

The Beast's Heart



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This excerpt is from an advance, uncorrected proof

Ace
New York

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Chapter I



Enchantments and dreams: I suspect they are made of the same stuff. They each beguile the mind and confuse the senses with wonder and strangeness so all that was familiar becomes freakish, and the most bizarre of things intimate and natural. For the longest time after the curse fell, I did not know if I was a beast who dreamed of being a man, or a man who dreamed he was a beast.

There are moments I recall with clarity from that dark stretch of years in which I lost myself. In remembering them, though, the real is indistinguishable from the phantasm. My initial flight in abject terror from my home is as sharp and shapeless as a shard of glass. I know it happened. Everything since has unfolded from it. The details, though, are the stuff of nightmares.

I have tried to string my memories together to make some sense of those years. But living under such an enchantment is akin to being trapped in the grip of a restless slumber, fighting toward wakefulness and finding only dreams locked within dreams.

The first moment I felt as though I were awake, in all those years, was the first time I saw Isabeau, standing in a fall of golden light, hesitating on my doorstep in her poor, patched gown. The sun flooded in, spilling across the flagstones and lighting up the very air around her. It was too bright for me. Her radiance dazzled my sleep-blighted eyes and I crept away to hide.

Everything before that has faded into shadow, or taken on the livid shimmer of a half-remembered delusion. The decades I spent haunting the wild, wild forests my fair lands had become, terrifying people and savaging any livestock foolish enough to stray within its bounds; the starvation years that inevitably followed, as the forest emptied of all living creatures save vermin and the occasional watchful raven; the shatteringly lonely term of my imprisonment in the home I eventually returned to when my misery finally crushed my rage and I remembered what I once had been.

If it was a living nightmare that took me into the forest, it was most certainly a dream that brought me out of it, and back to my ancestral home.

Since I had forgotten myself, my dreams had been wild, primal things, a reflection of the savagery that filled my days. But, as the skin sunk deeper into the hollows between my ribs and my empty belly cleaved to my spine, I lost even the strength to run and hunt in my imagination. Now, each night found me limping through the endless, empty forest in my mind, searching and searching. I had no clear idea of what it was I searched for, except that, unlike during my waking hours, it was not food. My memories of those bitter dreams are of hunting through dark, shadowy trees for something hidden in the heart of the forest; something I feared to discover, but I feared more I would never find, and would be lost to me forever.

One grim night, as I was nearing the end of my strength, I fell asleep upon a bed of pine needles, curled against the rain soaking through the branches above. At once my mind found itself slinking between the measureless ranks of phantom trees. As I dragged my paws forward, I saw ahead a glimmer of moonlight. I lifted my weary head. The moon never pierced the canopy of this unending nightmare.

As I looked, the pale gleam began to move. I followed. I was so far behind, and so weak and sore of foot, it was all I could do to keep the errant moonbeam in sight. But eventually, I began to draw closer and I could see I was following a woman. She was dressed in the most exquisite finery, such as would not be out of place at the royal court, and she moved as lightly through the trees as if she were stepping across a dance floor. Her pale skirts were long and trailing, and shone in the gloom. She wore a tall, old-fashioned, horned headdress, from which a gossamer veil floated, dissolving behind her into drifting motes of silver light that sunk away into the dark soil of the forest path. She was a vision so rich and rare, I could not help but follow along behind.

I soon realized we were walking upon a road that wound through the forest. It was ancient and much degraded, its cobbles displaced by roots and covered by moss. Indeed, parts of it were in danger of being entirely reclaimed by the creeping wood.

Eventually she stopped ahead of me. I came as close as I dared. She was standing before a ruined gate. It had once been very grand indeed, but now ivy twisted through its rusted ironwork, and the stone columns supporting it were crumbling and broken. I did not like to look at the gate; to do so made me feel miserable and afraid. So instead, I looked at her.

Now I had come upon her, I saw her dress was not, as I had thought, a sumptuous court gown of satin and brocade. Up

close, I could see it was constructed of clotted cobweb and the velvet wings of dead moths. It was not embroidered with pearls and diamonds, but decorated with the tiny bones of small animals and glittering with spiders' eyes. The veil was no veil, but a drifting cloud of tiny insects glimmering with their own milky iridescence. I hunched down, my hackles rising in fear, and she turned to look at me.

I could not see her expression, but her eyes gleamed in the darkness, green as a cat's. Terrified, I hid my face.

When I looked again, the gate was open and she was some distance away from me, walking between the cracked columns. I did not want to put my paws through that gate, but as my eyes followed her, my gaze fell upon the dark, jagged shape of a ruined building far ahead. Something about its lightless, misshapen hulk called to me and I crept forward.

I lost sight of the woman for some minutes, then, as I slunk along the overgrown path, I spied her again. She was no longer ahead of me, but walking far away, to the side of the ruin ahead. I hesitated, unsure if I should follow her, or my growing compulsion to see what lay amid the broken walls. By the light of the ghostly glimmer she cast about herself, I saw her walk beneath an archway in a tall hedge. I could see nothing but trees beyond. My heart quailed. What could lie through that portal, but the forest? I did not want to go back there. I turned away from the fading smudge of light and started again toward the shattered building looming distantly against the night sky.

The path twisted to and fro among strange, dark shapes vastly different to any forest tree I had seen, and yet eerily familiar. With every step I took, a sense of creeping unease grew in my breast. Then the path made another twist and before me lay the ruined chateau I had seen from the gate.

Within its roofless, crumbling walls, burning brands illuminated a scene of the basest debauchery. Bodies writhed and danced and crawled around the figure of a man, who stood among them, his shirt open and his hair wild. In his hand he held a bottle glinting amber in the firelight. His eyes shone with a mad light, and his face was gray with the ravages of illness.

Pain lanced through my heart.

I knew him. I hated him. The anger I thought had died erupted into incandescence within me and I sprang forward, snarling.

But my claws and teeth met with nothing. I crashed heavily upon the stone floor and lay, writhing and alone, amid the cold, dark ruin of the house in which I had been raised.

Memories came flooding back. A confused and bitter cacophony, with rage and hatred at its heart. I threw back my head to howl, but the sound that came out was a human scream.

I jerked awake.

I was in the forest. My hairy paws scabbled in the sodden mulch as I heaved myself upright.

Nothing had changed. Everything had changed.

I was still a broken, starving beast—but I remembered now. I remembered what I had been, and how I had been transformed. I remembered the Fairy's cold, green eyes. *Let all who look upon you see the nature of the heart beating in your breast*, was the curse she had laid upon me. And only now, with my arrogance crushed and my rage exhausted, could I begin to see the truth of her words.

But what good was any of it now? I was alone and close to death.

I hung my head. At my feet, a pale, wet rock glistened in the darkness. It was a curious, regular shape. Not far from it lay another, so similar as to be identical. I looked around. A short

distance away, the rain had washed a film of dirt and mulch from the ragged edge of a ruined, cobbled road. My hackles rose as fear gripped me.

Was I still dreaming? I was so sure I was awake.

I stepped forward, sniffing. There was an odd tang in the air. It took me a few moments to place the scent. Magic. I don't know how I knew it, but I realized now the scent had pervaded the forest as long as I had lived in it. Until now, however, the magic had been old and settled. This was fresh and new.

With sudden clarity, I knew I was not dreaming. The road was real, and I knew where it would take me, if I chose to follow it.

I could, of course, choose not to. I could slink away into the forest and ignore it. Without a doubt, that would have spelled my death. I did not feel ready to take the path. I did not feel ready to return. But with death as the alternative, my formless fears were no longer of any consequence.

Not knowing what else to do, I stepped onto the path and began to follow it home.

Chapter II



*M*y return was a bleak event. The gates were rusted open, the gardens overgrown and tangled. As I came to the chateau I saw crumbled walls and broken windows and exposed beams like shattered ribs where the roof had fallen in. The elements, the animals and insects had all found their way inside. The furniture, fine tapestries and luxurious carpets were rotting away. Expensive baubles had been scattered and broken and the colors of valuable paintings washed away by rain. If I had not known, I would never have recognized my beautiful home. But I knew now. The moment I put my hairy paws through the gates, I knew it all again.

That night I crept into the entrance hall, through the drifts of decaying leaves and piles of rubble. My arrival disturbed a veritable horde of verminous beetles, black and glittering, that fled at my approach, scuttling away into cracks in the broken stonework. I lay down before the fireplace. I could not light a fire, but I had my accursed fur. Weary and sorrowful beyond belief, I followed the example of the dogs I had owned, many

years before, and laid my great, shaggy head upon my paws and fell asleep.

When I awoke—seemingly but a moment after I had closed my eyes—it had all changed.

It was the fire that woke me. The instant I felt its glow on my flank and heard the quick snap of wood, I was roused. At the sight of the flames dancing brightly in the grate, I sprang violently back, hurtling into a chair. I knocked it over, scrambled up and backed away. The chair was upholstered in wine-colored velvet and familiar to me. It had been a favorite station by the fire once, long ago. Warily I looked about and saw my hall as I remembered it. But to my beast's nostrils, the air stank of magic, recently invoked.

As I stared around myself, a movement caught my eye. An earwig crawled over the velvet brocade arm of the fallen chair and disappeared. Then, before my eyes, the chair righted itself and moved back into place. I had been a beast for many years and had only just remembered myself. For longer than I had lived as a man I had let wild instinct govern me, and it governed me still. I fled. The great doors were shut fast, so I bolted up the grand staircase, only to be halted at the halfway landing. Here was an elaborate Venetian mirror; taller than a man, it dominated the landing where the staircase branched. The sight of myself in this mirror brought me up hard. I was frozen. I could not run. Not from myself.

I was no pretty creature. Not built like a wolf or a bear or a lion; yet, a little of each. I had the lion's mane—a mass of dark, dark hair growing about my face and neck and over my shoulders. I was massive, my paws armed with long, sharp talons I

could never sheathe, and crowning my head were a pair of gnarled and twisted horns. But my eyes—oh, my eyes! They were unchanged; as blue and human as the day the curse had been laid. No wonder people ran in terror from me. To recognize my eyes and know the horror and corruption I had become—how they must have feared me.

Now my own eyes held me. I stared into them, they stared into me. Around them, instead of a nobleman with elegantly clipped hair and clothes of velvet and satin, was a beast with tangled, matted fur and slaving jaws, groveling on all four feet.

After the first shocked moment of realization, such despair and anger surged within my monstrous breast that, snarling, I hurled myself at the mirror.

I met the cold, implacable glass with such force it cracked in two. I fell back. What I saw only enraged me further. My hackles rose. Each half now reflected back to me my image. Two sets of shocked, blue eyes now stared at me from within the broken frame. I gave a roar and threw myself forward again, one thought in my brain: *No mirrors. I will not abide any mirrors.*

Again and again I attacked that great slab of mocking, silvered glass. Each time it cracked, a new set of glaring, human eyes would be there, staring out from the abomination of my face. I tore at it with my claws and blindly pounded my horns against its surface. Shards of glass began to fall around me, smashing apart on the marble floor. Finally, the entire thing shattered, cascading to the floor in a thousand fragments. I stood on my four feet, swaying with exhaustion, surveying the destruction I had wrought. It was enough. Nowhere could I see a sliver large enough to show me what I had become.

What little strength I had left now deserted me. I collapsed, exhausted from my frenzy and torn and bleeding from my work.

* * *

When I awoke the next morning, I was sprawled upon the bed I had used when I was human. The room was hung with cobwebs and thick with dust, but the dirt and tangles had been combed from my fur, the insidious splinters of glass removed and my gashes dressed and bound.

On a chest at the foot of the bed was a tray upon which sat a most unappetizing breakfast. Stale bread, withered fruit and a thin, greasy gruel. Still, I was hungry enough to eat anything. A tarnished spoon lay beside the food: a utensil I had no hope of being able to use. In bitter humiliation I ate by thrusting my blunt nose into the middle of the meal, tearing at the bread and gulping down the gruel as though I were a dog.

The very act of eating exhausted me, but the room was so cold and drear, I could not bear to stay. I slunk out the door and down the corridor, back toward the entrance hall in search of the fire that had roused me last night. Despite the ministrations of whoever had tended my wounds, I hurt all over. A deep cut on one of my hind feet reopened, leaking blood through the linen bandage and leaving a trail of crimson paw prints across the bare stone. At the great staircase I stopped, wary of subjecting my lacerated paws to the gauntlet of broken glass I had created in my distemper. But I could not see even the tiniest glittering fragment amid the ruins of the rotting carpet and dead leaves clogging the stairs. The only remaining evidence of the existence of the great glass was its ghostly outline on the wall.

I limped cautiously down the stairs, sniffing at the air, trying to catch the scent of whoever had cared for me last night and left me food this morning. I had no coherent thoughts in my head as to what I would do when I met them, just an instinctive

yearning for warmth and more food. All I could smell, however, were the myriad, musty odors of decay underpinned by the now-familiar tang of newly awakened magic. I breathed deeper. I could not even detect the smell of wood smoke. As I reached the bottom of the staircase, the reason for this strange absence became apparent: the hearth was empty. Not just cold, but utterly bare. No charred remains of last night's fire; not even the tell-tale, ashy coating of a hearth swept clean. Indeed, the soot stains in the fireplace were so faded it looked as though it had not been used for years. There was nothing here but cold stone and mildew.

Not far away was a pile of weathered sticks and disintegrating fabric. I crept forward and sniffed at it: woodworm and the faintest vestige of mouse. A few stray strands of horsehair quivered in a draft. *My chair.* Or, more correctly, the remains of it. The skin across my shoulders prickled with unease. *Did I dream the fire and the chair?* I was so sure I had not. I nosed around the floor and found one of my own bloodied paw prints. *How could I have possibly dreamed up broken glass that cut me?*

A new scent reached me, the merest thread of warmth in the vast, gray chill of the abandoned chateau. I turned to follow it. I padded lamely up the stairs, along halls, until I came to a long, empty gallery. It was so desolate I did not immediately realize where I was. Shutters had fallen away from a series of large windows that showed countless gaps where the panes had cracked and shattered. Part of the roof had collapsed and, beneath the rubble that had descended from the breach, the floor was sagging dangerously. It was not until I saw the splintered frames, torn canvases and warped boards still adorning the decrepit walls that I recognized this was the gallery in which had hung portraits of my family, dating back many generations. I had little

care for these ruined heirlooms now. I was exhausted and in pain and entirely focussed on tracking the tiny point of heat I had detected. The scent of it was not wood smoke, but something else that spoke of warmth and light and comfort; something I had known in another life. Memory tugged at my brain like a snarl in my fur, but I could not place it. I picked my way along the gallery beneath my obliterated ancestry, following the enigmatic trace. At last I saw a tiny winking light.

Of course. Candle wax.

Visions of tall tapers burning in silvered candelabra washed through my brain; of people and dinners and dancing and church, and all the things candles meant to me once upon a time. Instinctively I looked all around for the person who must have placed the single, jewel-like light, twinkling in a glass upon a shelf. There was no one about.

Then I saw it.

Amid all the destruction wrought by time and neglect, one portrait remained untouched. It hung above the candle, the rich gilt of its frame intact and reflecting ruddy glints. It was a portrait of a woman of middle years in a russet brocade gown with a starched ruff, smiling gently, if a little sadly, down upon me. One hand rested upon a ruby droplet depending from a strand of pearls about her neck, the other clasped a posy of wild flowers in her lap; white daisies, red carnations, forget-me-nots, celandine and purple fritillaries. The strength left my legs and I sank to the floor, staring up her. Every line of her kind face was intimately familiar. My heart broke open and memories spilled through me, sweet and piercing.

Grand-mère.

A miserable whine rose in my throat. *Why must I see her now?* I'd never felt my wretchedness more keenly. She was the

only mother I had known, for mine had died when I was very small. She had understood all too well the failings of her son, my father; it was her life's sorrow. She had doted upon me, perhaps hoping I might choose a better path. *But look at me now*, I thought, bitterness stopping my breath as though I had swallowed thorns.

I dragged myself up, too ashamed to remain here under the benediction of her painted gaze. But as I took a faltering step I heard the ghost of her voice again. *Chéri, you must be the best man you know how to be*. I stumbled. She had said this to me so often in the last years of her life, always with a gentle touch and a smile, trusting me to choose the right path and not lose myself to the course of corruption chosen by my father. I hung my head, staring at my bandaged, bleeding paws.

I am not a man.

Yet someone had cared for me. Had left me food. And however pitiful that meal had been, it had been a human meal. I twisted to stare back at the candle. *Someone else* was here in this ruined chateau and whoever it was knew me for being more than just a beast. Perhaps they could help me . . . I limped off in search of my mysterious benefactor.

I found no one.

It's true; I was ill and injured and could move but slowly. It would not have been a difficult task to avoid me. Even so, if there had been someone to find, eventually I must have discovered some sign of them. But there was no one. I searched for days. Weeks, even. Every night I returned to my dreary room and every morning a meal was waiting for me beside the bed. Sometimes there was even a meager fire burning in the hearth, or in the hearth of the entrance hall. At long last I came to the uncomfortable realization I was entirely alone and that whatever

food or fire or light appeared in this desolate place was a result of the magic that seemed to have sunk indelibly into the very walls. There was no one to help me. If there was to be any change in my pitiable condition, I would need to work it myself.

The morning after this epiphany, as I was finishing my paltry meal, a basin of steaming water appeared on a table nearby. I cannot describe how wholly disconcerting this was. It simply materialized out of nothing. I flung myself away from it, snarling. When it did nothing more remarkable than send up gentle curls of scented steam, I gathered my courage to investigate it. Circling the table upon which it stood, I recalled the way my fireside chair had picked itself up after I knocked it over the night I arrived. Indeed, the water smelled of chamomile and pine and the faintest whiff of magic. I knew what it was for. I remembered it from my previous life. It was as though, now I had accepted any change in my situation was mine to make, the magic inhabiting this place was offering me a challenge.

I could only reach it by standing on my hind legs and my only means of cleaning my face was to submerge it in the water and shake it about. By this method I ended up with half of the basin's contents up my nose and the other half down my front. Still, most beasts will wash themselves with their own tongue, and I had done it with a bowl of hot water. An unfamiliar feeling of warmth gathered in my chest. It caught me by surprise when at last I recognized the foreign sensation for what it was. *Pride*, I realized wonderingly. I honestly could not have said when I last did something I felt proud of. This was such a simple thing, it seemed ridiculous. But it certainly wasn't the last simple thing to challenge me.

Thus began the process by which I learned anew how to be a man. At the start, it was almost as miserable as the existence I

had just escaped. Many, many times I tore outside and threw my body at the iron gates, trying to force them open so I could run back into the forest and be a beast once more. It seemed, however, that having accepted the house's hospitality in my darkest hour, I would not be permitted to return to oblivion.

The house was not the crumbling ruin I had first encountered on my return, but it was little better. It was rank with neglect and inhabited by every pestilential creature imaginable. The strange forces that had cared for me and brought me food on my return were erratic. One day I might find a feast awaiting me in the entrance hall, another I would be served nothing but rancid cheese and spoiled meat. There were occasions when I did not eat for several days together. Even so, with the relics of my old life constantly before me, I began to try to reclaim what dregs of it I could.

And it seemed to me the magic now pervading my house rewarded my efforts toward this impossible goal.

Over time, the rooms I used most improved and became comfortable. The invisible servants inhabiting my house became more reliable. I found it easier to pretend I was a man. I would shake off the drowsiness that dogged me and walk around on two legs. I would dress in a fine linen shirt and velvet doublet and dine at the table.

It was not easy. Eating with any appearance of civility was ever difficult; that never changed. Always I had to allow the magic to help me dress, or the velvet doublets I wore became torn and the fine linen ruffles at my wrists frayed and unraveled. I found it almost impossible to draw on my own boots, even after my hind feet grew more human in shape. Yet it was of immediate concern to me that, in every possible respect, I appear as noble as I had been born. I knew all the conventions of civil-

ity; they had been ingrained in me as I grew. I had practiced them in empty pride, a mere exercise of righteousness. But now, in absolute solitude, I made them the mark of my humanity.

Progress was achingly slow and each milestone I achieved was a thing to be treasured. It took years before I could walk unaided down the grand staircase on my hind legs, and many more hours of effort before I could do it easily. And, of course, some conquests cost me more than simple physical exertion. There was the day, before ever I thought to stagger about on two legs like a parody of a lady's lap dog begging for treats, when I wandered into the room that had once been my study. It was a decrepit mess. Not wholly derelict, perhaps, but close. The curtains over the windows hung in rotten rags, mildew bloomed across the walls and the books piled upon the desk had swollen with damp and burst their spines. Several had come apart entirely and spilled their pages across the floor. I looked down at the water-spotted piece of paper at my feet . . . and discovered I could read.

Why should I have been so surprised? It was something I would not have thought twice about in my previous life. But here I was creeping about on four paws, my body clothed in nothing but coarse fur, looking down at words scrawled across a page and *reading*. I think that was the first time I knew for certain I was no mere beast. I stood there, transfixed by those faded words, trembling with the import of this revelation. *I could read!* What beast can read?

The onslaught of grief this presaged, as I realized anew what had been done to me, was difficult to weather. I finally understood what was lost to me and what must lie ahead. But, even so, after that, the study became a favorite haunt of mine. Even before I could sit in an armchair, I would sprawl on that thread-

bare hearth rug, a book open beneath my animal paws, my phantom servants turning the pages as I found refuge from my unbearable existence in the words and knowledge of other men and women that those precious volumes contained.

Another incident stands out in my mind. On this occasion I was prowling through the upstairs portion of my house, shambling along on two legs as elegantly as any bear, when I passed a gallery that had once been used by the men of my family as a sort of *salle d'armes*. Every other time I passed it, it had been a shell of its former self, reduced to warped floorboards and damp-streaked walls. But on this day the door was open and through it I glimpsed an apparent mirage: the room, set up as it always had been, as neat and tidy and impeccably maintained as if my fencing-master had only just that moment stepped out to run some errand.

What was this? Why this room? Why now? The hallway I stood in was as rank and neglected as ever. But inside the gallery ... There were the leather dummies, set at one end of the room, presided over by a wooden manikin with one outthrust arm surmounted by a battered saber. There were the hooks upon which hung thick leather jerkins and a heavy canvas jacket. There was the rack of shining weapons, some among them intimately familiar. I crept forward, hardly daring to breathe, feeling as though I were trespassing on forbidden ground. *Why should this disconcert me so?* I shook my head to clear the anxious buzzing in my ears. My heartbeat was racing itself, tripping against my ribs.

The art of fencing. Surely the mark of a civilized man. I had known how to handle a blade. I had been very good at it. I had learned and practiced and honed my skill in this very room. *Was this a sign?* If I took up my sword and proved my skill, would I likewise prove my manhood? Would I be free of this stooping,

hulking, hateful form? I edged closer to the rack of steel. *There. That one!* My own saber rested there, gleaming.

I reached out one beastly paw and wrapped it around the hilt, lifting it from its wooden rest. At once I was assailed by memories, rushing through me as though a river had suddenly burst through the walls and was carrying me away. My nostrils filled with the remembered stink of blood and smoke and burning steel. For a moment it seemed my paws and blade were drenched in scarlet. Screams of pain and cries of “*Beast!*” echoed in my ears. Memories of a wall of spears and flaming torches rising up before me sent me stumbling to my knees. I lost my grip on my blade and it clattered to the floor.

Slowly the darkness obscuring my vision began to clear and I could see the whitewashed walls of the *salle d’armes* again. I gasped in clean, untainted air.

“I am not a beast,” I croaked in protest, the sting of tears rising to blot out the room anew.

“Not a beast,” I said again.

And then I heard it.

Not the suffocating silence that usually filled these lonely halls, but the words I had spoken to break it. *Words*. No inarticulate whine or anguished howl, but human speech. My first words in a century, or perhaps more. If I had not already been on my knees, I probably would have fallen then.

It was this, more than anything else, that taught me to keep striving to regain those things I had thought lost. To keep trying to walk upright, though I felt as though I were performing a foolish trick for an unresponsive audience. To do what I could to regain my skill in fencing, though at the start my ungainly paws could barely grasp the hilt. To take up what other pursuits I remembered from my life before, though my clumsiness made

me grind my teeth and my solitude mocked me at every turn. And to read aloud a little, every day, so that my voice might strengthen and lose its beastly growl, and I might hear something to break that frozen silence.

Still, there were times when I raged about the house, or ran to the rooftops to howl curses at the night-time skies with their cold stars. For, as I tried vainly to regain my humanity, I began to feel, more and more keenly with each passing year, each day and hour, the one basic need that makes every person truly human.

My invisible servants were by no means physical beings. They did as I bid them, but aside from that, talking to them was like talking to the wind. There were no replies. I could still feel the forest around me, and no one ever came into it now. Even though I no longer haunted its shadowy ways and mysterious groves, the miasma of my anger remained. I had passed into myth, but the taboo persisted.

My sorrow was loneliness. My craving was for human company. Often I pondered the bitter irony of my situation. Before, I had been a man locked in a constant struggle with the monster within. But the Fairy had torn me open; exposed my most shameful secret to the world and ensured I would only ever be recognized for what I had tried to hide.

Despite this, when the chance came to see and speak to another human being, I grasped it without thinking twice.

Chapter III



Who knows how many years I spent there alone? A lifetime? Half a lifetime? I never counted. Indeed, time seemed an unreliable, mutable thing. It stretched and contracted with dreamlike unpredictability, while the rest of my world remained utterly static.

It was early one evening, in the depths of midwinter, when I became aware someone had entered my forest. I always knew when some creature had broached my borders. For many years it had only been the occasional goat or cow that strayed too far. But this was no dumb animal; this was a man. Cold and hungry and possibly near death.

I laid aside the book I was reading and sat for a few moments concentrating on the presence of this solitary traveler. He was indeed exhausted, and so was his poor horse. But he seemed driven onwards by some burning need. I had the strongest sense he *refused* to die, that he knew if he let himself or his horse rest for even a moment, they would never leave the forest. The poor fool. I could tell that unless both he and his animal got food and rest in the very near future they would not see morning.

My strange connection with the forest did not end with my capacity to sense intruders. I had long been able to shape it to my will, to somehow change the course of the pathways winding through its green heart so, if I chose, the lost might wander forever without once catching sight of a break in the trees. Now, though, I made sure he found an overgrown path that led straight to my gates.

I did not know if they would even open for him. I merely hoped. My joy, when he finally rode through, was unutterable. I could only imagine his amazement when he saw what lay on the other side. For, within the tall hedge that kept me from the forest, my lands in their previous entirety could be found.

This was not all. My ability to manipulate the forest outside was multiplied a thousandfold within the confines of my prison. Even before I learned again to eat with decorum, or read, or fence, or shoot with bow and arrow, or do any of those things that are the mark of a civilized *man*, I found solace in shaping my gardens. In them I could use the enchantment binding me to create something of refinement and beauty.

I had not been able to resist a certain measure of exotic variety that could only ever exist by magic. It took time (of which I had eons to spare) and much careful experimentation, but at last I had gardens straight out of the pleasantest dreams. Winding paths twisted past flower beds permanently in their prime, flourishing with springtime blossoms and fragrant herbs growing together with delightful untidiness. I had orchards both in fruit and in flower and lawns ornamented with ancient yew trees trimmed into fantastic shapes and hedges. Sometimes the lawn and yews were cool and green and sometimes they were covered in a blanket of clean, white snow. Another lawn was set with *bosquets* of different varieties of trees, all in glorious autumnal

colors. Tended by my unseen servants and pampered by magic, my gardens flourished, even as parts of the house persisted as a ruin.

This, then, was what greeted the lost traveler as he rode through my gates. How his amazement must have grown, as the world around him melted from winter into spring and summer. I lit lanterns along his path, so he could better see the nodding blooms and ground free of frost, and I made sure every window of my house was ablaze with welcoming light.

I led him first to the stables where the doors swung open to reveal fresh hay and warm oat mash. He dismounted, but did not directly lead his horse inside. This puzzled me until something registered in my mind. Something I had hitherto overlooked. This man was afraid. He had come from a winter forest steeped in a legend of terror, to a springtime paradise exhibiting magical opening stable doors.

The man hesitated for some few minutes, but was eventually decided in his course of action by his horse. As the seconds trickled away it became obvious they were in no immediate danger. At least, the horse thought so. To it, the smell of oats became more important than the smell of magic, which, although strange, apparently offered no real threat. And after a while it began to demonstrate its interest in what lay beyond the threshold of the stable door. This must have made the traveler realize that, trap or no, his only alternative was the forest—which offered certain death. He eventually relented and led his horse inside, where it very sensibly went straight to its stall and began to consume the oat mash without even waiting to be divested of its livery.

The man dithered awhile with his animal, making an at-

tempt to care for it. I say attempt, for he had hardly touched the girth strap before it became unbuckled. And by the time he had taken the saddle off and placed it on its peg, the saddle blanket and bridle had also mysteriously found their way to their places and his pack and bags were nowhere to be seen. He only conceded defeat and left the horse to its mash after he discovered that, while he picked one of its tired feet clean, the other three had been done and its coat curried to perfection.

As he left the stables, a series of well-placed lamps lit to show him the path to the entrance hall where a marvelous feast awaited him. And as he made his way through the garden, I left my library and also went to the entrance hall. I was excited beyond words and could no longer satisfy myself with the vague sense of him in my house. I had to see him with my eyes.

I did not go down into the hall, but rather to one of the curtained galleries overlooking it. I intended to watch him as he ate, and measure the kind of man he was. I would let him eat his meal and then I would come down the staircase, and we would sit by the fire and talk as men should. I expected him to be afraid at first, but, I reasoned, after a good meal he would be more relaxed. He would find me fearsome, but he would have already experienced my hospitality and good care and surely that would reassure him as to my good intentions.

I waited in darkness, peering through the gap in the velvet drapes. The seconds passed me by and I felt each and every one, like single drops of water falling into a crystal bowl. Then he entered. Even allowing for his exhaustion, his gait and posture were not those of a young man. He stopped when he saw the table laid out before him and was so taken with it, he did not notice my unseen servants remove his cloak. His chair slid out from its place

and turned invitingly toward him, and a flask arose from the table and poured him a glass of wine. His mouth gaped open and again he just stood and stared.

“Sit!” I growled in frustration, as his astonished, lack-witted response began to grate on my nerves—and was astonished myself when he started, looked fearfully around and quickly seated himself. I, too, glanced around. Perhaps it was echoes or perhaps it was magic, but if I was to frighten him as little as possible I would have to be more careful.

I watched him eat with interest. He ate quickly as a hungry man would, but he did not gobble his food. It became obvious he was a man of some breeding—or at least his table etiquette was excellent and seemed unconsciously so. He ate a lot, but did not gorge himself, and when he was done, he folded his napkin and pushed back his chair and stood up. He cleared his throat uncertainly and began to speak.

“I do not know if there is anyone to hear me or not,” he said loudly, “but if there is, I thank you for your hospitality. You must forgive my hesitation. I am by no means ungrateful, but this chateau is a strange place and I have had a very hard journey.”

I sat motionless. His was the first human voice I had heard in perhaps a century and to me it sounded as beautiful as the finest music. But what held me frozen in my chair was the quaver of uncertainty the man had not been able to keep from his voice. He was still afraid. All this—my forest, my lands, my house, my servants—perhaps it was all too much. When I had lived in the world, magic was certainly rare. I had been living apart for so many, many years. What if, as was inevitable, the world had changed? What if magic was unheard of? I leaned forward and peered again through the curtains. The man had

seated himself on the edge of one of the chairs by the fire and was twisting his hands nervously.

My courage failed me. I was a beast and not fit for him to look at. If I went down he would try to run, or to kill me, or he would faint with fright. I could never have a conversation with him as I had wished. I fell back into my chair with my hairy, taloned paws covering my human eyes. Below me the lights in the entrance hall dimmed, and lamps leading up the stairway and to a bedchamber flickered alight. I did not watch him go.

That night, in my own rooms, I tore off my costly garments, shredding the fine cloth and gilt embroidery with my claws. Clothed only in my own dark pelt I ran from the house and out into the night. I was a beast again, and my strange body flowed back into the shape of a creature for which it is natural to prowl on four legs. I roamed my gardens and roared in anger and disappointment at the blank face of the moon. Until, through my howls, I heard the screams of my guest's terrified horse. I hadn't wanted to frighten it, I had only come out to indulge in my own bitter rage. Ashamed, I slunk away to my old haunt among the rooftops.

As I lay there, subdued and humiliated, I noticed something new in the magical fabric of my house. I closed my eyes and lay my shaggy head on my forepaws and tried to concentrate. Within moments I realized what it was. My guest was dreaming.

And such dreams! There was never anything new in my life, so my dreams were always the same. But this man had a life, and a family. Three daughters. He must have loved them very much for their faces kept on appearing in the unfolding images of his

dream. A thin current of worry threaded the flow of his reveries, however, and the youngest daughter kept asking him for roses. Every time her sweet face appeared, she said laughing, "Bring me a rose, Papa!" and a wave of unhappiness swept through the dream.

I cannot tell all the emotions that arose in my breast as I eavesdropped on my dreaming guest. The warmth of his love for his children first suffused me, then became a bitter ache as I realized I could never hope for such. My heart soared at the tenderness in the youngest daughter's eyes, and shriveled as I ground my teeth in rage at the remembered image of my own face, covered with fur and crowned with twisted horns. Eventually, I shut my mind to his sleeping visions, unable to bear them any longer.

I lay on the rooftops, exhausted by the ordeal I had put myself through. I felt as though my heart was breaking. I even fancied I heard a noise that sounded like the shattering of glass. I could not summon the energy to rise and howl to the heavens as I had first sought to do. The hopelessness of my situation consumed me and I lay with my muzzle on my paws, too sick at heart to even move.

I slept, and I dreamed. But this time I did not dream of forests and terror and painted gardens. My sleeping mind plucked images from the traveler's dreams and wove them together anew in my head. Now the youngest daughter was smiling for me, and not with the eyes of a daughter, but those of a sweetheart, a lover, a wife.

Her hands were full of roses, in every color, and they were woven into her hair and strewn about her feet. She plucked one from her breast and lifted it up to her face. As the creamy white

petals touched her lips, they blushed. First a delicate shade of pink, then, as she presented the flower to me, the petals darkened to a vibrant crimson. Unable to resist her gift, I reached my hand out and, with a shock that jolted me awake, saw human fingers, a human palm, and a hairless, human wrist.