return them to sheaths inside her sleeves and boots. A leather strap with an attached hook went around her waist, tucked under-

neath the sheath with the hook nestled against the small of her back.

As she transferred her weapons, he spoke. "You're staying at the Letterset Inn, it's along that wall about five streets and then in between the two printing companies. Two blocks according to the maps. It's a good place and my contacts said it is out of the way with quality almost as equal to my room."

It only took her a few seconds before she was affixing the small knife in her auburn hair and make sure it was secured before letting her curls spill out over her shoulders.

He watched her with a smile.

Catching his gaze with her hands up in her hair, she favored him with a smile. "Like what you see?"

"Always. Always and forever, until the next life." His smile faltered slightly. "Soon. We'll get me back to the creature I was and then we'll go home for our happily ever after."

Soon. That was the word that had kept them traveling for three summers. Three years of searching for some way to bring back the man he used to be, the beast she had fallen in love with, and the body that he missed with all his heart.

Beauty stepped up and pressed her body against him, stealing a quick hug before too many people noticed she had arrived with him.

Her prince wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. "Be safe, my love."

"Get cursed and turned into a horrible beast again, my prince." She looked up in his eyes. "Come back to me as the man we both loved."

They kissed briefly before parting ways.

Beauty pulled the hood of her riding cloak over her head and leaned against the wall.

Daman strode further into town, leading the two horses. A ripple of power rose around him as he called out. “Where is the finest place a proper prince could eat!?” he bellowed.

Around Beauty, strangers looked up as they were drawn toward him. She had seen it a hundred times before, the perks of interest and curiosity that caused a crowd to gather around him.

She waited until she had a clear path and then crossed past the gate before heading along the stone wall.

Chapter 2

Letterset Inn

Curses, one field of the dire magics, are in the domain of hedge magic. They typically require strong emotions to create or break.

—Hasidar Ridlin, *On Lesser Magical Techniques*

Rain broke out before Beauty could make it to the Letterset Inn. One moment, there was a rumble, and then in the next, it poured out in icy knives that warned her how close they were to winter.

She shivered and drew the cloak tighter. Her backpack tugged on her cloak, making it hard to keep her supplies and her face both dry. After a few seconds, she gave up and let the rain plaster her hair against her face and dripping down her throat.

Beauty turned on Printers Lane. Seeing it empty brought a quiet relief. She didn't like crowds in new towns, the press of people always left her feeling vulnerable and helpless.

She smiled to herself. She had enough of that in the prince's palace, back when he demanded her presence in exchange for her father's life. Little did she know that she would be longing for those days again when Daman

growled and snarled through his days, struggling to put on a facade of humanity with a body of a beast.

The Letterset Inn stood between two printers, just like the map said it would. The narrow building rose up like a wedge until it expanded to cover the second floors of both printing shops.

She stepped inside into the entry hall and shook her cloak to free it from most of the rain that beaded on its oiled surface. With a shrug, she removed her pack and held it in her hand before heading out of the short hall and into the inn proper.

An older woman, maybe in her forties, watched with a scowl etched on her face. She had a steaming cup next to her. "Help you?" she asked.

"I made a reservation a week ago, under the name Beauty?"

"That your real name?"

"Yes, youngest daughter of six." Beauty smiled to herself, it had been a while since she had seen her siblings but she didn't miss them. Her brothers were no doubt cheering for the upcoming war and her sisters would still be trying to get beautiful dresses and jewelry.

All Beauty wanted from her father was a rose.

The older woman scoffed. "Terrible name. Your parents had high hopes, I take it?"

Beauty ignored the jab and shrugged. "Maybe, but it is still the name my parents gave me."

The other woman sighed. She pulled open a drawer and pulled out a packet. It was a bank satchel, ordered by Daman a few months ago and sent ahead. It had details about the reservation along with some money for her.

Flipping it open, she pulled out three marked envelopes. Finding the first one, she opened it and peered inside. "What's the code?"

Beauty smiled. “The candle can sing.”

The innkeeper sighed and shrugged. She pushed the envelope for Beauty over before opening the third one. A thick stack of bills stuck out of the opening. She fluttered through it and then made an appreciative sound.

Beauty tapped the edge of her envelope against the counter. She already knew it had money in it for her. “Deal?”

The woman opened a drawer and pulled out a key. “Yeah, deal. Number one on the second floor. My name is Trus, I run the place during the day. My son, Kas, handles night. If he gives you trouble, just kicked him and tell me. I’ll set him straight. Pid’s my little girl, she does errands and helps clean.”

“Thank you.”

“Anything else I can help you with?” asked Trus, her tone growing more cheerful with the influx of cash.

Beauty cringed. She hated the next part. Three years of trying and she still didn’t know how to ask up front. “Actually, I have just a few short ones.” When the woman gestured for her to continue, Beauty asked, “Any witches in town? Curses? Um, old ladies that terrify everyone?”

Trus’s face froze.

Beauty kept going. “Maybe fairy rings? Places to avoid?”

The smile started to droop.

She closed her mouth.

“Why kind of questions are those?” Trus asked.

Beauty shook her head and held up her free hand. “No. No, I’m... I’ve had bad experience with being cursed. It isn’t something I want to ever go through that again.”

“Curse or a man claiming it was a curse?”

She thought about Daman and her shoulders sagged. He was supposed to be her happily ever after, not an empty reminder for the both of them. His transformation had left an emptiness in both of their hearts.

“A man,” Trus said with annoyance. “It’s always a man.”

“A lot of both, a man and a curse.”

Trus shook her head. “Don’t worry, you’ll grow out of it. Just don’t keep going back to him. See a man like him? Run away. Never go back to the bastard.”

Beauty smiled to herself. That was the entire reason both of them were there.

“But, if you are avoiding dire magics, you probably want to stay out of the north. There are some valleys up there that are always filled with mist and strange sounds. And mine number six. Those places are definitely cursed. There is also Old Mads down in the laundry district and the Master of Magics among the smiths.”

Trus glanced at the ceiling. “Maybe the guy in the Blue Tower? He’s a mage or something also. The mayor tried to send a round of guards up there to collect taxes but no one ever came back.”

Beauty struggled to hide her hopes. “Sounds terrifying.”

“Yeah, but then they said they didn’t die. They got twisted by magic and are crawling around in the woods around the tower, like some monster.” Trus cringed. “Not safe at all.”

Forcing the smile from her lips, Beauty nodded while memorizing the information. “Thank you.”

“Girls have to keep each other safe, right?” Trus said while slapping her envelope of money against her palm. Then she looked at Beauty. “Hang up your cloak over the heater vent over there. It will dry it out faster than the room.”

Beauty thanked her and shucked off her cloak. Her auburn hair spilled out on her shoulders and she felt the prickle of cooler air dancing along her skin.

Unlike Daman who couldn't keep his shirt buttoned, she wore a far more appropriate outfit for travel: a heavy, button-down shirt and black trousers.

Trus glanced at her and then did a double take. Her jaw dropped slightly before she looked away sharply with a blush.

Beauty headed over to hang her cloak.

"Your parents were damn lucky, weren't they?" she muttered just on the edge of Beauty's hearing.

Beauty smiled to herself.

The door banged open, bringing a rush of wet air and a cheerful young girl. "Mama! Mama! I saw something!"

"What are you doing, Pid!? Close the Couple-damned door before you let the rain in!"

Pid spun around and slammed it shut with both hands. It bounced on the frame, but she shoved it close. It didn't latch before she turned around and ran to the counter. Her long, dark brown hair stuck to her back, it was wet from the recent rain. "Trus! Mama! There is a prince!"

Beauty froze for a heartbeat.

"A prince?" Trus said with a mocking tone. "Really?"

"Yes! One from Gepaul with lots of money and horses. And he is pretty! With flowing hair and tall boots. All the girls are swooning over him. He kicked Old Mads when crossing a street and she started cursing him out."

Beauty's heart beat faster, maybe they wouldn't have to visit the tower?

The door banged open again with a squall of air.

"Damn the Couple, what happened?" snapped Trus, but her voice was rising up with her interest. She hurried around the counter and shoved the door close until it latched.

"The prince, he went back but then Old Mads dumped her chamber pot on his head. Rightfully bonked him in the skull and everything."

With her back to the others, Beauty grinned.

Trus groaned. "What then?"

"It just dripped off him. One moment, he's covered in piss and shit. Then he just smiled and it-it rolled off! His hair wasn't even wet!" The girl screamed and bounced. "A prince! He's really a prince!"

Trus knelt down. "Where is he staying?"

"Um, Royal Palace but Baen said he hasn't checked in. Instead, he's buying rounds at the Amber River and getting really drunk."

The girl's mother sighed. "I... I should see if I can convince him to stay here." She looked around and then patted Pid's shoulder. "Go get Mama's hat. I need to go."

"Okay!" Pid rushed past the counter and into the back rooms.

Sweating, Trus cleared her throat. "Are you comfortable with going to your room? I... I could use the money if he stays here. Can you believe it?"

Beauty couldn't tell Trus that her inn was the one place the prince wouldn't stay. It was part of their roles in trying to get him cursed again. With Beauty traveling with him, there wouldn't be attempts at marriage nor could he be the ass that had gotten him cursed in the first place.

That was Daman's role in these towns, to be the rich asshole and hopefully stumble into being cursed again.

Pid rushed back with Trus's hat.

"Stay here and watch the counter. This lady is staying here. Just let her get some food when she's hungry, understand?"

"Yes, Mama."

With the fierce determination of a small business owner, Trus smashed the hat onto her head and plunged into the rain outside.

Beauty finished hanging her cloak and returned to her bag.

“You know how to use that sword?” asked Pid, her eyes wide as she sat on the edge of the counter. Her legs swung back and forth.

“Of course.”

“But you’re really pretty.”

Beauty smiled. “Yes, but sometimes being pretty doesn’t really help me.”

The young girl stared with wide eyes. “Like when?”

“Oh, once I had to fight off a demon horse that was chasing us. I took my sword and I tried to stab it, but it kept turning into mist.”

Pid gasped. “What happened?”

“A friend of mine is immune to most evil magic now, so he dove into the horse’s lake and found an old metal shoe that kept it there. We melted it and then the horse went away.”

That was the biggest fear in Daman’s and her hopes, how could he be cursed into becoming a beast again. More than a few mages had told them that his original curse was so powerful that it would override any other curse magic that took place. But, it would take powerful magic to get through Daman’s defenses; finding true love shielded both of them from most dire spells.

“W-Wow.” Then a brief pause. “I thought pretty girls get the horses with horns? That’s what Mama says.”

Beauty smiled and reached up to gently stroke the bridge of the young girl’s nose. “Pretty girls like you always get the unicorns. Lovely unicorns with little flowers on their flanks that call you best friends.”

“Promise?”

“Yes, I promise.”

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Chapter 3

Investigating

Even though they are countless in the fables and stories, powerful curses are nearly impossible to find. One might suspect they are but a vehicle to move a story forward than a reflection of reality.

—Hasidar Ridlin, *On Lesser Magical Techniques*

Beauty closed the door behind with a sigh of disappointment. The so-called “Master of the Seven Magics” barely had the ability to make some shadows and illusions. In a small town like Fires Down Below, that may have been impressive but she had danced with animated furniture, read in the light of golden lights, and danced with a beast that had become her lover. The mage behind her was not even a shadow of what they had at home.

The rain had continued through the night but had softened up into a drizzle by morning. She pulled the hood of her cloak and looked at her list. It started with the five places that Trus had mentioned earlier but Beauty had found two more through gossip.

The abandoned mine didn’t have anything besides some dire warnings, discarded clothes, and empty bottles. It looked more like a place where teenagers sneaked away for

drinking, drugs, and digging into each other's clothes. The faint smells of sex hung in the air.

She doubted there was anything that could produce a curse they needed.

The haunted boat was a curve hunk of rock sticking out over a cliff. Some joker had built a boat hull around it but had done so poorly. A few people fell off and died in the cliff below. It may be cursed, but it wasn't the type they were looking for. She expected there to be ghosts and the dead, not transformations.

Gossip in a breakfast restaurant had lead to a grand house near the edge of town. That was the most promising one in town, with tales of some beast stalking the hallways. Along the way there, she stopped by the city register and looked up the place: it was currently being contested by two children of the former owner. She had seen too many of those types of "haunting," usually by one side trying to make it unappealing so the other would drop out.

When she had found out that one child was a talented illusionist and the other an animal training, she dismissed the house before walking to the far side of town.

Beauty sighed again, neatly folded her list, and pushed it into her pocket. One of her daggers brushed against her hand and she enjoyed the comfort of being armed. Even near the center of town, there were always thieves looking for an easy mark and a young woman alone made a tempting target.

"Lunch, and then Old Mads," she announced.

Chapter 4

Old Mads

Jems are the official currency of Tarsan. Each strip of paper, five inches by two, is embedded with metal, colored like the rainbow, and has a portraits of the head of a Great Family. The common denominations are 1, 5, 25, and 50 though the highest, 1000j, is rarely seen outside of banking.

—Timons da Kasim, *Wedding Bands to Chips to Paper: Tarsan's Physical Wealth*

Happy that she found a place that made spiced rolls, Beauty leaned against the corner of a building and watched the town strolling past her. It was mid-day and almost everyone in town would be working in the mines or out doing chores and shopping. They moved with a grace, like dancing, as women and children crossed the street gathering up their supplies. The swirl of day dresses and whispers of gossip were only occasionally interrupted by the passing of a horse rider.

To her surprise, the town had a pair of mechanical hounds owned by one of the town's rich. She watched as they thudded down the street, belting out steam as they paced after her while carrying heavy loads of dress boxes and crates from the local grocer. The woman leading them

strolled ahead of them, chin up high without looking around.

Beauty was surprised to see the hounds. The only people who shaped their mechanical devices after animals were the desert clans. Less than a year ago, some terrible battle had triggered an exodus from the sands. Now, it was rumors that the clans were invading toward the coast that had triggered the fears of invasion.

She looked around at the smoke rising up from the east of the town, on the lower side where the black smoke rose up in a wall of dark and shadows. It left soot on everything, but the upper echelons of the city were for the rich such as the woman passing her.

“Do you see that?” whispered a passing woman to another. “How long before we realize she is paying for those people to invade.”

“Such brutal devices, they ought to be illegal again.”

Beauty shook her head while she finished her roll. The rich woman was going to find the nastier side of humanity soon enough. Memories of the villagers invading the palace with pitchfork and torches flashed through her head. They had rushed her and pinned her to the wall. She could never forget the feel of hard hands holding her wrists behind her back while she watched men attack her precious beast. The roll in her throat suddenly tasted like ash. With a whimper, she forced herself to swallow it.

She had seen when things turned ugly and had no intent in remaining in Fires Down Below to experience it again.

Pushing away from the wall, she headed down the street toward the laundry district. Old Mads may have dumped a chamber pot on Daman’s head, but Beauty still needed to see if her curses were mere words or if they had some bites.

She almost missed a familiar whistle. One high, and then a sweeping low. With a start, she looked around until she

spotted a coil of auburn hair dancing out of an alley. The figure whistling turned and she caught a flash of Daman's face.

Her stomach fluttered with anticipation. She crossed the street and passed a pair of men walking together. They moved in time with each other, signs that they had been together for many years, but their movements were stiff. She dismissed them and strolled down the far side of the road until she reached the alley. With a quick peek along, she stepped into the darkness.

Daman caught her and pulled her deeper until the sounds of the road had been muffled by stacks of boxes and drying laundry. "I missed you," he said in a low voice.

Heart beating loudly, she tilted her head up and kissed him.

Among the dripping laundry, they kissed slowly. The world ceased to exist for a moment and it was just her and her prince.

When they broke, she was pressed up against the wall with his body tight against hers. She could feel his hardness against her hips. A shiver ran up her spine as she remembered the last time he had her pinned to the wall, back when he was a beast and he had to hold her up with one knee as his claws pinned her wrists above her head and his other hand mauled her breasts.

Hungry to feel the excitement, she drew her hands up along the sharp brick wall and kissed him.

His fingers caught one wrist and tried to catch the other but he wasn't big enough. After a moment, he reached up with both hands and held her tight as their lips sought each other again. This time, their kiss had more passion as she strained to remember the rush of their first time.

When they broke again, she was panting. With a smile, she stared into his eyes.

“I missed you,” he whispered.

“It’s been only a day.”

“Not that long.”

Beauty arched an eyebrow. “You woke up at noon, I take it?”

“Earlier, maybe an hour before. They had this spread of eggs and some of the cheeses from the other side of the mountain. And their eggs have this sweetness that we don’t have at home. Apparently someone here knows how to poach properly,” he said with a grin. “What did you have?”

“Bread, cheese, eggs. At least the water was cold.”

“Is the inn in poor shape?”

“No, my love. The innkeeper’s son, Kas, was distracted polishing his sword and almost let it burn. Fortunately, his little sister was willing to grab the ruined meal for a friend and made a new batch for me. She’s a sweetie.”

Daman frowned. “I don’t think I know the people who cooked for me.”

“You should ask their names. You know everyone back in the balance.”

He kissed her nose. “I spent forty years trapped in that place and them with me. How could I not learn their names?”

“Forty years or forty minutes, knowing their names always helped.” Beauty smiled. “They were always nice to me, even when I first came in.”

“Well, you are beauty incarnate.”

“And you were my beast,” she whispered with a broad grin.

“Soon.”

The word drifted between them.

Beauty tugged her hands down. Having them pinned over her head felt good, but it also reminded her of a better

time. The hunger for it was still there but it couldn't be sat-ed in an alley.

"So," Daman cleared his throat, "any luck?"

She give him a summary of her morning. "Then I was going to double-check Old Mads."

He shook his head. "Don't bother. I've kicked and insulted every old woman and bastard from here to the gate, and her twice as much. For all her curses and swearing, there wasn't even a flicker of magic around her."

"Sounds like I need to give her something for her misery? Money?"

Shrugging, he thought for a moment. "Maybe some, but also some Dark Piffin. I heard her saying she would kill for that but I don't know what it is."

Beauty thought about her morning. "Piffin's is a small brewery up on the north side of town. Seems to cater to the richer side of things. I heard good things about them and their stouts but not their lagers."

"Get her a small flask then? Just on the side? And maybe fifty jems? You have enough, right?"

Beauty kissed him back. "For my prince, anything else?"

"Sounds like we need to head out of town for the last two on your list. What do you think, the misty valley or that blue tower?"

"Tower? Trus says that men had been transformed into beasts and haunt the woods."

"Sounds perfect. An hour before sun up? I saw a tall, dead pine tree as we were coming in. It was up a few hundred feet along the mountain, but looked like it would be a good place to meet."

She nodded. "I'll be there, my love."

Daman slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her back. "Be careful out there. I saw some men I didn't. They moved like they were in the infantry, marchers."

Beauty thought back to the two men she had passed.

“They are strangers to town, but asked a lot of questions.” The concern faded and he grinned. “Just like my beauty.”

“I hope,” she said between his kisses, “that I’m more subtle with my questions.”

He broke and stared into her eyes. “No one hears your questions, your visage erases their memories before they ever realize they were answering you.”

“Flirt,” she said.

“Trust me, I plan on asking you many... many... hard questions later.”

With one final kiss, she pushed herself away. “Soon.”

He smiled as the flicker of longing came back. “Soon.”

Heading Out

In Tarsan society, a woman's role is highly regimented to the roles of being a beautiful wife or the proprietress of a silk business: clothing, decorations, and inns. Though, the further from the great towns, the restrictions ease up but don't fade completely until outside the country's borders.

—Waknir da Disrobin, *The Invisible Yoke, A Woman's Life in the Greatest Country*

Beauty woke up to the crack of thunder and the rush of rain crashing against the roof. It plunked into metal gutters and rattled along the windows. With a groan, she peered up at the plaster ceiling. There was a damp spot in the corner near the window but the brown marks that surrounded the patch gave her hopes that it would only seep through instead of pouring out on the floor.

There were many curses in the world, but poor weather was not the one she was looking for. Not unless the rain could turn her love back into a beast.

Levered herself off the bed, she went over to her pack and pulled it away from the corner. With a quick glance to the outside, she guessed she had a half hour to meet Daman at the dead tree. Just enough time to get cleaned up,

maybe grab some food, and then head out. She hoped it wouldn't take long.

Twenty minutes later with a wet washcloth and she was ready to go. She didn't bother with her town outfits but went straight to the sensible trousers and a light chemise with appropriate support for her body underneath. The chemise wouldn't handle the weather well, but she had a new vulcanized rubber top that shed almost all water though it would quickly grow stifling in the heat of the inn. It had been cut in a short jacket that was snug to her skin without being tight or binding.

Grabbing a smaller, more maneuverable pack, she double-checked the supplies before sliding her forearm and thigh daggers and sheaths inside. The ones in her boots were already in place as was the knife in her hair and the hooked strap around her waist. She didn't want the town people to know her martial ability.

The final part was her favorite, wide-brimmed hat of the same material and shade of dark brown as her outerwear top. In the woods, it would make her harder to see but also protect her against the rain.

Wrapping her top and hat around her sword to obscure it, she hefted everything and headed downstairs.

The bottom floor was dark and quiet. No one sat at the front desk so she headed back.

Pid, wearing a poncho of oiled cloth, hummed to herself as she layered the spiced beef from the night before across four pieces of thick-slicked bread. She had a jar of preserves next to her along with a jar of pickles. Apparently unaware of Beauty, she sang to herself, "Gonna see my puppy, my little puppy, of three years old. He'll be bold. Then comes summer, and he'll come here."

Beauty grinned. She remembered singing the song when she was little. Her sisters hated it, but she would always in-

sist on belting out the words whenever they walked along the creek.

Spotting a bread knife teetering on the edge of the counter, Beauty set down her own supplies before grabbing the place.

Pid grabbed some cheese and carved out chunks. “Gonna see my puppy, my little puppy, of four years old. He’ll be bold. Then comes summer, and he’ll come here.”

In the middle of dropping the slices on the bread, Pid froze. Her eyes flickered to Beauty. “Um... good morning?”

“Good morning, Pid.”

“You are up early,” came the cagey tone.

“Well, I heard some singing and thought some spiced meat sandwiches sounded good. Is one of those for me?”

Without answering, Pid grabbed the bread and looked around for the knife.

Beauty handed it to her.

“How many?”

“Um, think there is enough for four more.”

Pid’s eyes widened. “You’re eating with someone too?”

“Yes, maybe.” Beauty smiled. “I need to go find that unicorn for you, right?”

“Oh, yes! Did you find one? Should I...” Her eyes glanced at the bread.

Beauty rearrange the counter and set down the new pieces of breads. “Well, I haven’t found one yet. But I was going out of town and look around. You never know if I find one.”

Pid beamed. “I hope you find one and she’s really pretty.”

“With flowers on her rump,” Beauty said with a gentle tap on Pid’s nose. “Hand me the meat and I’ll slice off some for myself.”

Beauty started to sing as she prepared her meal. “Gonna see my puppy, my little puppy, of five years old. He’ll be—”

They sang together as they finished preparing eight sandwiches. Pid made a small basket for both of them, adding in pickles wrapped in wet fabric, the meat and preserve sandwiches in oiled cloth, and a handful of small apples.

After cleaning up, they both left: Pid out the back door and Beauty following after her after putting on her hat and winter shell. She tucked her sword in with the lunch to hide it as best as she could. By the time Beauty left the inn and closed the door behind her, the little girl was gone.

Hefting her pack and lunch for two, she walked to the southern gate. She was drenched almost immediately but her outfit held up to keep it away from her skin.

Disinterested, the guards waved her through with a yawn.

Beauty went a distance until she couldn't see the gate and then cut up to find a path leading to the dead tree. It took her almost a half hour to reach the dead tree.

Daman leaned against the withered trunk wearing his outdoor outfit, a waterproofed trench coat. It was almost expensive as her top, but they had been caught out in the rain enough times that it was worth the price.

The hilt of his sword stuck out of the front of his coat, easy reach to draw it quickly. He also had his bow, though he had not strung it to keep it away from the rain that hammered around them. A quiver of arrows rested in the crook of his elbow.

Seeing her, he straightened. "My Beauty."

"My prince."

"I brought lunch," he said and held up a bottle of wine. Clear droplets slid down the misty sides.

She gave him a wry smile.

“It was as much as I could steal before someone noticed. They are always serving food in trays, which makes poor travel meals.”

Beauty held up her basket. “Well, at least your love knows how to feed you.”

Daman held up his hands. “My excuse is that I had servants my entire life.”

“Your excuse,” she said handing him the basket so she could pull out her sword and strap it on, “is that you have to pretend to be the rich asshole who deserves to be cursed.”

He sighed and pulled her close to kiss her. “Yes, it’s a hard role compared to yours, the wayward waif traveling alone looking for dire magics for the man who betrayed her.”

She giggled and kissed him, tasting wine, rain, and his breath. As soon as she strapped on her sword, she settled it into place. A few moments later, she had the wire released around the hilt to make it easy to access. “Ready to go?”

“Yes, my love. May we find horrors on our journey.” He held out his elbow for her.

With a grin, she rested her hand on it while resting her other on the hilt of her sword. “We shall.”

Together, they headed into the rainy woods in search for a curse.

D. Moonfire

In the Woods

March royalties are from the pseudo-kingdoms that surround Gepaul. Also known as marches, these territories are granted to families in exchange for protecting Gepaul from external threats. The use of “prince” and “princess” is allowed to describe the heads of the marches, but “king” and “queen” is not.

—Dainak University Press, *The Complex System of Rule Across the World*

The woods above the town were sparse but big. They were also very wet from the rain. Every time Daman or Beauty pushed a branch aside to get around a tree, a shower of droplets would poured down and soak them.

“You know, I like it better when it’s dark woods and you can’t see the sky,” Daman said cheerfully.

“Except when you lost your boots in the swamp.”

“Fine. Dark woods always have murky swamps with green bubbles everywhere and it is stinks. There is always slime and plants that want to eat you.” He used his gloved hand to shake a branch and then step away for the inevitable downpour. Gracefully, he swept around to bring his arm around her waist and pull her into a kiss.

With a coo of surprise, she closed her eyes as the water sluiced off their bodies and soaked into the thick mats of pine needles at their feet.

They broke with a chuckle.

“You know,” she said, “you don’t have to do that every time.”

“I like to,” Daman announced and then released her to lead again. “I like it when you smile like that.”

“Is that why you pulled my hat aside last time?”

“I said that was a mistake! How much do I have to beg?”

A mistake that caused her underclothes to get wet. It was uncomfortable, but she hoped they would find a place to strip and dry off. Maybe a camp in the privacy. She grinned. “Only until I can get you on your knees.”

He stopped.

“Not right now, we’re heading toward a tower. There are monsters around here.”

A breeze rustled his hair, pulling it back just so his face was perfectly framed when he looked back. “It’s a promise. Next time is for you.”

A little tickle of warmth pushed back the cold.

“Come on, I think I see it.”

“Really?” Her heart jumped. As much as she loved Daman as he was, she still wanted the beast back.

Together, they hurried to the ridge of the path they were following. Ahead, about half a mile, a blue tower rose up above the tree line. Even from a distance, she could see light bouncing off glass or something reflective. A thin plume of smoke rose up from a chimney that had been built into the side. The dark smoke only rose a few feet before the rain bore it down.

“Someone’s home,” he said wistfully.

“I hope they can help.”

A roar burst out to the side and both jumped.

Something screamed.

“Monster,” Daman said as he turned and ran toward the noise. His sword scraped along the mouth of his sheath as he drew it.

Beauty raced after him but kept her weapon sheathed. It would be foolish to run with a bare weapon, but she wasn't going to tell him anything. He fought his way, she fought hers.

Together, they scrambled over outcroppings and roots. When Daman went left around a tree, she dove for the right. They never followed one after each other, at least not after the pit trap a few years ago. Or the ambush earlier that year.

Just as she hauled herself up a boulder, Daman yelled out.

“Left!”

She turned as something leaped from the side, a slender white creature with unnaturally long claws dripping red. Matching red eyes focused on her as the creature reached out for her.

Beauty threw herself forward, rolling along the slick surface of the boulder. She caught herself along a ridge, noticed that there was solid-looking ground on the far side, and then slid down to land heavily in a bed of pine needles and leaves. Panting, she spun around and grabbed her hilt with one hand and the top of her sheath with another, watching the ridge for the attack.

It came from the side, the weasel-like creature snaking around before launching itself against at her.

Moving with practiced grace and years of practice, she respond quickly in rapid beats.

Plant foot.

Turn away.

Tighten grip.

Draw fast.

The blade snapped out in a streak of steel and cut into the weasel. The magically sharpened metal cut through the creature and sliced through muscle and bone.

Beauty continued her movement to spin around.

Blade down.

Thrust back.

The tip punched into the monster's chest and slid between its ribs. She leaned into the blow as it pierced inner organs. She hoped that she caught its heart. To make sure, she twisted hard and jerked the hilt of the sword to force the tip of her weapon to catch on many organs as possible. She then yanked her weapon free with a downward stroke that tore open the monster's belly.

The creature made a long gasp before it slumped to the bolder, leaving a smear of crimson that quickly washed away in the rain.

Beauty gasped for breath for a moment, her eyes scanning for an immediately threat. Feeling nothing looming or charging at her, she let herself relax slightly and looked further away.

Daman's yell caught her attention. "Beauty!"

She wiped the blade and sheathed it again before running toward the noise. The thud of her boots could barely be heard over the pounding rain. The water-logged pine needles slipped underneath her and she grabbed at the trees and branches when she passed them.

Her prince stood only feet away from two more of the weasel creatures. A third writhed on the ground a few yards again, its throat cut and blood spraying everywhere in its death throes.

Beyond the gruesome fight, she saw four more weasels were fighting something large, another creature with tawny fur and about the size of a riding horse.

They were too far away to attack quickly and Beauty focused on her prince to join his fight.

Daman's attacks were fast and hard. They didn't use her grace but instead used his strength as he chopped and slashed at the creatures. Before she could reach him, he managed to shatter one of the weasel's ribs and slash through its heart. It fell back with a high-pitched scream.

"I'm here," she called out, her eyes scanning for other threats.

"Off right tree! Thick branch!" he yelled, not taking his eyes of his opponent."

She spotted the branch he mentioned. It looked thick enough to hold her weight and would bring her around to the back of his opponent. The end was dipped low, the needles held down by the weight of the water pouring onto it from a higher branch.

Gripping her hilt tightly, she jumped through the streamer of water and raced up the branch. At the truck, she kicked out and caught it hard. With a surge, she launched herself up in a low arc over the weasel.

As soon as she saw bloodied white fur, she spun around and snapped out with her sword.

It caught the neck of the weasel and cut cleanly through.

She landed on the ground but slipped on wet needles. With an inarticulate shriek, she fell on her rear. Gasping, she scrambled to her feet and spun around with her sword ready to parry.

The two thuds of the creature's corpse hitting the ground brought a smile.

Then the ground gave away underneath her. She slid further back with a gasp.

Daman caught her. He pulled her up and kissed her. "My Beauty."

She smiled. "My prince."

“Damn you, bitches!” The voice bellowed out from the fight near the other creatures. It was masculine and growling, like a woodsman coming out of the cold. The sound of it caused a quiver in Beauty’s gut, it reminded her of Daman’s growl when he had been transformed into a beast. Back when she first fell in love.

As one, Daman and Beauty looked over to where the creatures fought. There were four of the white creatures, but two more had been killed and were sprawled out on the forest floor.

The other creature looked more like a mountain lion, but one that was easily triple the size of any lion Beauty had seen before. He, she guessed based on the voice, had thick limbs and jowls around its bloody muzzle, but the tawny fur and dark mask around his eyes was distinctively a mountain lion’s coloration.

He favored his back right leg. She caught glimpses of blood running down in thick rivers from a pair of scratches that had gouged deep into his flanks. Claws crushed branches as he inched away from the four giant weasels that threatened him.

“Curse?” Daman said in a hopeful whisper.

“Curse,” she smiled broadly. They had finally found one.

Daman grinned like a fool and then charge forward, bellowing at the top of his lungs.

“Oh, for the—” Beauty chased after him. She kept her sword away from her body as she circled away to flank them.

One weasel peeled off from harrying the mountain lion to launch itself at Daman. Despite being huge, its wiry body sprung the distance.

Beauty cut across in front of her love and ducked down. As the weasel sailed over her, she jammed her sword up into its throat and braced herself.

The momentum tore open the creature's belly.

It fell on the other side of her, landing on the ground between Daman and herself. Entrails poured out from the wound.

He rushed past her.

Spinning on her heels, Beauty sprinted after him.

Two weasels rushed toward them.

Daman shoved the other one aside before slamming his sword into one behind it. His sword flashed with light as he brought the blade down right on its skull, slicing it in half.

Beauty caught the teeth of the attacking weasel with her sword. Her weapon bent from the force of the blow. The sharp edge dug into the gum of the creature but it didn't flinch as it claws and scratched at her.

Then, Daman stepped back and brought his sword down on the creature's spine. A muted crack of shattered bone and the creature shuddered to a stop.

He wiped the blood away from his face, it left his skin as clear as if he had stepped out of a scented bath. "Are you safe?"

Panting, Beauty nodded. She snapped her sword to the side to flick the blood off and then sheathed it.

With a high-pitched scream, the remaining weasel suddenly turned tail and bounded away, bouncing as much as running. The crimson-stained furry blurred and then it was lost among the branches and trees.

"How... how did it hide that fast?" Daman said.

Beauty didn't take her eyes off the mountain lion who crouched only a few yards away.

He snarled back at her, his eyes wide as he regarded beauty and prince.

She delicately elbowed her prince to pay attention before hold out her bare palms. "Hello there."

The lion reared back and then spun on his heels. Water-thin blooded splashed everywhere before he leaped over a fallen tree and bounded higher into the mountains.

“Well, that was rude.”

She gave her prince a hard look. “You have terrible manners too.”

“What do you mean, I’m a prince!” He said with a puffed out chest, but his eyes were sparkling.

“You drank out of the toilet and ate raw deer on the good tablecloth. We had to replace it three times while you were trying to learn how to eat with forks again. You were a monster.”

“At least—”

“You also shit in the corners of the west wing.”

He closed his eyes with a snap. “Fine. I was the monster.”

“Yes,” she said, her voice softer. “But you were the monster I fell in love with.”

He reached out and took her hand, pulling her close until he could press her palm to his chest. “He’s still here somewhere. Soon, you’ll have him back.”

“Then I will truly have my happily ever after.”

Chapter 7

The Tower

Very few animals are capable of talking. When one speaks, one should probably listen.

—Vikor Nik-Maldin, *The Wolf's Voice*

With the tower peeking over the woods and following the bloody spoor left behind by the fleeing giant mountain lion, it took little time for Beauty and the prince to reach the mage's tower. They drew both of their swords before they got within a furlong of the building's base; they had both had their shares of isolated buildings that the more powerful mages and witches called home.

"Bet you're glad we aren't in the marsh now?"

Daman chuckled. "Oh, remember Lady Tiflin of the Dark's? She had that waist-deep water with all the leeches in it? That stuff was thick and got everywhere."

Beauty cringed. "Yes."

He smirked. "At least it was fun for me taking them off you."

"That's because mud doesn't stick to you and bugs leave you alone. You can go swimming in muck and come out smelling like roses." She gave him a mock glare. More than

once, she had to scoop thick mud or slime off her while Daman just flexed his chest muscles and smile before it all slid off him. One advantage of being a prince, she guessed.

Daman paused. "I don't smell like roses." He puffed up his chest. "I smell like sandalwood."

Beauty gestured to a small path paved with flagstones leading through a trellis that marked the entrance of the white fence that surrounded the tower. "You should still probably pay attention, woodsman, but we're approaching."

The area surrounding the base surprised her. Most of the towers they had visited treated the entrance to the tower as an unnecessary requirement. They had gates, fences, and moats. Almost every time she saw a pair of statues on each side of a door, there was a good chance it would animate and try to kill them. However, the Blue Tower had done something different. She never expected to see a pair of small cottages, a vegetable garden, and a small fountain bubbling up just beyond a white picket fence.

Daman slowed to a stop. "That's different."

The tip of Beauty's sword lowered. "Maybe he'll be friendly?"

"That would be a first," muttered Daman. His sword remained ready to strike.

The ground began to shake underneath her, a steady thud of something large approaching. She looked around until a loud roar drew her attention to the far side of a cottage where the giant mountain lion came rushing around. The creature bounded over the fence and landed heavily on the path between Beauty and the tower.

The lion roared again before crouching down and baring his teeth.

Beauty looked at Daman and then purposefully sheathed her sword. "You can talk. You don't have to threaten us."

Ahead of them, the lion pawed the ground and roared again. The sound was deafening.

Daman's sword wavered for a moment. With an exasperated sigh, he spun his sword once and rammed it back into the sheath. "Yeah, he's faking it."

The lion's head jerked. The beast pulled back to roar again.

Daman crossed his arms over his chest. "Go on."

Instead of roaring back, the beast glanced at Beauty and then back to Daman. Then, with a snort, he slumped back to the ground. "Shit," he muttered under his breath in a low growl.

Beauty held out her bare palms. "Not wielding a weapon. We just want to talk."

The lion shook his head. "No, you should get out of here. The person who lives here is a terrible creature, not man, not woman, but something beyond! Zi'll curse you into the shape of some terrifying beast like myself!"

He waved his massive paws at them. "Run! Run away before you share my fate!"

"Well, good," Daman said.

"G-Good? No, run away!"

Daman shoved his hands into his pockets. "That's what we're looking for. Is the mage in?"

"Really?" asked the lion. "That doesn't scare you?"

Beauty shrugged. "It's why we're here. We're looking for someone who can transform my prince into a beast again."

When the lion stared at Daman, the prince nodded.

"You... want to be transformed also? But... you're so pretty now." A low growl rumbled in his throat, but it wasn't a fierce one. It sounded playful.

Daman shrugged. "Yeah, I am. I mean nothing compared to Beauty here."

The lion didn't look at her. Instead, he remained focused on Daman. His tail slowly wagged back and forth as the eyes trailed up and down. There was a different emotion, one that she had seen on many people in their travels. Daman was a beautiful man, with long flowing hair, and he attracted lust like flies.

She sighed and shook her head.

"You really want to be cursed?" asked the lion.

"Yes, with all my heart. I'm looking for someone to break True Love's Kiss."

"And you think Lanier can do that?"

Daman chuckled. "That's the mage's name, Lanier?"

The lion opened his mouth to say something but then closed it with a snap. Looking down, he muttered, "Shit."

Then, he shook his head. "No, Lanier isn't here. Zi's looking for fell magic somewhere high in the mountains. It could be days or even weeks before zi returns."

The door to the cottage that the lion had run around opened up and a young girl leaned out. Pid called out loudly. "Jorul! Lan says its your turn to roll the dice! And you have to eat my crusts!"

"Shit."

Beauty giggled. "Pid!? Is that you?"

"Beauty? Beauty! Why are you here!?" Pid screamed as she ran out of the cottage. Her bare feet smacked on the flagstones as she rushed through the trellis, past Jorul the Mountain Lion, and flung herself toward Beauty.

Kneeling down, Beauty caught her and gave her a tight hug. "I was looking for Lanier."

"Oh, why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, I didn't know his name."

"Zirs name. Lanier is a zi." The girl's voice was firm and insistent.

“Oh,” Beauty said in surprised voice. “I didn’t know zirs name when I left. I didn’t even know I would be meeting Jorul before I left. How did you get here so fast?”

Pid spun around, her brown hair smacking against Beauty’s shoulder. She pointed down toward town. “There is a small gate between the blue houses. You go straight up from our front door and you can squeeze in.”

Beauty smiled. “How clever.”

“You wanted to meet Lanier?”

“I do,” Beauty said with a broad smile.

“Zir’s not here,” muttered Jorul but he didn’t even put effort into making his voice sound convincing.

Pid stamped her feet. “Yes, he is. Stop lying. Come on, I’ll bring you to him.” She took Beauty’s hand and lead her to the cottage. Her grip was firm and commanding.

Beauty grinned and followed.

As they passed Jorul, the lion muttered “shit” before turning and following next to Daman.

D. Moonfire

Chapter 8

The Beast

The Ring Islands was never a popular board game in Tarsan, but it lost even more favor when the population grew more mobile for the Mechanical War.

—Fangor da Taul, *Entertainment Before the War*

For the youngest daughter of a trader, Beauty had met many mages over the years but Lanier was unlike any she had ever encountered before. It was difficult to classify the mage as either male or female. If Beauty told herself that Lanier was a woman, then Lanier took on a more feminine appearance. On the other hand, if she told herself that Lanier was male, then the mage was unmistakably male. It was as if Lanier was on the knife edge between the two genders, with only a phrase that would tilt them from one side to the other.

Pid leaned over and poked her. “You’re staring,” she whispered.

Beauty blushed and looked down to Pid. She spoke in a low voice, “Sorry.”

“Not me you should be apologizing.” The little girl gave her hard look. It was adorable, but a bit fierce.

The blush grew hotter on Beauty's cheeks. She glanced up at Lanier who was pouring another tea.

The mage wore a long flannel shirt with oranges and reds in it along with a solid color skirt below. Judging from her experience, the materials were of good quality but Beauty didn't know much about the cut or shape. It looked comfortable with the faint chill of the late season and rain.

Zi set down the tea cup in front of Daman. "Here you go."

"Thanks," said the prince and pushed it to the side while peering down at the concentric rings on the table underneath. It was a game board, but Beauty didn't know the rules, why the rings were segmented, or the purpose for the little markers on the lines in the ring.

Lanier's red eyes flickered over to catch Beauty's.

Beauty blushed. "S-Sorry."

Zi shrugged. "It happens. The question is if you keep staring or if you just accept it." They had a musical voice that sounded supernatural, or at least trained for stage. It also brought little tingles along Beauty's skin hearing it.

Pid leaned over. "Don't ask zir why zi is that way either."

"I wasn't," Beauty said.

Daman shrugged and grunted. "I probably would have. I'm curious."

"It's none of your business," said both Lanier and Pid said at the same time.

The mage raised zirs eyebrows at Pid.

Pid shrugged. "Sorry. I know, I don't talk for you. I just wanted to save you the effort."

Lanier chuckled and shook zirs head. Picking up their tea, they took a drink before setting it down on the edge of the ring. "My turn?"

Jorul reached over and used his paws to push the three colored dice over to Lanier. "Here you go."

Lanier rolled the dice in zirs palm for a second, then rolled them on the table. The red came up one, the blue showed two, and the green was zero. Smoothly, the mage picked up one of the orange ship figures and moved it one space along the ring. Then moved another ship two rings out. After a moment, they finished by moving the second ship one square along the ring toward one of the tokens.

“Oh, that’s my island!” grinned Pid. She grabbed the dice and almost threw them across the table.

Jorul’s paw snapped up to catch it before it fell off. “Off the table, roll again.”

Pid did. She got red two, blue zero, and black three. With a squeal, she moved her blue ship along the ring two and then three places to reach the crystal token first. “Mine!” she giggled and picked it up to transfer it to a bowl next to her.

Daman grunted with approval. “I think I get the rules now. Looks like fun.”

Beauty didn’t think so, but she didn’t want to say anything.

Pid picked up the dice and leaned over to Jorul before rolling them carefully in front of the giant mountain lion.

“They are pretty simple at first blush,” Lanier said. “You have dice to travel, getting treasure, and stealing from others. You leave the game by moving away from the outer ring, and the player with the highest number of treasures wins. House rules make things more complicated, but we stick with the basic three dice, three boats, and double the number of players in treasures and rings. It’s a fun game to enjoy lunch.”

Beauty remembered that she was making sandwiches for Daman and herself. The others already had the meal that Pid had brought along with Lanier’s tear. She ducked her

head and finished up before handing the delicate plate over to her love.

She watched them play a few rounds, not quite enjoying herself but not enough to be rude by moving around the cottage or outside.

Lanier finished moving off the board with three treasure tokens in zirs bowl. Pouring the bowl into the wooden case for the game, the mage cleared their throat delicately. "Now, I do consider it my business as to why I have guests."

Beauty looked up and then over to her love.

Daman struggled to stop watching the board. He grunted. "May I play next? It looks like fun."

The mountain lion looked at Lanier and then back to Daman.

Daman sighed. Then he sat up, shifted his position, and sat firmly down next to Beauty. His hand slipped against hers and they clasped their fingers. "We were following rumors that you were capable of transforming men into beasts."

Jorul's ears perked up.

"We're looking for someone to bring back my curse."

Lanier rubbed a finger against the edge of zirs nose. "You want to be cursed?"

Beauty blushed. "Well, transformed would be fine also." She looked at Daman and felt the longing rise up. "We just both want the beast back."

"Beast?"

Daman cleared his throat. "Many years ago, after my parents died, I was the marsh prince in Gepaul on the Kormar border. I wasn't exactly the nicest person so when this old lady shows up and asks for shelter, I told her to fuck off because she was so ugly."

Pid spoke up. "That's rude!"

Daman grinned at her. “Yes, it was. And I was being a proper asshole. But she then turned into this beautiful fairy princess and cursed me into a shape of a horrible beast until I found someone who could love for my heart, not my physical appearance.”

Lanier said, “I take it Beauty was your true love?”

Beauty nodded, memories of the night flashing past her. She had almost lost Daman that night when her own brothers led the charge into the castle and fought him off. Her heart almost tore in half in that moment.

Lanier gestured with delicate fingers. “Then when you two kissed, the curse was broken and he turned into... that?” The fingers pointed directly at Daman.

Next to the table, Jorul let out a long sigh.

Daman nodded.

“And you want him back? To the beast he was?”

Beauty said, “Yes.”

“After a break a curse about seeing someone’s heart beyond a physical appearance, you’re looking to get his monstrous appearance back?”

At the accusing tone, Beauty cringed. She should have been happy with what she had. The longing was just hard to resist.

Daman, on the other hand, didn’t seem bothered. “Yes.”

“Why?”

Sitting up straighter, Daman squeezed Beauty’s hand. “We love each other with all our hearts. Nothing is going to change that. I just... We were both happier in that shape.”

She sheepishly agreed. “I liked his roughness. He was rough and brusque, but that’s the man I fell in love with. Plus, the growls, and the fur, and the... then...” She realized she was going down a train of conversation inappropriate for public company.

“I had a huge log.” Daman broke his grip to hold his fingers about two feet apart.

Blushing hotly, Beauty elbowed her prince. “Daman!”

He snorted and brought his hands about eight inches apart before dropping his hands to capture hers again. He grinned as she blushed even hotter with his more accurate measurement.

Jorul’s tail smashed into the ground and he let out a low, sultry growl.

Daman turned to the lion. “I know, but I’m stuck with... this shape with some of the strangest things that happen to it. You know, I can’t get muddy? Every time I stand up, it just slides away. Same thing with mosquitoes, flies, and skunks. It’s unnatural. I liked it when I had mud in my fur, or the way the ground shook when I stomped around, and I could open the doors easily during the winter.”

Beauty ducked her head before she lifted her gaze to speak. “It was about four years ago, we realized we wanted him back. We talked to some mages and they said that having him cursed would trigger the initial one as long as the new curse wasn’t as powerful. So we started looking for someone who curse us and bring back his old body.”

“I’ve been an asshole to every person I could find since then.”

Lanier asked Beauty, “You let him do that?”

She shook her head. “He isn’t a bad person, so I usually went back after a few days and made it right. Usually food, drink, and payment. I don’t want either of us to be villains, it’s just a...” She struggled with the word.

“A longing?” Lanier asked, zirs eyes softening.

Beauty looked at Daman and they both nodded.

“Yes,” she said.

Jorul laughed. “I know that feeling, that hunger to be something different. Back in the day, they sent me up beca-

use someone got it up their ass that Lan here needed to pay taxes.”

Beauty stared in shock. “You really were a tax collector?”

“Yeah, hated my job.” The lion growled. “Soulless and cruel, you spend half of your time being told to use any excuse to seize as much money as possible. Most of the other collectors in town were even worse, they went out of their way to bully others. When you get paid a percentage, it’s amazing how fast you can find a missing tax payment.” He growled and shook his head. “I hated that job so much. It cost me my husband and a happy life.”

“You were married?” asked Daman.

Pid spoke up. “No, but he had a crush on a cute guy who was already married to another girl.”

Jorul growled at her.

She stuck out her tongue at him.

Beauty cleared her throat. “What happened?”

The lion stretched and inched over to rest his head on Daman’s thigh. Rolling over, he peered up at the prince. “Well, beautiful,” he started while looking at Daman. “We went in and started making a mess. My commander, she got turned into that white weasel that ran away, started breaking things left and right. The usual threats of prison. We all joined in, I mean, it was our job.”

Lanier sighed. “I panicked. I didn’t know what to do, so I used a transformation spell better suited toward combat. At the last minute, I realized I had done the wrong thing and tried to avoid turning them into sheep.”

Jorul’s tail thumped against the ground. “Next thing I know, I’m a mountain lion trying to get out of his armor. Commander ran away along with the others.”

“I offered to turn him back,” said the mage.

“I hated my job and I hated my life. Even in those few minutes, being a lion felt really good. I had a change every-

thing. So I asked to stay. Offered to protect the tower if that was payment.”

“I didn’t need payment.”

“You got paid anyways, pretty boy,” said the lion with a growl.

“Zi!” snapped Pid. “Lan is a zi!”

Lanier held up his hand. “Quiet.”

Pid and Jorul quieted down.

“Now, first thing. Jorul, you are invading Daman’s personal space.”

Daman shook his head. He rested his hand on Jorul’s head and started to pet it. “I don’t mind.”

The mountain lion began to purr loudly, a deep rumbling sound in his massive chest. “He doesn’t mind.”

“Are you sure?” asked the mage.

The prince chuckled and shrugged a shoulder. “I know what I look like and there is no reason to deny it, I’m handsome. This isn’t the first time someone found me attractive. Nor is it the first time I’ve had a man’s head in my lap. It happens.”

Jorul opened an eye. “Ever do something about it?”

Daman leaned over and whispered something in his ear.

Jorul’s tail thumped loudly. Then he looked at Beauty.

She knew what her prince had said. The couple had a rule while traveling, one they had established a few months after their first trip out. If Jorul wanted to bed the prince, he needed her permission just as someone would have to get consent from both Daman and herself if she was inclined to spend time with a lover. She had only taken the opportunity once, with a childhood friend, but Daman usually enjoyed dalliances every few months. As long as he returned to her and it didn’t turn into anything beyond a casual fling, she wasn’t bothered.

“Not now,” Daman said. Then he spoke louder. “Do you think you could help us? We can pay.”

Lanier looked back and forth. Then zi sighed. “I know what it is like to feel that longing. That was how I ended up becoming a transformation mage. I’m willing to try, but I’m unsure of what price is needed.”

“A favor then? No questions.”

“That is a dangerous offer. You shouldn’t ever make those, otherwise you might find yourself in the middle of a war with no one to help you.” There was a sharpness to Lanier’s tone. Zi had been in that situation and Beauty couldn’t imagine what had happened to cause the haunted look in zirs eyes.

Daman drew himself. “It’s important to me.”

“Let me see if I can do anything first. Come on, stand up... we should probably go outside. This could get messy. Pid, find your cloak, it still raining.”

A few minutes later, they were outside in the drizzle. Daman stood between the two cottages, on the stone path. Lanier had put themselves right before them. The others remained by the edge of the cottage, with Pid standing between Jorul and Beauty.

Lanier held out zir hand. It glowed brightly, a shifting cascade of rainbows about the brightness of a good torch. The colors rolled around each other as zi pressed their fingers lightly against Daman’s bare chest. “I can feel the remains of the curse. Yes, your advice was right. If you were hit with shaping magic, the original spell would take over and you would return to your form.”

Beauty let out a sigh of relief. Even though two separate mages had told them that, she always worried that if they finally got her prince cursed, he would become something entirely else.

Magenta sparks of light rose off both Daman and Lanier. A trickle of blood oozed out from the mage's nose while Daman scratched his wrist.

The light grew brighter. It grew from the brightness of a torch into the brilliance of a courtyard surrounded by magical lights.

"I'm going to charge the remnants of the curse directly. If I do that and repair some of this damage, that will let me push more power through the frame without a risk of something else taking over."

Daman groaned. His body shuddered.

Beauty held her hand over her mouth, not wanting to cry out.

The light grew as bright as sunlight. Then it turned liquid before pouring directly into Daman's chest.

Beauty's love let out a loud groan of discomfort. His shoulders clenched and twisted. "This hurts."

Lanier pulled back his hand.

"No!" bellowed Daman, his voice growing deeper. He turned his head to stare directly at Beauty. "More. Make it hurt, I can handle it... for her."

Tears burned in her eyes.

The liquid energy continued to pour into him. It flooded his insides until his bones and muscles could be seen through his skin. The golden light poured out of his eyes, ears, and nose. More of it ran down his legs until his entire body was coated in the raw power.

Beauty whimpered.

Pid grabbed her other hand and clenched it.

Beauty dropped to her knees and held Pid tightly. She couldn't look away from her lover's eyes as he stared back at her.

"More," growled the prince. "Please."

More blood ran down Lanier's face. It came from his ears and nose. "This isn't something you just ram in. I need grace and control. Just a few more seconds though, I'm about done."

Daman threw back his head and howled. His body grew thicker and dense, swelling up inside his shirt until the fabric tore. Button by button snapped off as fur sprouted across his body.

At the familiar sight of his claws, Beauty's heart almost burst. She remembered when it felt like to have his powerful hands pinning her hands over her head in the West Wing.

He continued grow, his body filling out to the familiar shape that she had been longing. His bestial feet slammed into the ground and then sank with his increased weight. Powerful muscles flexed underneath fur as his broad shoulders and haunches settled into place. Two horns spiraled up above his broad head, sparkling in the light before settling into place.

The light extinguished with a flash.

Lanier staggered back.

The Beast slumped forward, ending his howl. Shaking, he looked down at his black claws and broad hands. Then, he reached down with both hands to feel his crotch. With a grin, he looked back up. "I'm back?"

Sobbing behind her hand, Beauty reached out for him. "My love," she whispered in a choked cry.

He lifted his hand, the size that would easily dwarf her own. Seeing it brought the memories of the warm pads against her skin, the points that trailed along her shoulder, and the way he could hold her off the ground with his strength.

His eyes shimmered.

Approaching, she breathed in to take in the musky smell that had clung to him before. It was primal and hungry, the shape of the man she had finally gotten back.

They touched.

She could feel his warmth and the tickle of his fur. Even the rough edge of his claw brought countless memories to slam into her.

Golden light rose around him, just like the day when he had turned into a human.

Daman's face flickered into a frown. "Something's wrong —"

With an explosion of golden light, Beauty was thrown back into the cottage as her love was ripped from her grip by the explosion that had formed between the two of them.

Chapter 9

The Bad News

Most see resonance and feedback as an immutable force, but magic changes over time. Like wine, it pulls energies from its environment, slowly adapting until once was dangerous becomes mundane.

—Betany Cal-Robin, *The Life of a Solitary Tuner*

Beauty's head throbbed. She clutched it and sat up even as she tried to pry her eyes open. Underneath her, a mattress shifted with her weight. A heavy blanket slipped into her lap. Inundated unfamiliar sensations and smells, she froze as her senses came into focus. She blinked a few times until the world sharpened around her.

They were in a cottage, Beauty guessed the other one near the bottom of the tower. It had a small cooking area, and a half dozen bookcases filled with books and trinkets. A cozy-looking chair sat in the middle of the cottage and near the fireplace on the far wall.

At the bottom of the bed, between her feet, Pid sat while rolling dice in the space between their legs. The red and blue cubes sparkled brightly in the light that streamed in from a widow. She sighed and scratched a bandage over her brow.

Beauty groaned and reached out to her side, looking for her bag. A quick glance down told her that shew as still dressed, though her clothes were scorched and stained. “W-What happened?”

Pid beamed at her. “You’re awake!” She crawled up and over to Beauty, twisting in place until she sat down in the space between Beauty’s body and her arm while using her shoulder as a pillow. “You got knocked out when he exploded.”

“Explosion?” Memories slammed into Beauty. She gasped. “The prince! Is Daman okay?”

Pid leaned against her and giggled. “He’s fine. He got up right away but he was cranky, so Lanier sent Jorul and him out to hunt down the weasel.”

Beauty tried to untangle her legs from the blanket, but a twinge stopped her. “What happened?”

“Well, I won—”

The door opened and Pid snapped her mouth shut.

Lanier entered. He had bandages on his hands and one on his face. “Ah, you’re awake. Good, I was starting to get worried. I’m not equipped to handle a concussion.”

Beauty gave him a pained smile. “I’m better, thank you. What happened?”

“True love.”

“What?”

Zi set down a tray with bandages and sewing supplies. “There was feedback between the curse and your love. I thought I patched the struts so the shell could handle the feedback, but obviously there wasn’t enough of the original spell’s framework to handle that disparate energies.”

Beauty stared at him, confused.

Lanier sighed. “The fairy’s curse plus my magic produced a great deal of feedback. When your magic was

thrown into the mix, the interaction produced a violent reaction and exploded.”

“Me? I can’t use magic.”

Zi gave her a hard look. “You love him, right?”

“With all my heart.”

“Love is magic, it can change the world faster than any spell.” Lanier shrugged. Then zi frowned. Reaching up, zi rubbed zirs nose and zirs fingertips came back bloody. “Neither of you can stay long. Your affection is causing feedback with my powers.”

Feedback was the reason mages gravitated away from the cities and towns. If they didn’t, encountering different sources of magic. The more powerful the mage or artifact, the more violent the reaction. For a mage like Lanier, encountering the curse was the reason he had nosebleeds. Zi would have experienced more severe reactions if the curse had been any more powerful.

Beauty cringed. “Sorry.”

Lanier sighed and leaned back on the counter by the cooking area. “I know that longing you talked about. That was the entire reason I specialized in transformation magic.” Zi tugged on zirs skirt. “I was born into a body that never felt right. A shape that felt like a puppet, a poorly cut suit. No one really understood that feeling of wanting something else. To be something else.”

Beauty sighed. She knew the feeling too well.

“I learned magic and specialized in transformations to turn me into what I thought I wanted to be.”

“What happened?”

“I failed,” Lanier said sadly. “I thought I wanted to be this... beautiful woman in my dreams, but I got to this shape and couldn’t get any further.” Zi gestured to their body. “The magic wouldn’t turn me any more. No matter how much I tried, how much I studied, I just couldn’t.”

Zi closed their eyes for a moment. “Then that damn war. Tarsan doesn’t ask questions when it comes to serving. The bastard yanks you in battle and sacrifices you on altars of blood. Six years of service, twenty-one battles, and seven ambushes. I... killed so many people. When I had the chance, I mustered out as fast as I could and ran away.”

Lanier started to move the supplies off the tray. “I’ve been here almost a century now, just living alone. Occasionally, someone would come up, cause some trouble, and then they would go away. I thought I was happy being alone. Then Jorul showed up about a decade ago and you can imagine how that went.”

“Always trying to get into your skirt?” Beauty said with a smile.

“Not really. He goes for those who look more masculine. And I... I was never like that.” Lanier shrugged. “I never wanted to look like it either. But I enjoy his company and he appears to enjoy mine.”

Beauty didn’t know what to say.

“But...” Lanier said, “That longing is hard to fight. How many years have you been looking? Four?”

She nodded slowly.

“I looked for almost twenty-eight years before I realized it would never go away. I wish I could say I accepted this body that magic has given me, but even have a century, the urge is still there. Faded, quiet, but occasionally shows up in the dark of the night.”

Tears blurred Beauty’s vision. Decades of searching? Was it worth it? Would they still be in love if they spent most of it traveling and searching for curses, fighting their way out of traps and escaping fell magics? Her shoulders slumped as she considered her options and imagined the possibilities.

“I’m not saying give up. Just realize that what you get is not always what you want, more so when you already have so much.”

Lanier smiled and gestured toward the door. “How many people find love? How many want to even try? You have something amazing with Daman. You found true love. True love! That is the thing you read about in stories, not experience in your life.”

She ducked her head.

Pid frowned as she looked up. “Beauty?”

Beauty smiled and kissed the top of Pid’s head. “Sorry.” She looked up to the mage. “We didn’t mean to intrude.”

Lanier shrugged. “I’m also not going to send you without advice or suggestions.”

She looked up.

Lanier pulled out a piece of paper and started writing. “If you are going to keep looking, you need to think bigger and taking more time. You are never going to find a random person who has the ability, desire, and will to curse him. Even if that worked, it isn’t going to take long for people to realize that you are following after him and making things right. It’s hard to hate someone enough to create a curse when you know someone else is going to drop a few hundred jems in your lap the next day.”

Beauty blushed. “I don’t want to hurt people.”

“Then don’t. Stop pretending and do this properly. Look for specialists who can handle transformations and curses. Once you find someone who can do it, you need to address the bigger problem: getting three sets of energies compatible enough that your mage can create a transformation spell that has no feedback with either the curse or your love.”

Lanier flipped the paper and continued on the back. “You want to find someone who is third circle or higher, to

say the least, at least in terms of skill. You might find a talent, but I wouldn't hold your breath for those. A transformation talent may not have the perceptions or focus to make this happen. Now, I'm giving you a list of mages I know that might have a chance to help you, but most of them are in Tarsan."

"Could you do it?"

Zi looked up at her. For a long time, they said nothing. Then a sigh. "Yes, I could. The second part is your problem. My energies do not mesh well with yours. We can attune, which is to change all of our powers slowly and over time to adapt to each other, but 'slowly' is the key word. You are talking years, probably decades."

Tears burned in her eyes.

"It can be done, but you would have to move into the town and visit almost every day or at least twenty years before there was a chance it would work. It might take longer, thirty or forty years. It's an art, not a science."

She sighed with the possibilities. She wasn't even sure if she could live as long as Daman could, or if Daman's lifespan had been shortened once the curse has been removed.

Lanier walked over and sat on the bed. "Try to find someone better for a few years, maybe a decade. If you two still want it, then we can try the reattunement. I'm willing to help, but I'm just not the best option."

"Thank you."

Leaving the paper on the bed, Lanier got up and headed to the door. "Talk to your love and decide. If you find that the need is still there after everything and you are willing to spend the rest of your life waiting to have your beast back, then come back here. We'll get you through it. It just takes time. A lot of time."

Zi stopped at the door. “You’ll need to leave soon, but I wish you the best of adventures and you find what you are looking for.”

“Thank you, Lanier.” Her heart ached from zirs words, but there was a truth to them. It was also more advice than they had gotten in years.

The mage smiled sadly. “I wished I could give you something better.”

Beauty wiped a tear from her eye. “You’ve given me so much already. I... we have an idea of what to do next and... and...” Her mind drifted to that one perfect moment she had her beast back. “I got to see him again.” She smiled happily. “I got to touch him.”

Lanier smiled back. Then zi gestured to the little girl. “Pid, you should take them home. Your mother is going to be asking where you are and it’s getting late.”

“Will do!” pronounced the little girl.

D. Moonfire

Surprise Guests

The Pillory Pass is an infrequently used pass between Gepaul and Tarsan. The terrain is rough and unsuited for caravans. It is mostly used by travelers on foot or horse seeking to travel between countries before it gets snowed in for winter.

—Jacom Hibon-Gasil, *A Meandering Geography of Gepaul*

Beauty and her prince walked hand in hand as they followed Pid off the mountain and along the winding trails that wove around the city of Fires Down Below. The only time they separated was for the rough sections. On the smoother lengths, she nestled up against him despite the fat drops of rain that threatened to separate them.

Her thoughts were focused on Lanier's words which continued to echo in her head. Despite the mage's good advice and the list of sources to check next, the overwhelming despair of how long it would take took her breath away. It could be years before they could get through the list, years of traveling during the summers with longer trips home the further they went. She struggled with the idea of decade when she was only in her twenties.

Daman squeezed her hand. "You seem distracted."

Beauty rested her head on his shoulder. "I am."

"What the mage said?"

She nodded.

He said nothing as they crawled over a few fallen trees. "We're heading home after this, why don't we talk about it over the winter and decide?"

It was the logical answer.

She sighed. "I know, I just..." She let her voice trail off with a thought she didn't want to consider.

He squeezed her tightly. "I'm with you. In the end, that is all that will ever matter to me. You are my love, my truest love and there is nothing that will stop that."

Smiling happily, she stopped him enough to kiss him in the rain.

"See, and I get to kiss the most beautiful woman in the world," he said brightly. "Everything is going my way."

Beauty pressed her face into the gap of his trench coat and breathed in his smell. "Spend the night with me."

"But the separate inns?"

"Lanier said the chance of finding a random person to curse you is almost impossible. No one is going to have that power or skill. So, pretending to be an asshole isn't going to get us closer to what we want." She looked up. "Right now, I want you and that's all that is important to me."

His eyes softened. "Of course, my love. Your place or mine?"

Beauty glanced at Pid who was happily continuing down the path unaware that the two had stopped. "The Letterset. It's more out of the way and her mother could use our money."

"As you wish, my queen."

She grinned. "I can't be a queen, remember?"

He pulled her close and kissed her passionately. His hot breath and the icy rain contrasted and left her steaming.

When they broke, he whispered, "You will always be my queen."

"I love you."

"And I will never, ever stop loving you."

With another kiss, they hurried after Pid.

The young girl lead them to the wall surrounding Fires Down Below. Built from quarried stone and local wood, it stood easily twice Daman's height and had a sturdy appearance. On their side, away from the town, piles of garbage, debris, and rocks fought with the sturdy brushes that grew along the base. Over the years, someone had taken the effort to plant thorny bushes along the bottom but the effort left a patchworks of thorns, rocks, and other hazards.

Pid ignored most of them as she skipped along one rough trail parallel to the town wall. It was obvious that she had taken that route many times and there was no hesitation as she choose one split of the path over another.

Beauty frowned as she struggled to memorize the route.

Daman chuckled and pointed to one tree. "That looks like the wardrobe in the East Wing."

"Oh yeah."

At the next junction, he gestured toward a spot on the ground. "And that reminds me of that place where you fell into the pond. That bush right on the corner? Where you lost your small clothes to the birds?"

Blushing, she nodded. "Thank you."

"It's the only way I can remember paths is try to find something that reminds me of home. Look, she's stopping."

Pid spun around and then blinked. "You're both slow," she said in surprise.

"Adult things," Daman said as he drew up.

"Sex?"

"No! Kissing!" Beauty said a little sharper than she intended.

“Oh.” Pid shrugged and then pointed to a tree next to her. It was pair of pine trees but one had died. Despite that, the two trees were intertwined together until the living one could reach above the dead one. “There is the marker.”

A cold shiver danced along Beauty’s spine.

Pid headed for a boulder next to the town wall. With a giggle, she disappeared into a barely perceptible gap between the rock and a massive thorny bush.

Beauty and Daman followed. The thorns scraped at Beauty’s shoulders and tugged on her hair. It only took a few steps before they came out in a gap in the wall behind a wall of boxes. To each side, she saw the blue walls of two houses that framed the alley.

Pid crawled over the box and hopped down, not slowing down for the others.

Beauty remembered her sword. “Oh, peace bonding.”

“Shit,” muttered Daman as he fished out the wire from one pocket.

It took a while for the two to finish wrapping the wire around the hilts of their sword. Beauty made sure hers went along the two grooves in the sheath before coming around. Once their weapons were properly secured, they worked their way around the boxes and to the end of the alley.

Beauty frowned and then recognized where she was. Taking her love’s hand, she drew him into the street.

A passerby looked at them and glared at them over his nose. “Get a room.”

“Thank you, sir, for your good advice,” Daman said proudly. “I’m heading right over there right now with the love of my life.”

Another glare before the man turned around and headed the other way.

Daman chuckled.

“You don’t have to be an asshole,” she said with a grin.

“I’m not. He made an assumption that I was doing obscene things with you and I wanted him to be clear that they were neither obscene or inappropriate.” He squeezed her hand. “I will always love you, for the rest of my life and into the next.”

Beaming happily, they continued onto the Letterset Inn. At the door, he held it open and she strode inside.

When she saw almost a score of men standing in the room, she froze. A shiver of concern rippled along her nerves as she looked around at the hard faces that all turned toward her and the open door. They were all dressed similar, with gray trench coats that had seen a fair amount of weathering and repair. Her gaze caught places where patches had been recently removed from almost everyone’s shoulders and scuff marks from a wide belt around the waist.

“And what is...” Daman’s voice trailed off. He rested his hand on her waist and held her firmly. “Looks a little busy.”

“Then find another place,” came a growling voice.

The crowd shifted apart into a line between the door and the front desk. Another man dressed in the same manner leaned over the counter as he looked at him. He had short-cut hair like the others, but time had grayed out his colors leaving a dusty brown behind. His coat looked to be in better shape, but she could see that he had removed more patches from his chest. In the gap between the openings of the coat, she spotted an empty sheath with the Gepaul infantry insignia barely visible in the shadows.

Beauty tensed. Why was the Gepaul army in town? They were in Tarsan, a neighboring country that was currently at peace with Gepaul. More importantly, why had they removed their patches and medals? She wanted to drop her hand to the hilt of her sword, but didn’t. The room seemed

too tense and both her and the prince would be hampered by the close quarters.

Behind the desk, Kas cleared his throat and set down the short sword in his hands on the counter. "S-Sorry, she's already a guest here. Checked in a few days ago."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to kick her out." The man who appeared to be the leader straightened and strolled over to her. He had a bit of a gut, but he moved with the comfort of a warrior still in his prime. His eyes were piercing as they focused on hers. "And what might the beauty's name be?"

She straightened her back. "That's my name, Beauty."

He blinked. "Really?"

"Yes, my father named me that because he had high hopes."

"Well, he was a fortune teller then. My name is Rizen, just a traveler coming into town. Nothing more. A harmless traveler."

Despite his obvious lies, she smiled at him.

"Why don't you lose the beef behind you and I'll give you a better time?"

Daman leaned over her shoulder. "This beef would like to stay. I am with her, you know."

"Are you a guest?" Rizen asked in a menacing tone.

"Yes," the prince said.

"No," Kas said from the counter. "But, she's allowed guests of her own."

From the back of the room, Trus came out of the kitchen and clapped her hands. "Okay, gentlemen, I have put on enough food for all of you. My son has given all of you the keys?"

Kas gasped. "Keys!" He shoved the sword further way and then began to dig into the drawers.

Rizen didn't look away from Daman. "You should probably leave. If you know what is best for you."

Daman smiled. “Well, one might—”

Trus came up. “Stop bothering my guest! She has the first room and you are not—” Her eyes lit upon Daman and then widened. She pressed a hand to her mouth. “Oh my Couple, the prince!”

Beauty cringed and she felt Daman’s hand tightened on her waist.

“Are you staying? Please?” gasped Trus.

Then she looked at Beauty with a mixture of awe and jealousy. “You are lucky.”

Beauty ducked her head.

Movement shuffled through the surrounding soldiers.

“Prince?” Rizen asked casually. There was a forced tone in his voice.

“A prince of Gepaul! I have an actual prince in my inn!” Trus crowed. She spun around and shoved her way back. “I need to put better food out. Out of my way and get to your rooms!”

She stopped at the counter and smacked the counter. “Stop drooling over their swords and get them their keys!”

“Y-Yes, Mama.”

When Trus left the room, an uncomfortable silence filled the entry room.

“So, Gepaul?”

Daman tugged lightly on Beauty, a quiet signal. “Yes,” he said in a dry monotone.

“Prince? That would make you a march prince, wouldn’t it? Judging from your accent, I’m going to say the eastern side? Near Kormar? Maybe closer to the north?” Rizen took a short step forward.

Beauty and Daman stepped back through the door frame.

“Are you a loyal prince?” asked the soldier.

“Loyal enough, for many generations.”

“Good,” Rizen said. “You should stay then.”

Daman looked around. He stepped back and Beauty followed. “Maybe I’ll come back later. It seems a bit crowded right now.”

“Ah, but your innkeeper is making you a special meal.” Rizen’s eyes were dark and shadowed as he stepped into the door frame. “You wouldn’t want to upset her. Besides, we might have some good conversations between the two of us. Things that those loyal to Gepaul need to have.”

Beauty noticed Pid standing near the counter. The little girl watched with a frown on her face. She squirmed back and forth before pressing herself against the wood underneath the ledge of the counter.

Their gazes met.

Beauty gestured to her right. There was an alley two houses down, a short distance but it was hard to communicate without attracting Rizen’s attention.

Pid held up her hand in a silent question.

Beauty nodded and then gestured to the same side.

Stepping back, Pid turned and ran up the stairs.

Beauty looked over her shoulder. “Come on. We’ll come back later.”

“Good idea,” Daman said. Then he nodded his head to Rizen. “I’ll see you later, sir.”

Rizen only grunted.

Beauty and Daman turned. He started to go in the direction Beauty gestured to Pid, but she stopped him and they turned around to head up the street.

“That looked ominous,” he said once they were a few blocks away.

“Infantry. From Gepaul.”

“I noticed. But they are hiding it. There shouldn’t be this many of our soldiers hiding in Tarsan, even if we’re close to

the pass. That isn't good and I don't like how it feels. I don't think the Royal Palace is going to be a good place either."

"Camp?" she asked.

"Probably a good idea. What about the stuff in your room?"

"I hope Pid will be delivering it to the alley the other way. We just want to take a wide berth and come around."

He chuckled and brought up her hand to kiss the back of her palm. "Brains and beauty, you are everything I could ever dream for."

They took a few minutes to walk around a number of blocks before coming up to the alley from the other side. Pid stood with Beauty's packs, bouncing around as she looked around fretfully.

"Beauty!" she whispered loudly and rushed over to give her a hug.

Beauty knelt down to return the embrace. "Thank you, Pid."

The little girl buried her face in Beauty's shoulder. "I don't think you should go back. He was asking a lot of questions when you left. Mama doesn't see it, but I don't like how he talks. They all have swords too."

When Pid pulled away, her face shimmered with tears.

Beauty sighed and wiped away some of the tears. "We're thinking about going somewhere else."

"Another inn? Mama wouldn't—"

"Outside to camp," Daman said. He leaned against the wall and his head turned back and forth to watch both ends of the alley. "Probably away from Lan."

Pid tapped her foot for a second. "Oh, Leaning Pines is a campground to the north, up near the Misty Valley. If you go out the north gate, it's five... six crossings. There is a sign with a tree at an angle. Go right." Pid sniffed and wiped her

nose with her palm. "It's rainy season and cold, so no one will be there. Just avoid the lower sites, they flood."

Beauty kissed Pid's forehead. "Thank you. Do you want to come with us?"

"I shouldn't, Mama needs me. That man wouldn't do anything to us, not in town."

Beauty wanted to press, but Pid wasn't her daughter. With guilt and fear filling her, she hugged Pid tightly. "If there is any trouble, you take your family and run to Lanier's. Even a hint of trouble, just run. We'll make it right, I promise."

"W-What about Mama and Kas? They don't know about Lan. And Mama would be furious."

"If there is trouble, she'll forgive you of everything."

Pid nodded and hugged her tightly back. "Be safe."

Beauty closed her eyes tightly, afraid she was making the wrong decision. "Be safe."

With a sniff, Pid pulled back. She pointed at Daman. "And you be safe because Jorul would be upset if you got hurt."

He smirked and then snorted. "Yes, because it isn't about me, it's about a talking mountain lion."

Beauty grinned. "I bet it's been a long time for him and you are quite handsome."

Daman shrugged and nodded. "Yeah, I'm pretty good looking. Poor guy, it's probably been a while since he's had..." His voice trailed off as he looked at Pid.

The young girl sniffed again. "I should go back. Mama is going to be yelling soon."

Beauty hugged her one last time. "Be safe."

They waited a full five minutes after Pid left the alley to leave themselves.

"So, go out the south gate?" asked Daman.

“Yes, my love. Come on, I’m looking forward to setting up a tent in this rain.”

D. Moonfire

Camping Out

So many stories end with the “happily ever after” but rarely talk about what that means. What is happily ever after? No one knows because no one knows what it is to be happy forever.

—Tome of the Lost Redoubt, *Musings of an Immortal Book*

After three years of traveling together, even a downpour didn't slow Beauty and Daman from assembling the camp at one of the abandoned sites they had found. They worked in relatively silence with Beauty hanging up the cords and canvas while her prince hammering in the spikes to keep it steady despite the wind rippling around them. As soon as she finished tying off the last of the rope, she gave the canvas a shake and made sure the small ditch made from rocks and a shovel would direct the water away from them and further downhill.

“Looks good, my queen.”

“And you, my prince. You good?”

He stood up. The rain had plastered his shirt against his body, outlining his defined muscles and slender form. He had stripped out of his trench coat after slipping into a stream. It remained underneath the first set of shelters they

had assembled to shield their supplies; they had left the horses in town with the intent of returning in a day or two. “Well, the tent looks good, you look better, and I can’t wait to have you naked in my roll soon.”

A warmth bubbled up, pushing back the chill from the water that slipped past her coat and nipped at her legs. With a faint blush, she gave the canvas another shake before gesturing to the stone ring that had been set into the ground by someone else. “You want something to eat before you ravish me? Or just go into it cold?” Arching her back, she gave him a sultry smile.

Daman looked between her and the pit. Then he stepped forward until his soaked chest pressed up against hers.

She lifted her lips, catching her breath with anticipation.

“Dinner would be nice,” he said with a grin and then returned to pounding in the spikes.

Beauty opened her mouth in mock rage, but her smile ruined it. “Do you propose lighting strikes or should I get the alchemical pot? I know we have a pack of the smoked rabbit from earlier. Nothing else enjoyable, just some hard tack and weak wine.”

“A meal fit for a queen.”

“Your queen would like something just a tad more formal, maybe on a plate or with a little sweet to go along with the teeth-breaking crunch.”

Daman chuckled. “I’ll have something for you... once we’re done eating.”

Another flush of heat. “Tease.”

“It’s been days. Hurry up, I’m erecting more than a tent right now.”

She slogged through the rain to the other shelter and gathered up her supplies. The alchemical pot was a metal container filled with a blue slime. She poured it out on some soaked wood. Carefully wiping her hand, she pulled

out a box of white metal sticks and selected one. Cringing, she jammed one into the slime and stepped back.

The liquid and the metal interacted with a flash of light and then a blue, almost transparent, flame burst into life. The acrid smell of the chemicals followed her to the packs. By the time she unpacked their meal, the sharp smell had faded and there was nothing but heat with very little light.

She cooked their meals quickly with a pot nestled inside the slime and the rabbit on a skewers to keep it away from the concoction; it burned well, but tasted horribly.

Beauty finished soon after Daman had finished arranging their tent for the night. Seeing the soft roll spread open invitingly, she shivered with a need for warmth and intimacy. But eating food on the same bed that she hoped to enjoy her love didn't appeal to her.

She carried their food through the rain to an outcropping a hundred feet away and downhill from their camping location. Daman had already set up a simple shelter by tying branching together. It was wet, just cool, but safe.

He reached up for her as she sat down, one hand on her hip and the other steadying the plate until she could sit down next to him. "Hello, gorgeous."

"My prince," Beauty sighed as she settled into place. They pressed their knees together and used it as a shared surface for the steaming meat and chunk of brittle, dense bread.

They ate in relative silence. It didn't bother Beauty like it used to. After three years of traveling together, they had exhausted many of the conversations between them. When it got to be rehashing of either shared experiences or their past, the words died away into a comforting presence.

She smiled to herself and leaned on his shoulder.

"Thinking about Lanier?"

"I wasn't until you brought it up."

“Sorry. It’s just been rattling in my head ever since we left.” He let out a groan and traced his fingertips along the back of hers before grabbing another hunk of sliced meat.

“About what?”

There was a hesitation, short but perceivable. “The future.”

The muscles in Beauty’s neck tensed up. His words were cagey, hiding his intentions. “You mean if we should follow zirs list?”

“Zi? Yeah, that’s it. Zi had some biting words to me while you were still half-conscious.”

“Oh?”

“About chasing after the past.” Daman sighed unhappily and set down his plate. “I don’t think Lanier thinks highly of our quest to get the Beast back.”

“No, zi doesn’t.” Beauty grinned and reached out to clasp his hand. She turned to look at her love. “Do you want to keep going?”

His brown eyes flickered to the side. “Do you?”

“Well, I want whatever would make you happy.”

Daman groaned and shook his head. “I’m going to the same thing. We want the best for the other, but what is the best? Should we keep going? I feel that we’re at a crossroad now. Both paths lead home back to the palace, but I think we are going to be two very different set of lovers based on what we choose.”

She nodded with agreement.

Daman sniffed. “I miss being the Beast, I really do. I like that power, that rush of being... capable.”

“You also smelled bad when you came in from the rain.”

His eyes glittered and leaned forward. “I could also smell you from across the room. That scent was always so seductive, like a perfume that only you could wear.”

Her cheeks warmed up.

Daman brought her hand up to his lips. “I could feel the beat of your heart when you came close and hear those quiet little moans in the back of your throat whenever I pressed you against the wall or held you tight.”

Beauty let out a whimper.

His eyes tensed for a moment. “It sounds different, it feels different. For years, all I wanted to do was be human again.”

Daman’s eyes softened and then he smirked. “Now, it feels like I traded something that gross, destructive, and primal for this nearly perfect body that hasn’t had a pimple in years.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s terrible being nothing but a mere human so beautiful that men, women, and lions throw themselves at just to be with you.” She rolled her eyes and then lean forward to kiss him lightly. The brush of their lips together brought another wave of warmth through her body. “It isn’t... that bad of a form, if I had to pick one.”

“Do you still miss the Beast?” he asked in a quiet voice.

Beauty hesitated and then nodded. “Probably for the same things. You were wild then. I loved running my hands through your fur and the feeling when you wrapped your arms around me and I felt tiny and protected.”

“And all those stops in the stairwell?”

Her blush came back. “Not everything is about sex, you know. Or your so-called ‘log’ that you probably miss the most.”

He smiled but it didn’t reach his eyes. “You ever notice that we don’t have as much sex since I transformed?”

She did and a small part of her missed the far more primal sessions that she wanted to admit. She cleared her throat and shifted closer. “Maybe, but what if that is just growing old together?”

“It’s only been three years.”

“Well, I heard you stop doing the fun things a few months after you say ‘I love you.’ I mean, we had a talk about that earlier.”

He slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her close.

She set aside the plate to lift herself up so she could straddle his lap. Setting down, she could feel his hardness and a welcoming heat of her own.

“Now, Beauty, I do love you with all my heart.”

“I can feel,” she said with a grin.

“No, I’m serious. I love you more than life itself. I love you with the beauty... shine of an undying rose on a pedestal. I love you more than the sun, the moons, and the clouds above us.”

As if listening, a flash of lighting brightened the sky.

“And the lightning too.”

She draped her arms over his shoulders and brought her body tight against his. Her lips caught his and they kissed again. It was short but sweet. “And I love you more than all the dancing furniture in the world, the spells and the riches. If we gave up every gem and cuk we had today, I would still be the richest woman in the world.”

Daman cupped her buttocks with his hands and pulled her tight. He let out a moan and kissed her lips, and then her chin.

She lifted her head and enjoyed the touch of his lips as he traced down to her collar and over to her shoulder. Even through her coat, the pressure felt good.

“Need to remove this.”

“I’ll get wet.”

“Yes,” he muttered into her shoulder. Releasing one hand, he reached up and worked at the front of her outfit.

She joined him, pulling open her clothes until she could push it off her shoulder and let him resume his caresses along the delicate skin. She moaned at the touch.

When he reached his limits, he kissed back to her throat and then to her lips.

The question still hung over them. She could feel it haunting her, as if she couldn't enjoy the passion without it being answered. "Can you live with me if you never become the Beast again?"

He stopped, his eyes focusing on hers.

"Can you?"

The longing was there, she could feel it rising up and demanding she say no. It was a hunger, one that may never be fed again, even if they spent thirty years trying. She sniffed as her eyes blurred with tears and she stared at the man she loved with all her heart. "I think I can, if that is what you want."

"I don't, but..." He sighed. "If I had to choose between fifty years of... having my life frozen in hopes of getting him back and taking you home to treat you like the queen you are for those same fifty years..." His voice trailed off.

"My love?"

He smiled and kissed her. He cleared his throat and got a tighter grip on her buttocks. "I think this time, I'm going to cling to love and take you back home."

The words felt like a knife in the stomach but also a blossom of brilliance in her heart. A tear ran down her cheek as she kissed him. "Then, I want to go home with you."

"To spend the rest of your life with me?"

"Yes," she giggled. "To spend the rest of our lives together, man and woman, in love."

He squeezed her ass and pulled her into a kiss.

She melted into his embrace, kissing and touching as she tugged at his clothes. It didn't matter if rain would soak

them to the bone or the cold that nipped her bare shoulder, there was a warmth waiting for her.

Daman broke the kiss. “Can you really live without my immense log?”

“Your ‘log,’ as you call it, is plenty fine with me. It fills me up just right anyways.”

“Let me take you back to the tent and let’s make sure.”

She held up a finger. “I believe, you said that you were going to do something first.”

He frowned.

A rumble of thunder shook the ground around them. And then another flash of lightning.

“Something about getting on your knees?” She squeezed her thighs to make a point.

He grinned. “Oh, yes. Definitely. New plan. I’ll get my very warm and wet desert and then I’ll make sure you’re happy with my log since you’re going to be getting it for many years to come.”

Rude Interruption

The Fall of Kosòbyo, the first great battle of the world war, started the bloody exodus of the desert clans from their homes as they attempted to flee the upcoming civil war between the sun and moon.

—Givil da Nisian, *The Mechanical War, One Woman's Insight*

Morning came with a lightening of the sky and pressure on Beauty's bladder. She managed to pull her legs out from between Daman's and crawled out of the wonderful warmth of their bedrolls and into the cold air of their shelter. Above her, rain still drizzled in a light pattern on the heavy material and she could feel cold air seeping underneath the edges and along the openings.

Shivering, she tried to pull her clothes but they had gotten trapped underneath the rolls. Her lover's weight pinned them against the soft ground and she could feel they had gathered the damp from the rain.

Quietly muttering to herself and fighting the growing need to pee, she looked around for an alternative to cover herself. For a moment, she considered going out naked but it was cold, rainy, and she didn't know how safe the abandoned camp would be.

She spotted Daman's heavy shirt inside the rolls. It was coiled next to his arm and between his body, but looked otherwise easy to pull free. Crawling over him, she grabbed it and gently tugged it free. It still had his warmth and smell when she pulled it on and covered her body. The heavy material reached a foot below her hips, indecent in polite company but enough to rush to the latrine and back.

Forgoing the rest of her small clothes but not her pair of boots, she crawled out of the shelter and then ran through the icy drizzle to the latrine they had found earlier. The sky above her was brighter, probably early morning with the sun well hidden behind the boiling clouds.

She didn't like being exposed, even with no one else around. She finished her business and hurried back. Her bare feet smacked loudly on the wet grasses and she slipped a few times when she hit a patch of cold water just a few degrees above freezing. She couldn't wait to crawl into Daman's warm bed and just let the rest of the day pass by.

Beauty reached the shelter they put their supplies when her skin prickled. Slipping to a halt, she stopped and looked around.

There was someone leaning against a tree only a few yards away from the entrance of their sleeping area. It took her a moment to take in the gray trench coat and the bulky man inside to identify the intruder, Rizen.

Rizen chuckled and gestured with one hand. "It's rare to see such a beauty prancing out of the rain."

Beauty tightened her lips and looked around. Under the edge of their sleeping area, she saw a jerk of movement. Then behind her, a rustle of grasses told her that someone had walked up behind her. She glanced around, looking for something to defend herself, but her sword was a few yards away with only the hilt sticking out. The peace-bond wire glinted in the light, not that it would stop her.

She brought her eyes up. “What do you want, Rizen?”

“Your man left in such a hurry, right in the middle of our discussion. I want to return to the topic so I came out here.”

“How did you find us?”

Rizen shook his head. “I didn’t hurt the little girl. One of my men overheard you and I asked that impressible young man what they were talking about. He was a fool for answering, but he doesn’t know better,” Rizen said with a grin. “These Tarsan youth don’t understand betrayal... at least not yet.”

Behind her, she heard two men chuckling. They were on each side of her and she guessed they were also about two yards behind her. To the side, she saw another few men coming up from where they had been hiding behind trees. They were all soaked from the rain and their heavy boots crushed dying leaves and fallen branches.

Her skin crawled.

Daman crawled out of his shelter, still naked. He groaned as he made a show of stretching before he looked pointedly at Rizen. “Why are you bothering us?”

Rizen’s eyes flickered down to take in Daman’s appearance. He made a show of shrugging with disinterest. “As I told your woman, I just want to talk.”

“I have no interest in your words or your fantasies.” Daman made a shooining gesture with his hand.

Rizen pushed himself from the tree. His gloved hand dropped to the hilt of his sword. “Maybe, but we are still going to talk.” His voice was low and threatening.

Daman flexed his back and shoulders, his muscles twitching. For a moment, Beauty was reminded of how he would do that as the Beast, a terrifying gesture that silenced most conversations instantly but, as just a naked human, it didn’t have the same terrifying impact.

No one responded.

The prince sighed. "Why don't you just head back to town and we'll talk there? I have little interest in politics with my branch swinging out and gathering rain."

"Because I doubt you'd return. You're a coward, March Prince."

"I am not a coward."

"Maybe. Maybe not," Rizen said, "but I'd rather see which side you are on."

"Why are there sides? I wasn't aware we were at war with Tarsan."

Rizen's eyes flashed. "We aren't at war with these pathetically soft men of a dying country. You know as well as I do, the desert borders have fallen. Whatever happened inside that forsaken land is spilling out and Gepaul is right on the front of that battle. We are the marches before the war and I will be damned to the hells if I let a bunch of sand-blooded bastards take my land and kill my people."

Around them, a few of the men grunted with agreement.

Beauty glanced to the supplies, looking for Daman's weapon. It wasn't where she thought they had left it. Her eyes scanned around, turning to the side. As she started to look behind her, she heard a scuffling of movement and held herself. They were standing just on the edge to make her uncomfortable and it was working. Her stomach twisted.

Rizen's eyes caught hers. He chuckled and held up Daman's sword. "Looking for this?"

Daman held out his hand. "That's my father's sword. I would rather you not stain the hilt with your touch."

Rizen shook his head. "No, pretty boy. You're going to listen, one way or another."

"Are you threatening me, Rizen?"

The warrior's eyes looked directly at Beauty. He smiled slowly even as his eyes darkened.

She shivered at the look.

Daman crossed his arms over his chest. “Are you threatening... my Beauty?”

Rizen answered without looking back. “Yes. Either you listen with her by your side or you listen to her dying. If you continue to fight, then you’ll die—”

Beauty couldn’t take it anymore. She rushed forward and yanked her sword free from the pile of her supplies. The weapon felt comforting in her grip as she spun around and braced herself.

The two men that were looming behind her were armed with short swords in their hands. The blades wavered and rain ran down the naked steel. One of them had a second weapon out, a short fighting dagger.

Rizen chuckled. “Go on, let her have her little toy. It’s peace-bonded. You’ll have plenty of time to cut her throat by the time she gets it free.”

Beauty glanced down at the thick wire that tied the hilt to the sheath. It was sturdy and wouldn’t budge. Rizen was right about trying to free herself, but she focused to make sure the wire still remained in the two notches on each side of the sheath. Seeing that, she transfers the sheath to her other hand and held it firmly by the middle.

One of the looming men chuckled and elbowed. “You even know how to use that, Girl?”

She glared at him. “I’m good enough to handle two boys.”
“Yeah, right.”

Rizen sighed. “Now listen, Prince. You are going to help us take this town if you want to or not. If you don’t, then I’m going to make sure your little girl here has a very short and painful life left.”

“Take this town?” Daman shook his head as he glared. “We aren’t at war with Tarsan. You are talking about invading from Gepaul, that would start a war.”

“We need that iron for our own battles. Tarsan doesn’t care about this place, it’s some middle of fuck nowhere mine right on the border. Half the business used to go through that pass until a few years ago. I know, I was positioned over there, watching this country get fatter and richer while Gepaul starved.”

A murmur of assent came from Rizen’s men. Beauty counted seven of them, all armed and ready for fighting.

“And what happens when Tarsan comes to defend their territory?”

“The town is easily defended, if you know the enemy is coming. We’ll just blow the road leading to Tarsan and then start shipping the iron across the pass.”

“Winter is coming. A lot of people will suffer if you do that.”

“I have a lot more allies than you know. I can bring in fire mages to keep the pass open and stone knights to keep it clear. Gepaul is going to get this iron, one way or the other.”

“And do you think the Silver King is just going to welcome you with open arms.”

Rizen snorted. “The Silver King is a fool who thinks the best of people. No, I follow the Golden Queen and she will reward me for my service.” Rizen thumped his chest. “She will reward all of us, even you. You want to be more than March Prince? Doomed to spend the rest of your life protecting some border?”

“My family has protected the border for generations.”

“Then why aren’t you there... Prince?” Rizen smirked.

Daman pressed his lips together but said nothing.

“You aren’t there because you want adventure. Join me, and we’ll have a glorious time conquering this town and then we join the war that has already started. The Golden

Queen is already moving and I plan on firmly planting my feet on the winning side.”

“What if you are wrong?”

Rizen snorted. “I’m not. I will not let the sands invade my home, even if I have to kill every one of those brown bastards with my own hands.”

Daman shook his head. “And I heard they are bringing their families with them. These are refugees, not warriors.”

“They still attack.”

“We provoked. They are scared and frightened.”

“They’ll be dead soon enough. They can be scared in whatever hell their sands have for them.”

Beauty felt sick to her stomach listened to Rizen. She tightened her grip and glanced at the two men threatening her to see if either was distracted. To her surprise, they had excellent discipline and kept their eyes on her.

Daman shook his head again. “No.”

Rizen did a double take, finally looking away from Beauty to the prince. “What?”

“No, I will not betray my oath to Gepaul. I will not help you invade a peaceful country. I will not stand by and let you slaughter innocence, no matter if they are here in Tarsan or fleeing wars in their home. In fact, I will go beyond not helping by actively doing my best to stop you.”

Rizen gestured at him. “You’re naked, unarmed, and outnumbered.”

Daman grunted. “I’m not... exactly in a position to stop you in this moment, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to try.”

The warrior shook his head. “No, I need to make my point clear. You will help me, Prince. Kill her.”

Beauty tensed as she turned toward the two men. She held up her sheathed sword between her and them.

In the corner of her vision, she saw Daman looking at her expectantly. Her mind flashed for a moment, trying to remember the terrain behind her. The shelter wouldn't be enough protection if they surrounded them. They had to get further away but she doubted they would have a chance to snatch other supplies.

Daman answered as he shoved himself away their tent and rushed toward her.

“Stop him!”

Beauty surged forward, bringing her sword up before slamming the tip of the sheath hard on a large rock she spotted. The bottom third of her sheath had been made from a thinner material. It crumbled from the blow, driving two wedges on either side of her blade up and into the wires. The metal snapped, flinging off as the sword was ejected from the sheath.

Grabbing the moving hilt with practiced grace, she swung it in a tight arc as she stepped to the right. The blade made a perfect sweep at an angle and caught the first man just under his chin. The tip tore open his throat before the blade arced down to catch the second man across his knuckles. The blade jerked as it snapped bone and sliced through his fingers.

Beauty stepped back to catch the momentum of her first strike, flipped the sword underneath her hand and then drove forward to ram the blade into the second attacker's gut. With all her might, she angled the blade up to spear his lungs and other organs.

The world stopped for the briefest of moments.

With her face in a grimace, she twisted hard with all her might.

Blood sprayed across her face.

Daman raced past her without a second look.

The first attacker gurgled as he tried to stop the crimson spraying out from his fatal injury.

The second man stared at her with shock and fear.

Then, with a twist of the blade to tear her opponent open even further, she yanked the blade out and ripped open his stomach. She stepped back to avoid the gore and then turn and ran after Daman.

By the time the first man hit the ground and the second's organs were spilling out across the ground, she had caught up with Daman and they rushed up the hill toward a bank of mist that hadn't been burned off by the hidden sun.

Seconds later, there was a roar as the warriors charged after them.

D. Moonfire

The Freezing Cold

Mounted by the unchaste princess, the unicorn's demeanor changed. Gone was the flowing white mane and the flowery perfume that clung to sparkling fur and in its place was a nightmare, a creature of death with burning red eyes and a horn dripping with blood. It reared up and then plunged into the Dark Forest, never to be seen again. Even today, the screams of the betraying princess can be heard when the wind blows.

—Kastil dea Gorbil, *The Unicorn Triumphant*

The cold and wet air tore at Beauty's face as they race along the slick dirt path. She led the way, her boots splashing through the puddles and casting off flecks of ice in all directions. Her shirt gave her little protection and the flurries of wind cut against her bare thighs.

Daman held onto her hand, his grip tight as he stumbled after her. She winced with every groan he made as he tried to keep up with her without a shred of protection against the wind or anything to protect his feet.

Distracted, she tripped and lost her balance. With a yelp, she swung her other hand to catch herself. Her sword splattered blood into the air before she landed on her knuckles.

The impact drove the hilt in her grip tight against her bones and a burst of pain tore up her arm.

Daman slipped his hand around her and helped her up. “Keep going, love.”

Beauty whimpered and stumbled with him until she could take the lead. “W-What about you?”

“Less talk, keep going.”

They gathered speed along the trail leading back to the main road. They had taken it before and she remembered where they could sprint and where they had to be careful; she only hoped that Rizen’s men wouldn’t have an immediate knowledge of their surroundings and they could get ahead.

Coming over a hill, they came up to a fork in the trail. One way continued down the slope and to the road. It was a straight path the entire way and she could see the gravel marking the way back to Fires Down Below. The other way was an overgrown trail that led further along the curve, trailing away from the road and the town.

Daman stopped her at the junction. He shivered as rivulets of drizzle and sleet ran down his nude form. He groaned and wiped the moisture from his face. “Which way?”

There was a yell in the distance.

Beauty worried her lip as she looked between her choices. Going down would get them to the town and shelter for Daman. There was also a risk because of the unknown enemies waiting for them. The other way would be risky with only a shirt and a pair of boots between the two of them.

He cocked his head and looked back. “Only a few chains behind us. Maybe ten seconds before they see us.”

Beauty tightened her grip. “Are you—?”

“Choose, I will follow.”

“You’re freeze—”

“Choose!”

She cringed but then pointed away from both of the choices, up the slope to a thick cluster of rocks. She could see mist and fog seeping between the boulders and a thicker bank of shifting mists beyond it. “Up there, if we can—”

Daman didn’t want for the rest of her sentence. He gripped her tightly and tugged her along as he forged through the wet underbrush toward her choice.

Beauty grimaced and followed. She could feel him shivering through his hand. Ice clung to his hair and the icy water ran rivulets down his bare back. Bright lines of fresh scratches scored his sides and shoulders. She regretted her choice but they couldn’t afford to second guess anymore.

They made it just as the men came rushing down the path after them.

Beauty pulled Daman down into the shadows of the rocks. The swirls of the fog tickled her skin as the world grew hazy. It would hopefully shield them from their attackers but it also meant that she wouldn’t have any warning if they approached. She cocked her head and strained to listen to the words that drifted up.

Daman shivered violently.

Beauty looked at him, concerned.

“I’m fine,” he mouthed but his teeth were clattering. They had only been running for a minute, but he had nothing to shield him from the cold and rain.

She glared at him and inched closer. She set down her sword and started to unbutton her shirt to give it to him. Her boots wouldn’t fit him and he needed something against the cold.

He pressed his hand against hers, pinning her. His eyes were adamant as he shook his head.

Beauty frowned and gestured angrily to his shaking form.

Daman glanced around and then pointed to a gap between two boulders. There was a narrow but clear gap between them and the fog bank beyond.

Unhappy but desperate to keep moving, Beauty pushed herself up to her knees and crawled between the rocks. Every step caused rocks to scrape against each other and she winced.

Daman kissed her ass as she passed. His lips were icy against her bare skin.

She stopped and glared at him. "Really? Now?" she mouthed back.

"I'm not dead," he responded silently with a grin. Even though he was shivering, he kissed it again.

Rolling her eyes, she crawled away from the men who were at the fork in the road. Their yells and orders were muted through the mist and distorted by the echoes. Only vague words could be understood, none of them kind or calm. Glad to be moving away from them, she only hoped Daman and herself could find shelter before exposure killed them.

On the other side of the boulders, she remained on her hands and knees as she worked the boulders between them and the path before delving deeper into the thicker parts of the mist. The air around her grew even colder and ice clung to her bare skin; she was moving too slowly to generate heat and shivers began to course along her limbs.

It felt like a hundred years had passed before they were deep enough into the fog to stand up safely. A blast of icy wind slammed into her and she clutched her sword arm against her chest stomach to try keeping the wind from billowing out her shirt.

Daman stood up and then swayed.

She gasped and reached out with her other hand. "Daman," she said in a worried voice.

He slumped against her and groaned. "You're s-so hot." His voice was broken and cracked.

The cold wind blew underneath her shirt and she shivered. It did not look good for either of them. "We need to find shelter," she whispered. Looking around didn't help, she couldn't see through the fog that was protecting them. Only vague shapes loomed around her: a mound of snow, a vertical darkness that may be a tree, or an unsteady ridge of darkness.

"Kind of wish we had a t-talking lion right n-now," he said with chattering teeth. With a groan, he slipped his arms around her and held her tight.

Beauty's heart broke feeling how cold he was. She made sure her sword was safe before hugging him back. He was so cold and her heart broke to feel him shivering in her group.

"W-We b-better get g-g-going," Daman said. He took a deep breath and then picked her off the ground.

"Daman!"

"Quiet," he grunted as he shifted her across his arms and then staggered deeper into the mist.

"What are you doing?" Beauty flailed in an effort to escape and get back on her own feet. "I have the boots. A-And you're naked!"

"I'm the p-prince," he said. He made no effort to put her down.

"What does that have to mean with anything?" It was getting hard not to whisper.

"Like mud, s-slugs, and that broken chair, I will be fine. No frostbite, no broken toes. Nothing in this world will harm me as long as you love me." He grinned and tried to kiss her but missed. "You, on the other hand, are my beautiful rose who doesn't have all those benefits because I can n-never love you as much as you love me."

Beauty sniffed as tears burned in her eyes. She stopped struggling and leaned into his cold chest in hopes that her own body warmth would help. “You aren’t going to put me down, are you?”

“N-No,” he said with a smile.

“Just hurry, okay? I’ll keep a lookout.”

Around her, looming branches rose out of the fog, passed over them, and then disappeared. He shook underneath her, but he held her firmly to his chest as he walked.

Beauty allowed herself a brief smile. “I do love you.”

“And I you—” He stumbled. He gripped her tighter to keep her close, then he straightened. “I love you... oh, warm?”

Beauty looked up. “W-What?” Her teeth clicked from her own shivering. She glanced around her but only saw the dense fog and vague shapes.

Daman stepped back and looked around. “There is something... warm... here.” A smile crossed his face and then he knelt down.

She felt it before her boots touched the ground, a warmth radiating from a bank of snow or a rock. Without thinking, she reached out to touch it. It was velvety but solid. It was also very warm, searing hot compared to her own freezing body.

Then it shifted underneath her. “Excuse me,” asked a deep, masculine voice that shook the surface underneath her hand.

Beauty snatched her hand back.

“What the shit are you doing groping my stomach?” A groan. “Oh... why am I up? Where in the dark am—”

A belch interrupted the words and a wave of fetid air blew past her carrying the stench of vomit and alcohol. When it passed, the icy wind came back with a vengeance. All she wanted to do was plaster herself against whoever

was talking but she couldn't; a whimper slipped out of her lips as she drew back into the cold.

"S-Sorry," Daman said as he dropped to his knee. "We were caught out here and you were so warm when I bumped into it. We are desperate and need shelter."

"So you though groping me was an answer? Do you have shit for brains?" Another belch.

Beauty shook her head and held up her hand. "We didn't —"

Daman interrupted her with a hand on her shoulder. "We're freezing. I-I would love to continue, but could we do it while leaning against you? Please?"

A slash of wind plucked at Beauty's shirt, pulling it up. She shook at the icy claws that ran up her spine. She tried to push it down but her fingers were numb and the effort futile.

A sudden white light blinded her.

She drew back. She tried to hold her sword but her fingers wouldn't work. She looked down to forced herself but her brightly-lit hand was empty. She had dropped her weapon without realizing it.

They were defenseless.

Nervous, Beauty looked up at the brilliant light shining down on her. The fog and mist created a glare but she made out a horse-like face with rainbow-colored eyes. When the creature turned to one side, the light moved and she could see it was a single glowing horn sprouting from the unicorn's head.

The unicorn peered at her and then at human. "Um, I'm pretty sure you are both human, right?"

Daman said, "Yes, of course."

"You seem... very naked for prancing around in the middle of winter."

The prince chuckled. "Wasn't our intent."

“You were doing something with sex, right? I’ve heard humans were always fucking.” The unicorn shook his mane and groaned. “Oh, too much berry wine last night...,” he muttered.

“Well,” Daman said. “It was suppose to be a night of cuddling and enjoying ourselves but then someone tried to kill us.”

The unicorn scoffed. “I don’t care, not interested. Humans are nothing but trouble.”

A shiver tore through Beauty. She clutched her arms tight to her body as she tried to stop her teeth from chattering. Glancing over, she noticed that there was a clear symbol on the unicorn’s flanks: it looked like a bucket with waves rising up from it. Around the base of the pail were circles. She frowned in confusion because her first impression was that it looked like a bucket of shit.

Daman pulled her tight to his body as he spoke to the unicorn. “Please? Just for a few minutes? As soon as we can, we will be gone.”

Beauty looked up at him and then to the creature.

Another belch. “Fine... just... try not keep your filthy human parts rubbing against me. It’s bad enough I’m going to need a bath after this.”

Daman guided Beauty against the unicorn.

The unicorn was warm but foul-smelling, the smell of stale wine and shit clung to the creature’s hair. But she wasn’t going to leave for a smell. Groaning, she pressed her body against the heat and shivered.

Daman slipped up behind her, cradling her body as he settled into place. “Thank you. My name is—”

“Don’t care any more than a pile of shit on the ground.”

Daman continued as if nothing was said. “Daman and this is Beauty.”

The unicorn snorted. Then he groaned.

“Hangover?” Daman said. He slipped his arm around Beauty’s waist and held her tight before settling against the unicorn’s stomach.

“Yes, thank you for reminding me. Though I could use a bucket of molly berry wine right now. And a decent hunk of roast meat.”

“I wasn’t aware—”

Beauty elbowed Daman before he continued. “Be nice to our host. We might survive to find shelter because of him.”

“Yes, the fat human female appreciates me.”

Daman started to response but Beauty interrupted him. “And you,” she kicked him, “what was this about carrying me across the ground? I have boots, that was one of the few things I could handle. And, I might mention, I’m the only one who even has a shred of clothing on right now?”

“I told you, I’m a—”

“Yes, a prince. But what makes you think you’re immune to frostbite? Just because mud and leeches don’t stick to you doesn’t mean you can’t lose your toes from the code, or slip and fall. You aren’t immortal, Daman, and I don’t want to find out how to live without you.”

He chuckled. “I know, but that’s it. As long as you are in my story, then I will come out.”

“Yes, but you could be scarred for life.”

He kissed her neck. “Only if that is what would turn you on.”

She squirmed at the touch. With the heat and their near death experience, his incorrigible nature was hard to resist. “Not now.”

“Fine, but only if you acknowledge that I’m going to carry a torch for you as long as I have fingers to hold it and feet to raise it high.”

Beauty sighed. “Fine, you love me.”

“I do and you love me. And soon, we’re going back home and being happy every after.” He chuckled and kissed her again. His fingers snaked up to cup her breast.

She giggled and pushed his hand down. “Daman, no filthy human parts, remember? We need to be gracious to our host.”

“Fine...” He hugged her tighter. “But when we get back, I’m going to bring you to a proper room and ravish you behind a locked door.”

The unicorn groaned. “You two are really disturbing, aren’t you? Like two monkeys rutting in a puddle of mud. Like every other human I know.” He belched again. “At least you aren’t trying to kill anyone.”

Beauty ducked her head and wondered if losing her sword was a blessing in disguise.

Daman shrugged. “Thank you, Bucket.”

The body underneath her tensed.

He gestured back toward the unicorn’s flanks. “I assumed your name is Bucket, right? Syrup Bucket? Mud Pail?”

The unicorn let out a huff. “Is that what you really think my name is?”

“Well, I haven’t had a good chance, but I’ll call you whatever you want me to call you.”

The unicorn sighed. “Pail is fine. Just... don’t need to add anything more to that.”

Daman grinned and saluted. “Well, a pleasure to meet you, Pail, and I thank you from both of our hearts that you were willing to give us shelter. As soon as we can, we will make our leave.”

A cold wind tickled Beauty’s bare legs. She curled up tighter to the unicorn but then the cold wind blew up against her buttocks. She squirmed and then shifted back until she had one leg nestled between Daman’s with his

body protecting her privates and her feet underneath the unicorn's legs.

It was uncomfortable but at least she stopped shivering. With a sigh, she rested her head against Pail's belly and closed her eyes.

"Is this love?," asked Pail after a few minutes.

She looked up, surprised. "What?"

"I can sense he used to be cursed by a fae."

Daman chuckled. "Yes. I was a self-centered prick and pissed off the wrong woman. She cursed me to be a monster." He kissed Beauty's shoulder. "At least until she taught me to care for someone other than myself."

Pail's body tensed. "And it was True Love that broke the curse?"

"Apparently. At least that is what Lanier said."

"You talked to the blue mage?"

At Daman's nod, Pail glanced around. "Then he's probably right about surviving."

"Really?" Beauty drew closer to the unicorn. It was almost like sleeping in her bedroll, except for the smell.

"True Love doesn't stop after the curse is broken. It replaces it, creating a connection between the two of you. I don't really understand how, but I know that her love will change him to fit her expectations."

Daman chuckled. "You mean, I don't have to worry about washing my hair because she thinks princes always look good?"

Beauty blushed and smiled to herself. She never thought about it, but Daman was exactly what she expected with a prince. She leaned back against him and sighed.

He squeezed her and kissed her shoulder.

Pail tossed his head and the light grew brighter. "Why are you out here? You found love and broke the curse, shouldn't you be staying enjoying your Ever After?"

Daman's arm squeezed Beauty but he said nothing.

She thought about their decision to return home. She was tired of adventures and freezing and crawling through swamps, but they were talking to a unicorn and she wouldn't have a chance to do that again. "W-We were on a quest to turn him back but... we had just given up after talking to Lanier. But, then we were attacked—"

"Excuse me," Pail said sharply. "You were on a quest to get him cursed again?"

Beauty giggled. "Yes."

"W-Why, in the every flowing sewer of shit, are you trying to get cursed!?"

Damar kissed her. "Because we wanted to go back to the way it was. I was a beast, huge and hulking. I had claws. I had height and strength. I had a huge dick."

"You are doing this just to rut even more? Oh, for the powers that be, you humans are disgusting!"

"At first, yes, but not after." Daman's voice was sad and quiet.

Beauty froze, she had never heard Daman speak of anything else.

"But then it was something else. I've been feeling like I'm just wearing this suit. It's pretty and handsome, but it also isn't mine. As the years go on, it gets more uncomfortable like... like I need to get out of it but I can't."

Beauty turned her head to look into his sad eyes.

Daman wiped a tear from his face and then kissed her nose. "I'm sorry."

"Never be sorry," she said. "How long?"

"I don't know, I didn't realize it until I was talking to Lanier about her... zirs body. Then it just clicked. A suit that didn't fit, that made sense to me. I want to be the Beast again, not just for sex and fun, but because it feels right. I don't want to wear my Daman suit anymore."

“Then why did you want to go home?”

He sighed. “We’ve been trying so long. So many fights and struggles. I’m tired and it looks like it can’t happen as long as you love me.”

Daman kissed her on the lips. “Every second of every day is a lifetime of joy for me, and I won’t risk anything if it meant I might lose you.”

She smiled and kissed him back. “I love you, my beast.”

“And you will always be my beauty.”

Pail groaned. “And I’m going to be sick.”

Daman chuckled. “It isn’t—” but his words were interrupted as Pail surged to his feet.

Beauty and Daman slumped to the ground as the unicorn lurched out of the warm spot on the grass and vomited loudly. The cold air quickly returned and she clung to the still warm ground as she steeled herself against the weather.

Pail’s horn flickered and then went dark. He vomited again. It sounded like a huge bucket being emptied out on the ground and the stench surrounded her in a choking cloud. He staggered back and then did it a third time.

When he finally came back, the heat was fading from the ground. “Come on,” he said with a foul breath. “Get on.”

Daman got to his knees, then helped Beauty up before standing. “What do you mean?”

“Get on me. It’s some distance to the ring and you can’t walk there like that.”

Beauty blushed. “I’m not... a virgin.”

Pail stared at her and then huffed. “Why would I care? We aren’t having sex! I’m just giving you a ride, you daft human! WHY is it always rutting with you humans!?”

She squirmed in discomfort. “The legends say I have to be one. I just assumed... that is was important.”

“Well, screw those legends. I want to go home and I might as well take you to somewhere you can get cleaned up and maybe some answers. So that means both of you need to get on because I have no intent in slow-walking a mile in this weather.”

It took them a few moments to get up on Pail. Beauty leaned against the warmth and sighed. She hated how even a few seconds away from the unicorn’s warmth felt like like hell. She wasn’t going to question their luck, she was just happy that she wasn’t going to die of exposure in the mountain.

“Where are we going? Back to Lanier’s?”

Pail shook his head and his horn began to glow again. “The Fairy Realm. I figured between True Love and your curse, we might as well find an expert on curses.”

About D. Moonfire

D. Moonfire is the remarkable intersection of a computer nerd and a scientist. He inherited a desire for learning, endless curiosity, and a talent for being a polymath from both of his parents. Instead of focusing on a single genre, he writes stories and novels in many different settings ranging from fantasy to science fiction. He also throws in the occasional romance or forensics murder mystery to mix things up.

In addition to having a borderline unhealthy obsession with the written word, he is also a developer who loves to code as much as he loves writing.

He lives near Cedar Rapids, Iowa with his wife, numerous pet computers, and a pair of highly mobile things of the male variety.

You can see more work by D. Moonfire at his website at <https://d.moonfire.us/>. His fantasy world, Fedran, can be found at <https://fedran.com/>.

D. Moonfire

Fedran

Fedran is a world caught on the cusp of two great ages.

For centuries, the Crystal Age shaped society through the exploration of magic. Every creature had the ability to affect the world using talents and spells. The only limitation was imagination, will, and the inescapable rules of resonance. But as society grew more civilized, magic became less reliable and weaker.

When an unexpected epiphany seemingly breaks the laws of resonance, everything changed. Artifacts no longer exploded when exposed to spells, but only if they were wrapped in cocoons of steel and brass. The humble fire rune becomes the fuel for new devices, ones powered by steam and pressure. These machines herald the birth of a new age, the Industrial Age.

Now, the powers of the old age struggle against the onslaught of new technologies and an alien way of approaching magic. Either the world will adapt or it will be washed away in the relentless march of innovation.

To explore the world of Fedran, check out <https://fedran.com/>. There you'll find stories, novels, character write-ups and more.

D. Moonfire

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