

The Beast



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*For my grandfather
Who would have loved every word.*

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Prologue: Tøllervo & the Beast

A girl asked her father to tell her a story. After pondering the question for a time, her father asked, “Do you know the story of the Beast?”

From his pocket, he procured a small wooden figurine of a monster wearing an emerald green cloak. He sported twisted black horns, and he hunched over as though ready to attack. His little mouth was open, exposing his jagged, white teeth. The girl could almost hear his roar.

She shook her head slowly as she examined the figure. It had been a long time since her father told her a story she had not heard before. Her father’s stories were always special. They did not include the typical hero-rescues-princess trope that she grew tired of. They were usually about normal people doing extraordinary things for the greater good. When the girl grew up, she wanted to be one of those people.

“Would you like to?”

“Yes, Papa. Very much.”

“This story is a bit different from the ones I’ve told you,” her father said.

“Does it have a happy ending?” the girl asked quietly.

“I’ll have to leave that up to you.”

The girl wanted to ask him what that meant, but he was already clearing his throat. He took a deep breath and began.

Once upon a time, two kingdoms, the red and the white, were constantly at war. No one knew why it all began because the two sides had been fighting for so long. Death saturated the land and then drained it dry. Battle cries filled the air for days and echoed over the hills and rooftops.

On the red side was a tyrannical captain who ordered his men to plow through the white villages and burn them to the ground. He smiled at the path of destruction he created; he loved the smell of burning skin and the taste of ash in his mouth. His palate could no longer appreciate the tastes of fine food. Instead, his teeth gnawed on the gritty black powder. He once had a life beyond

this destruction—a normal life—but he could not remember what that was like, or if it was worth returning to.

One day, he and his men were trying to cut down the trees in the white's forest, but no matter how hard his men hit the trunks with their axes and no matter how many fires they lit, the trees would not come down. The captain insisted that they weren't doing it properly, so he grabbed an axe and started chopping away at the nearest tree. The axe barely made a mark. The captain kept hitting it over and over, sweat coating his face, his muscles aching for some reprieve, but he could not cut down the tree.

He turned around to face his men to insist that the axe simply wasn't sharp enough, but he found that he was alone. The forest seemed to darken at this knowledge, as though the sunlight had been sucked out of the world.

“Where are you, you cowards?” the captain barked to disguise his own cowardice. He swiveled his head around in every direction in search of a flash of armor.

Suddenly, there was a light so bright that the captain had to shield his face for a moment as it came closer to him. As swift as it had come, the light faded, and from it emerged a doe. She stepped toward him as though she had nothing to fear—not the smell of death on his skin, nor the gunpowder in his pouch. Slowly, the captain reached for his rifle. His men would love to dine on fresh venison, and he might even consider letting them have it when they returned to work. He aimed the rifle at the doe's chest. In her large black eye, the captain could see a reflection of himself slowly distorting, changing as though he was made of clay.

At that moment, the captain's muscles burned. His stomach seemed to fill with gas until it came close to bursting, and he doubled over in pain. Sweat coated his whole body. His armor became too tight for him and he wanted nothing more than to shed it like a heavy skin. He could hear the fine bones in his hands cracking. The captain fell to his knees, gasping for air. He yanked off his helmet and tore at his armor with his long fingernails. The scraping of metal made him grit his teeth. His chest plate burst apart, followed by his leggings.

Finally, it stopped. He took in deep, rasping breaths. His undergarments lay in tatters around him. When he looked up to see the deer, he saw a woman in its place.

This was no ordinary woman. Her skin was an olive green, her hair flowed wildly around her and looked to be made of twigs. Thick vines covered her body, accentuated by lush flowers in

different shapes and colors. When she stepped forward, roots pushed up from the ground and spiraled into elaborate patterns.

The captain had heard enough stories and legends to recognize this woman: she was known as the forest fairy, Tellervo. She was staring down at him with such a rage that his heart filled with fear.

“How dare you!” Tellervo said, her voice echoing with the malice of a dangerously powerful creature. “I pour my life into these trees and fill the world with beauty. I protect the creatures that nest in my home—even you pitiful humans. I have given my life to this world because I have so much to give. What about you, dear captain? What do *you* have to offer?”

The captain quivered. “Please, mercy, please...”

“Nothing,” Tellervo spat. “Not even the mercy you beg for now. You are a monster, captain, such a monster that you no longer recognize yourself.”

Tellervo gathered the dew drops from the grass and turned them into a mirror. She held it up for the captain to see.

“Look at yourself,” she commanded.

The captain shook his head. “I can’t.”

“Do as I say.”

The captain reluctantly raised his head. To his horror, his face was no longer that of the man he once knew. Fur covered his face, black bone horns grew out of his skull and twisted to the sky, and when he reached up to touch his cheek, his hands had black claws like thorns.

“What have you done?” The captain cried.

“I have made you what you are.”

“Change me back!”

“No.”

The captain gave a booming roar. He lunged at Tellervo and sank his claws into her flesh, tearing it apart. He bit into the top of her head and chewed on her twig-like hair. The captain let it fall from his mouth, but all that came out was dirt. He discovered he was only ravaging the ground. For the first time since he was a small boy, he burst into tears, covering his ugly face and burying his mouth back into the ground.

Tellervo’s hand rested on his hunched back and he jerked away from it; her touch burned through the muscles and seemed to infect his bones.

“Though I am still angry with you and still see no good inside you, I am willing to grant you a reprieve.”

The former captain slowly looked up. “Reprieve? Does that mean you’ll change me back?”

“I will, only if you complete a task...”

“Yes, yes, anything!” The monster folded his hands together.

“In order to change back into your original form, you must complete one thousand good deeds.”

“A thousand? But...but that is impossible! Who would want help from me? I will be like this forever.”

“Those are my conditions,” Tellervo snapped. “Perform a thousand good deeds, and I will change you back.”

With that, Tellervo dissipated into the slowly rolling fog, leaving the Beast with hopeless curdling in his belly.

For days, the Beast wandered around the forest and hid from travelers and merchants. He buried himself in the mud to sleep. How was he going to complete his deeds? The fairy was torturing him.

One afternoon, while he was trudging through the forest, he stumbled upon a man lying very still in the middle of a clearing. The Beast recognized the uniform the man was wearing; he was a soldier for the white side. The man’s breathing was shallow. Blood pooled around him. The Beast carefully stepped closer until he was standing over the man.

“Who are you?” the man asked in a raspy voice. He was too preoccupied with thoughts of death to be afraid.

“I am...” The Beast searched for a name, but he had none. “I am a monster.”

“Well, I suppose a monster at my side is better than nothing. There are things I want to say, and for my last wish I want a pair of ears to listen. You seem to have a fine pair.”

“I will listen,” said the Beast.

“I never did anything right with my life,” the man began, tears welling in his bloodshot eyes. “I became only a murderer. I watched my own people suffer, and I made other people suffer. I should have done more.” The man started sobbing. “I should have done so much more. I once saw a child holding her doll and weeping beside the body of her dead mother. I brushed her aside like she was nothing. I laughed at death, but I suppose it is death who is laughing now.”

The man was too sad to go on.

“I was once a captain,” the Beast said. “I was just like you.”

“Then there’s no real difference between us,” the man said, laughing bitterly.

“No,” the Beast lamented. “No difference at all.”

“Will you hold my hand? I don’t think I will be here much longer.”

The Beast wrapped his large fingers around the man’s small hand. The Beast was crying now because he did not want the man to die. He had forgotten what loneliness felt like until this moment.

“Maybe you *are* different,” the man said, his voice barely a whisper. His eyes were slowly closing. “Other people only dream of dying in the arms of someone who understands.”

The Beast closed his eyes and looked away. After a long time, the man’s shallow breathing stopped and his hand went limp, but the Beast could not let go. At night, the Beast took the time to bury the man. He wished desperately that he had learned his name.

The Beast stayed at the gravesite for three days before moving on. He encountered a woman whose clothes hung like rags from her body. The woman had bald patches on her scalp, and what little hair she had was very thin and limp. She was scrounging around for something to eat.

When she saw the Beast, she took a hesitant step back. “Have you come to kill me, monster?” Her voice quivered.

“No,” said the Beast. “I am here to help you if you need it.”

“Why?”

“It is how I will be free from this curse. What do you need?”

The woman still looked distrustful, but the Beast was patient.

“I need food,” the woman said, rubbing her arm. “And I need something else.”

“And what is that?”

“Bring me something to eat and I will tell you.”

The Beast hunted for her and brought her back some deer meat. He waited while she cooked and ate.

“I want to feel beautiful,” the woman said, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “I have never felt beautiful, even when I was a child.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” the Beast admitted.

“I just want to hear someone say it. Just once.”

The Beast looked deep into her berry blue eyes, and suddenly, she was beautiful. In his eyes, her hair seemed to be restored to its full, black beauty. Her dirty skin was smooth and clean, and her smile was like a tiny light in a dark room.

“You are beautiful,” the Beast said, and she believed him.

“Thank you, Beast. You are very kind-hearted.”

She reached up to kiss his cheek and the Beast felt warmth surge through his muscles. Then, just as she had appeared in his life, she vanished, and again he wished he had learned her name.

Days and months passed, and as they did, the Beast encountered more strangers along the way who were in desperate need of his help. Some had reservations about his appearance, but once they recovered from their initial shock, they found they could care less what he looked like. Much like the dying white soldier, they all agreed that they were quite happy that he was there for them. Even so, the Beast found that he could not enter any of the towns. He made the forest his home, quietly tucking himself away, but he did not hide himself so completely that none could find him if they needed him.

On the eve of his final deed, Tellervo came to him, glowing under the moonlight. There was a smile on her green lips.

“You have almost completed my task,” the fairy said. “Soon you will return to your old self.”

“And what will I be then?” the Beast asked.

Tellervo studied him curiously. “You will be what you were before I changed you.”

“The captain,” the Beast said. “But I don’t know him. He’s a stranger. When I looked at his image, I could not share it. I can’t be him. I have done so much. Yet, I feel it is not enough.”

“You are right. You have done so much, and you are no longer the cruel man I met many years ago. You will be a new man.”

The Beast laughed bitterly. “I doubt that very much.”

In the morning, a crowd of people were anxiously awaiting the Beast’s appearance. He was completely overwhelmed by the crowd’s cries for help. The Beast listened patiently to all of their stories. When he was done, he studied their faces over and over; nameless faces that needed so much from him. But what would happen after this? Who would they turn to then?

“I’m sorry,” the Beast said, “but I cannot choose.”

The crowd erupted into shocked whispers.

“I will conceal myself deep into this forest to await the one most deserving of my final good deed.”

With that, the Beast retreated into the gloom, away from the anguished cries.

“Who will help us now?” he heard them shout. He heard them sob and it tore at his heart.

The Beast found a lonely log to sit on. He couldn’t believe how weary he felt.

Tellervo came to him once again. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Waiting for the right deed to come.”

“Why?”

“Because when it does, then that will mean it is over.”

Tellervo could not understand these mixed emotions swirling through her, like thick clouds of pollen in the spring.

“I will sit and wait with you,” she said.

“That would be very nice,” said the Beast.

So they sat and waited. People passed them by, but the Beast insisted that it was not enough. Each time someone came, Tellervo would glance at the Beast, and her heart ached at his labored sigh. Not enough, he would insist. They sat quietly together and watched the sun as it came up and went down and then watched the moon glowing between the branches. Moss covered their legs, flies and insects crawled on their bodies. They remained unmoved.

Eventually, the people took to helping each other, lending an ear or a kind word to those in need. Soon, the Beast was all but forgotten. However, the people would sometimes still whisper about him over a meal or a good drink. They would wonder about him, wonder if he was still sitting there, waiting.

“Who was he?” they asked sporadically. “Where did he come from?”

It was as though he were a great flame in their time of darkness, lighting the way to a new era of prosperity. They never found the answer, and many years later, when they went to look for him, they could not find him.

“Is that really the end?” the girl asked.

“Indeed it is,” her father replied.

“But what happened to the Beast and Tellervo? Did he ever change back?”

Her father smiled like he was about to part a long-kept secret. “That, my dear, is entirely up to you.”

P art 1: The Transformation

Chapter 1

Valerie Mason emerged from the relative quiet of the forest and stepped back into the town of Leola just as the sun peaked above the buildings. She carried a bag of two dead rabbits whose blood was seeping through the bottom. She wrapped her arms around the bundle and walked as quickly and inconspicuously as she could, though the obvious tears around the skirt of her dress made it hard for her to blend in with the crowd. The hunters would not appreciate her encroaching on their territory again. She had been scolded a few times. The last time, they had taken her cargo away from her. She could not afford to have that happen again.

On her way to the marketplace, she passed the pub her father frequented. Valerie wondered if her father was in there now. She had half a mind to go look, but it would only delay her and it was quite useless otherwise. Last night, her father had returned home with a black eye and shards of glass embedded in his arm. With their combined salary, they were able to cover most of the doctor's expenses. Whenever Valerie had any doubts about the necessity of her going into the forest to steal, she was reminded of the reason she had to continue with this dirty business. If Valerie refused to steal meat from the hunters' traps, they would have had to choose between rent and supper—or doctor's visits and rent and supper. Was it so wrong with the fact that she did not want them to starve?

Her father was, of course, apologetic as always, and as always, she forgave him before the words were even out of his mouth. It was easier for Valerie to forgive than to be angry with him. After all, he was all she had left, and she could not lose him, even if sometimes it felt like he was determined to be lost. Her father assured her that the other man struck first. The childish part of Valerie wanted to ask, "But why did you have to strike back?"

Valerie turned sixteen the previous spring, and she was too old to ask such naïve questions. She was of age to be considered for marriage, but there were no suitors lining up at her door, not that Valerie was interested in such things. She was only thinking about her father. Although, if she married, it might be easier to take care of him.

The town of Leola was drinking in the remains of late-summer. Women hung their laundry out the window, on the line between buildings. Wet slopping sounds of waste being tossed down into the alleyways could be heard as it spilled down the cobble-stone streets toward the main road. Lord Aubrey's guardsmen marched in a unified line carrying rifles, their metal armor winking in the sunlight. Several passersby waved hello to Valerie, and she waved back cautiously. Children ran breathlessly as they chased each other, their laughter ringing in the air and mixing with the incoherent shouts of stall owners. Horses clopped lazily along pulling their carriages with heads bowed low as though they feared to make eye contact with beings around them. The aromas of waste, horse hide, and baking bread created a strange concoction in the air. All of this blended together to form the smell of the town that Valerie knew best.

She stopped in front of the tailor's display window. The tailor himself was arranging a beautiful emerald gown for all of Leola to see. There was already a group of girls standing in front of the window, pointing, giggling, and gossiping. Valerie took a moment to imagine herself in that gown. Maybe she would join the girls in their gossip. Maybe she would be invited to one of Lord Aubrey's parties, and he would be so impressed by her wit and charm that he would give her enough money to take care of her father forever.

The weight of the dead rabbits was enough to snap her out of her momentary daydream. No lady could carry such cargo and still be considered lovely or charming or witty. Valerie thought she had completely rid herself of such fantasies, but they kept finding her as though she was engaging them in an endless game of hide and seek.

A severely strict looking woman, who wore her hair in a bun so tight that it appeared to pull her face up toward her ears, was just turning the sign from Closed to Open on the front door of the bookshop. Valerie waited patiently for Mrs. Lind to finish arranging the books in front of the display window before walking inside.

The bell rang when Valerie pushed the door open. Mrs. Lind promptly swiveled around wearing a scarily forced smile and folded her hands in front of her. Her voice rose to an unnaturally high pitch.

“Wel –” she said before dropping three octaves into a low, disappointed tone. “Oh. It’s you”—her substitute for “Good morning.”

Altogether, it wasn’t said unkindly, though anyone else might have taken offense. Valerie simply shrugged it off.

Mrs. Lind snatched the bag away from Valerie. She made a face like something smelled rotten. “Did anyone see you?”

“No, ma’am.” *If they did, you would already know*, Valerie thought. It was best to keep such comments to herself. She didn’t want to argue with Mrs. Lind and lose her job. Even though she was only allowed to clean the shop and alphabetize the books, Valerie enjoyed it. There was something about being quiet in a room where hundreds of stories were at her fingertips. It was the only place where Valerie felt she was in control of anything.

“If they catch you, I’ll have to fire you. And I’ll pretend I knew nothing.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mrs. Lind sniffed. “Is that all you can say to me?” She imitated Valerie’s tone, “Yes, ma’am. No, ma’am. Are you a machine?”

Valerie didn’t know how else to respond to that question. “No, ma’am.” Though some days, she did feel like a machine. This was one of those days.

Mrs. Lind sighed with a hint of pity and stored the bag in a safe place where the rabbits would take longer to rot. Then she returned to Valerie, touting.

“What on earth are we going to do with you, child?” Mrs. Lind asked as she pinched Valerie’s torn skirt. “If your father finds out about this, he’ll have my head!”

Valerie wondered what Mrs. Lind would say if she told her that not only did her father already know but that he had given her a knife for her birthday. “If you’re going to disobey me,” he said, “you may as well defend yourself while you do so.” Valerie had only ever used it to finish what the traps started.

Mrs. Lind continued to fret over Valerie and Valerie let her because, in a way, it was nice to be the subject of someone else’s worry, rather than the worrier, for a change.

“If you leave this with me tomorrow, I can probably fix it,” Mrs. Lind said about the sleeve of Valerie’s dress, “I can’t make any promises, however.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Valerie said.

“Yes, yes. You can keep your thanks. I’d rather you show your gratitude by stopping this nonsense altogether.”

Mrs. Lind narrowed her eyes at Valerie as though waiting for her to promise that she would do just that. But Valerie couldn’t, and, frankly, Mrs. Lind knew that too.

After a moment of silence between them, Mrs. Lind said, “Can you please re-alphabetize the adventure stories? And when you’re done, dust the top of the shelves.”

“Yes –”

“If you finish saying what I think you’re going to say, so help me, I will do what your father refuses to.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Valerie said under her breath.

Mrs. Lind resigned to the counter while Valerie started her work. Children were their most frequent patrons, and sometimes they would leave sections in disarray. They loved holding the books in their hands and looking at the pictures. Some of them couldn’t quite make out the words. Sometimes Valerie would read to them. She liked watching their eyes widen in wonder. It reminded her of when she was a little girl; she used to stay up late to listen to her father’s stories, especially the one about the Beast. That was always her favorite.

Valerie could appreciate the adventures of dreaded pirates and Greek heroes, but her favorite genre was romance. There were rarely any female characters in adventure stories, and most of them were spoken of rather than seen. In the romance books, the ladies were sometimes permitted to follow the hero wherever he went. There was a sort of magic to them; no matter what dire situations the couples were plagued with, they always succeeded and ended up together. Valerie once thought her parents would make great characters in a romance novel. Her father was utterly mad about her mother, and her death was almost too much for him to bear. Coupled with what happened to him during the war, Valerie could almost understand why he turned to drinking and fighting. In a way, reading those books was Valerie’s “drink.” When she read about heroines like Caroline and Cynthia and Emily, she found herself stepping into their shoes, becoming mysterious, sweet, and desirable all at once. Sometimes, when she looked at herself in the mirror, she would recall her favorite lines and pretend she was wearing those pretty dresses in the window of the tailor’s shop. And the heroes they met weren’t half bad, either. Saxon and Daniel and Gregory: she could see herself spending time with them if they were real.

What she could live without was the stupid dialogue between the characters, the proclamations of everlasting love. Love was not everlasting.

Her mother's death had taught her that much.

Mrs. Lind promptly closed shop when the clock tower began to ring the four o'clock hour. She gave Valerie a wary glance as she held up the bag of dead rabbits, as though she was deciding whether or not to give it back and whether doing so would be an act of encouragement. It spoke volumes that Mrs. Lind handed over Valerie's pay before she handed over the rabbits. In the end, she gave them to Valerie without much fuss.

"Until tomorrow," she said.

Valerie wished her a good evening (adding a "ma'am" at the end for good measure) and proceeded down the lane to her house. The buildings along her street reminded her of crooked teeth in a grey mouth. They certainly weren't as nice as the buildings near Aubrey Manor. The manor rested on the tallest hill in Leola, and Valerie saw it as a white eye staring down at the rest of the town. Valerie had only ever seen Lord Aubrey once when he dismissed her father from the guardsmen's service. She barely remembered him. She supposed she should hate Lord Aubrey—that she should blame him for everything her father went through—but being angry at him was like being angry at the wall. There were more important matters that required her energy, such as making it home in time to make a good rabbit stew and whether or not her father would be home on time to enjoy it.

She entered her house to see her father sitting at the dining table as though he had been waiting for her for quite some time. He undoubtedly still felt guilty about last night. He meant well. He always did.

Valerie resembled her father more than her mother. She had his dark brown eyes and long, lanky frame. She did not have her father's scarred, leathery skin and the despair he often wore like a branding mark. War left him to deal with ghosts and a bad leg. When her mother was alive, her father smiled all the time. When she reminded her father of that now, he replied, "Now I save all my best smiles for you."

Her father was offering his best smile now. He greeted her with an embrace and a kiss to the top of her head. “Did you have a good day at the shop?” he asked. He glanced down at the bag in her hand and then quickly looked away as though he could not bear to see it.

“Yes, Papa. Did you have a good day at the smith’s?”

Her father worked at the gunsmith near the edge of upper-Leola. He helped make guns for Lord Aubrey’s men.

“It was tolerable,” her father said. “Everyone is stressed about the deadline. It seems nobody is ready for Lord Aubrey’s son to take the seat.”

Valerie set the dead rabbits on the counter. “I’m sure you will make it. You always do.”

Her father stood at the dining table. Valerie could feel his eyes on her back.

“Did you have many customers?” he asked.

“A few. They came in sparingly.”

“That is unfortunate. Did you bring anything to read?”

“A Saxon Matthews book.” Saxon Matthews was a romance series that Valerie loved. She sometimes read them to her father while he sat in his chair and smoked his pipe. He’d say, “Now there’s a man I’d want to see you with,” at her description of the series hero.

“Ah. I wonder what he’s up to this time.”

“Well, we’ll see after supper.”

Valerie succeeded in removing the heads and began skinning the bodies. The smell of blood was potent.

“Did you hear about Mr. Randall?” her father asked.

Valerie sighed. She did not know Mr. Randall, but she was certain she knew what happened to him. “No, I did not.”

“He’s gone missing—has been gone for several days now.”

Valerie had heard such stories of people vanishing in the forest. At first, she thought they were tales to warn children against going in and getting lost under the dense crown of trees. However, a few days after her birthday, Mrs. Knott’s son left to get married and was never heard from again. Disappearing was a frightening prospect, but to Valerie, starvation was worse.

“That is unfortunate, Papa.”

“It’s been happening quite a lot recently—more people missing every day. I hear Lord Aubrey is considering sending his men into the forest to investigate.”

“Hmm.”

“The guards might catch you stealing.”

If they do, I'll act like I'm thick in the head, Valerie thought. That's what got her out of most similar situations. *I don't know any better, sirs. I was just trying to help the poor animal.*

“Or you might be...”

Valerie turned to face her father. His hand was on his mouth as though he couldn't bear to say the word.

“You know I don't mean to keep...” His shoulders slumped over in defeat.

“I know,” Valerie said softly.

“Things are going to get better,” he continued. “I'm not going to keep forcing you to put yourself in danger. I'm going to get better. I'm going to be a better father.”

“Papa —”

He held up his hand. “Don't. I'm supposed to keep us together. If I can't fulfill that duty, then I am less than a man.”

Valerie walked over to him and embraced him as tight as she could. She had heard those words before. Their effect had dulled over time, but she could never stop loving her father.

He meant well.

He always did.