

# LOATHLY

Erica Forrest

After nineteen years as a prisoner  
to the Stonerow curse,  
fate owes Lady Maud a cursebreaker...

and delivers a Knight  
on a covert mission to win  
his Prince's war, Sir Favior Elwyk.

They were brought together  
by the unbreakable binds  
of magic and destiny.  
It shouldn't be so difficult  
or so painful  
to accept happily ever after  
but,  
even though Maud is only grateful  
for her freedom,  
Favior can't help but resent  
the complication and obligation  
of his unwanted wife.

And even as they're finally  
putting aside the bitterness  
lingering between them,  
the legacy of the curse  
still conspires  
to tear them apart...

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# *the greater territories*

*ingill - ruus - skorstan*



# Prologue

*Most eldritch beasts are  
more demanding than the one  
who has long held aulkin.  
But, a warning to the travellers  
in northern Ingill's forest:  
that benign creature has been supplanted  
by something darker.  
The territory is now guarded jealously.  
Stay beyond the wall.*

‘What am I looking at?’ the Prince asked, lifting his eyes from the note that had been waiting for him at his seat when he’d agreed to grant audience to his Kyrk man.

‘It is a note posted on the roads to the mountains, to warn of the trouble to travellers,’ the cleric. ‘Ingill has been losing men to that creature for more than a decade.’

‘Ah,’ the Prince murmured. His eyes flicked over the collection of his Knights assembled at this audience. ‘You already discussed this without me?’

‘It is yours to approve or dismiss,’ the holy man soothed.

The Prince firmed his lips but inclined his head in agreement. His eyes moved over the men the cleric had chosen to carry out his plan - seasoned warriors all of them, good choices for any such mission. The only one who was newly Knighted had proven his loyalty many times over in fierce battle and surely earned some trust.

But his gaze lingered on one. A tall, handsome youth. Pale, with untouched depths behind his eyes. ‘And you think you can leash it?’ the Prince murmured.

The Knight bowed low. ‘I believe so, your Grace.’

He looked back to the cleric with a raised brow. The holy man tipped his head towards the Knight. ‘Fey creatures are his to reckon on.’

The Prince considered - but he had long ago given his trust to his advisor and didn’t need to question it, especially if this strange plan might be the move that brought the long years of war to close.

Finally, he nodded. ‘If you think it can be done, let it be.’

PART ONE



*the  
beast  
of  
aulkin  
keep*

# 1

Incense stung my nose.

It was a moment of warning and then the magic on behind it rolled like a rumble of thunder beneath my feet when the intruder crossed the wall separating Aulkin Keep's grounds from the world outside.

I staggered – caught myself – stumbled again when the magic within *me* came to immediate, forceful attention.

So, not just any person.

*A man.*

I looked out across the gardens. After that first shock of disturbance, it settled and I could no longer feel the man moving across my land, but *there* - a small, golden light, flashing through the shrubbery, headed towards the immense shadow of the Keep.

My feet moved me - not entirely of my own volition, but not quite forced by the magic. The influence was so deep in me that it could do that sort of thing, but I'd learnt a long time ago that it was simply easier to not resist.

One nudge and I went, tracking the motion of that small shining point across the grounds, all the way up to the Keep where it slipping inside that stark, imposing shadow. A sting of magic, a reprimand for hesitation sent me darting across the mouth of darkness where the great doors to the hall had fallen, ducking where the puddle of lamp-light held in the man's hand could not reach me.

Crouched and hidden, I could observe him unnoticed.

And wasn't it appropriate? I thought bitterly, feeling branches scrape across my back as I pressed into the shadows. Quite right for a Beast to be skulking about in the dark.

And Aulkin Keep was the right place for it too; it looked a fairy-tale castle, with all the appropriate walls crumbling to ruins and ivy climbing up the cracks. Time had done some damage but there looked to be the remains of a pair of grand towers in the ruined wing. It was barren now, but echoing with grandeur – finely carved stone sconces, marble flagged floor, double stairs sweeping up the far wall to overlooking balconies. The man lifted his lamp to cast soft yellow light over one of the walls that still held a faint hint of a forest mural.

He turned to face me then. He was holding a blade in the hand not raising the lamp aloft – prudence for a man letting himself into a Keep at the edge of night. There could be robbers or rogue knights, vagabonds or gypsies, beasts or cursed women.

Magic reached out from me, magic swirling around him, tasting, testing.

The lamp flickered and he stiffened, turning in a slow cautious circle. He faced me then, staring blindly into the dark, but he was cloaked and even with the lamp-flame throwing light back onto his face it was hard to make out his features. I saw only a glimpse of pale eyes set deep a thin face, flashing. One shoulder rolled forward as if shrugging off a touch.

I waited for the curse to seize him and me and draw us into its usual patterns...

But it did not.

He breathed out a low sigh as the magic withdrew, just as I did. And maybe he could actually feel it. Perhaps this man was sensitive to such things.

Perhaps not, though. Anyone with sense or sensitivity would know better than to come to this place, especially alone and unarmed – for that little knife was no defence against things like me or even the servants.

The curse did not allow me many choices when it came to men in my home, but it seemed to give me one now – go down and play out my script, or stay here and leave the man be.

I took one step back, and the magic snapped.

And, for that, if the man was a fool, then he was a lucky one.

Why had he come here, to an abandoned Keep so far out of the way of anything else? Perhaps he was just a traveller – but without any bags? He had the figure of a mature man, not youthfully slim and not yet gone soft round the middle, with the shoulders of a merchant rather than a farmer or a soldier. Probably not a vagrant.

He could be a smuggler, I decided. And he wouldn't be the first to think it would make a good base for smugglers, with the borders to Ruus and Skorstan maybe a week away by land and Capitol even closer if a smallish barge took their cargo down the River Albiya.

I hoped that was not his plan. My curse might have spared him, but at least one of his compatriots would set it off.

I rubbed my nose to clear the lingering taste of incense and smelt bitter frost a moment before I felt presences at the edges of my magical perception, a tentative curiosity coming from the balconies. The Keep had servants, and they stayed clear of my curse – but, as the magic retreated, they moved in.

There was a reason my family always installed us cursed folk in this ruined Keep each time the curse struck; the servants - mute, invisible, terribly efficient - made sure that, even though I could not be in the company of people, I would never be abandoned.

*Glad you don't have to clean up another corpse?* I thought at them silently as their bitter, old scent drifted down into the hall. I didn't know if they could hear me, but I was as mute as they were and, somehow, they always seemed to know my thoughts. They were fae, I thought, so perhaps they might.

Perhaps the man sensed the weight of their otherworldly gazes. He backed up, staring at my place beyond the doors as if he saw me – I knew he didn't, for there was no cry of alarm and terror – then he turned, walked out of the great hall through a passage at the rear of the room and was lost from sight.

Soon, the faint noise of his echoing footsteps was lost too.

I emerged from my hiding place into the perfect velvet darkness left by the absence of his lamplight. No matter; I had an owl's eyes to see through the night and my feet took me confidently away along a parallel path. This time it wasn't compulsion, only curiosity.

Invisible presences chased me down the corridor, rustling my fur in ethereal winds and I went with them, down to the kitchens, where I had to pause to take in the sight of an unusual flurry of action was going on down there - the servants were apparently very excited by the prospect of a visitor.

Floating matches struck lamps, serving sets were brought up from storage, floated down atop a lacy table-cover draped down over the great, scarred kitchen table. The room was immediately transformed for late night dining.

Did they intend to feed the man? I chuffed. Good luck to them; there was no food in the larder, hadn't been any in years.

But there – a platter was being brought out. Was that... dried meat?

My laughter died. Had the servants been letting subsist off winter-dried apples while they made jerky in my cellar?

*Our guest certainly is lucky,* I thought sourly, glaring at the invisibles.

Or not. Those weren't beast-chewed strips taken from my catches on those days when hunger got too much to bear, I ran down one of the deer that hopped the orchard wall each dawn and dusk... so they must have been taken from the last unfortunate horse to have been ridden up to my Keep and sacrificed. Perhaps the servants did not offer it to me because they knew I would not take it.

Presences drew close, milling about my legs. The curse spilt enough magic into me to see the shimmer of ghostly bodies standing waist height before me, just for a second. Chimes rang somewhere deep in my ears – their strange, wordless, voiceless language.

I grumbled but let myself be herded to the door. How they moved my furniture, I did not know, for their touches had no more weight than a light breeze. I made myself malleable, let my arm be guided up to the door, and slammed a fist against it for them.

They seemed pleased and our guest was apparently a brave man. The boom did not send him running in superstitious terror – in fact, I heard his approaching footsteps a moment later, tentative but unerring.

I slipped out of sight into an alcove, letting servants crowd me and cloak me with whatever kept them from sight as we waited together to see our guest's face when he finally came down into the room.

The soft light exaggerated the surprise on his features to see the empty kitchen he had walked through transformed into a silver-set dining room and he stumbled on the last step.

'Ah,' he said. That was all.

The servants tittered inaudibly. Lucky for us all that they were the benevolent kind of fae.

'Hello?' the man called. He glared all about the room but didn't search the dark corners.

Incrementally, his stiffness relaxed. He stopped holding his lantern out in front of him like a talisman and even pushed his hood back, revealing blonde hair and indiscriminate features. He went to the bench at the table, guided by the servants that ruffled his hair with their presence, though he didn't seem to notice them.

He sat down and I saw his profile staring blankly down at the table before him. He reached for the cup by his silverware, found it empty and set it down again.

That was the moments the servants choose to make their obvious move. Good servants that they were, they knew only to lay down plates after the diners were seated - he didn't quite cry out to see plates drift through the air on invisible palms, but he jerked hard enough to nearly tip his seat. That coaxed a chuff out of even me as mirthful chimes echoed in my head.

When had I grown numb to the magic of it? It was a thrill to see another person light up at the sight of what was my every day, feeling the same awe and wonder I had when the invisible servants had made the Keep come to life for me that first time.

Amusement then turned sour as I watched the servants set a second place out.

For me.

Well. I supposed even benevolent fae were inclined to needle once in a while.

'Who will be joining me?' the man asked, noticing it too.

I accepted the touchless pats to my dress without rancour. They were right, after all; I *could* step out of the shadows and join the man at the table, share a dinner and a little company like I had not in so long.

I even wanted to, just a little bit. How long had it been since I'd last heard a human voice? The wise woman who visited the ruins hadn't come in all the winter months and children never came to play after the first time one discovered a corpse in the great hall.

All the cursed folk who'd come to Stonerow before had brought women to court at some point or the other I suspected the servants were disappointed – or, at least confused – why I wasn't doing the same.

*It's different for me*, I told them wordlessly.

Encouraging breezes rattled at my clothes, arguing. Yes, it would be nice to sit with the man. If only I could rely on him to greet me well, not to scream and take up his knife against me. I was not persuaded.

No, the place for this Beast was hidden in the shadows, as it always had been.

The servants commiserated then they went back to serving the man with slices of dried horse meat and well water. He received it with fascination and only one more disquieted glance at the second plate.

I allowed myself to sink into fantasies – of a grand feast in the great hall, of being a woman, a lady, a host. I imagined the table was set for twenty, not two. I imagined sweeping out in a graceful gown like I once had. I imagined taking the lady's seat as my guests all rose to greet me - like I'd never had the opportunity to.

Maybe the curse would not last another nineteen years. Maybe, one day, I would do that in truth.

The man picked at his food and kept sending disturbed little glances towards the second empty plate. Most probably, he did not trust the faery food laid out in front of him and only played with his knife for politeness' sake. Most probably, that was a wise choice.

It was only a token wait before he stood up. Lamp held aloft again and a few more uneasy glances about the dark places, he left the kitchen.

I held back to be sure he was really going, not lying in wait half up the stairwell, then followed him out.

The servants came after, steering me around the hall, up the serving paths and back to the great hall. This time my hiding place was on a balcony. With my retreat clear at my back, I looked down and trusted the stone balustrades to keep me hidden.

Below, the man stood in the precise centre of the great hall, his back to the doors, his hand reaching out. To what? His fingers grasped only empty air. His whispered words were too soft for even beast ears to hear.

I leant closer, dangerously far out over the rail – except he was surely too intent to notice me and I really wanted to know what held his focus like that.

My nose itched – copper and smoke. Magic?

He whispered again, his fist turning slowly and-

Pain! Shocking, unexpected.

I staggered and almost fell. I saw the man's hand still raised and fisted - saw his head turn - saw him see *me*.

## 2

His mouth fell open. I couldn't hear the words through the roar of agony and rage spilling from my own mouth.

Him! He did this! That was his magic digging in and ripping at me - and it *hurt!*

The curse uncoiled then with a whip crack that wasn't just in my head - not its usual, purposeful movement.

I sucked in a breath choked with incense and copper through lungs that were suddenly freezing. I'd never felt *angry* magic before.

I had only a moment for conscious fear before it swept me up and I was gone.

There was a moment of true nothingness and when I could see out of eyes that weren't mine to control anymore, the world was a rushing blur; I was falling, up and over the rail, falling down through the hall, falling and jarring my bones on the stone flagged floor.

It hurt worse than the man's magic claws, only made me angrier.

'Mage!' I howled, the curse taking my voice to lash out.

It shocked me; when the magic moved through me, I spoke to the curse-script - but that was not to script.

My fear worsened, though nothing of how I felt could affect me curse-driven body. It took my legs next, propelling me across the floor to the man where he stood.

If shock had ever shown on his face, it did not now - he stared me down with a ferocious frown, the claw of his hand still hooked in the air.

'Meat,' I cried. That was closer to my script, but no - the sentiment was wrong. The aggravated magic was not demanding me to be fed - it was demanding that the man die.

And still, he stood, stoic in the face of the horrific beast advancing on him. He had a knife now - where had it come from? He had such easy confidence.

'Halt, Beast,' he said.

The magics mixed and tore at the air, burning at the back of my throat. One running step more and I crumpled.

A second impact with the stone-flagged floor, hurting just as bad as the first. I screamed - but all I had was a beast's roar, no words; even the furious

magic of the curse was knocked senseless by the fall – it was me and my own decision that raised my head to meet the mage’s smirk.

Of course, he was confident. He really was a mage - with enough power to knock the stranglehold of magic away from my body. He *knew* that I would crumple to the floor just as soon as he said that – what was there to fear? Only I was shocked to feel my knees collapse at his words.

The curse raged at the edge of my perception, but he held it back with a few weaving patterns of the knife and swats of his magic.

My body was mine again – and I found that his order didn’t keep my bound. I gathered my legs beneath me, rising up from my sprawl.

Now, his expression changed – growing wary; he hadn’t thought I would move.

*Leave!* No magic, no voice; my beastly snarl would have to be enough.

I would chase this mage from here with tooth and claw since the furious curse wasn’t enough to dissuade him.

He took a hesitant step back. The curse battered to take control of me - but couldn’t. The first time in nineteen years it coiled around me but did not own me.

Fear fed my anger and I took a threatening step forward.

He ran.

Fast – in a moment he was gone in the darkness creeping outside – but I was fast too, ten steps behind and leaping the fallen doors - catching up.

Silver gleamed in the corner of my eye, then it flashed – I had to leap, fall and roll to escape the downswing of the deadly blade.

That was *not* the mage’s little dagger. I looked up to see myself surrounded by metal-clad, metal-wielding figures.

Knights!

The curse hadn’t told me about anyone stepping onto my land and now six plate-armoured knights faced me at the threshold of my own home, blocking my pursuit of the mage.

I had no time to think of anything else before the six soldiers blazed into action and attacked – I was all instinct. Paws and teeth and claws, swiping here, snarling there.

I was nineteen years of killing men just like this, who’d all thought they would be the one to slay the Beast of Aulkin Keep but were now just so much bone and metal in their shallow graves.

There – a mistake. I lunged, knocking the knight over, following him down and tearing off his helm to reveal his vulnerable throat – quick, quick – before the others would react.

The helm came off – with no head beneath it.

I stared stupidly, dripping drool from an open-mouth ready to bite. How could he be headless?

In my motionless confusion, I should have been easily struck by the other knights that surround me but they were still, silent. Frozen in the middle of battle - as if they weren't just so much empty armour, posed but unanimated. And the taste of copper on the roof of my mouth.

More magic. Just an illusion, a dirty trick to distract me while my real enemy stood away.

A beastly howl rose from my throat. I leapt away from the empty suits, casting about for the mage.

There he was – safely distanced to watch me tear into the conjured assailants. His knife was in one fist, weaving patterns in the air while the other clutched something to his mouth that he whispered to.

I roared, charging him – too late, I knew it was too late.

He threw out his open palm with a bellow of his own; 'Halt!'

It hit harder than the first, with crunching pain in the middle of my chest. Once again, I was swept off my feet by the force of my interrupted stride, left looking up at the mage, lying prone on the floor.

But he was retreating, running away from the Keep and disappearing across the unkempt grounds like a shadow. I strained against the magic that still held me pinned, feeling his running footfalls like thunder through my curse's connection to the Keep as he left the grounds.

Gone. He was gone.

The curse that howled and raged at the edges of my perception returned with lightning rush, a convulsion and pain, the third taste of it this night. I screamed.

Black fatigue crashed over me. Too many shocks, too much fear. I thought it quite calmly and still flinched at the first weightless touch to my back. The servants. Just the servants – come to fetch me because I was laid where the mage had left me still.

I ought to move, make certain the mage was gone and not coming back. If only I didn't feel so strange and cold...

I drew in a deep fortifying breath, then was lost to the black before the next.

### 3

I woke in my own bed, stripped naked and cocooned in my blankets, with no memory of how I'd gotten there.

Morning light filling the room, bright and soft. Touching my face, I felt the reaffirming touch of furred snout and clawed paw meeting. The memories began to trickle in then but I wondered if I had been dreaming.

I rose from my bed, the servants smoothing the sheets out behind me and opening my wardrobe door ahead of me to display the range of fine dresses. Every year, my mother sent me a new dress. They never fit; the collars weren't cut for thick, furred necks and I'd never had the discipline to keep up my lacing when there was no one to impress so the waists were impossibly tight, even if I could wriggle back into my stays. I kept them neat and perfect in the wardrobe, all the same, and reached past them for my regular wear of loose nightrails and underdresses. I donned a knee-length cream shift that was almost heavy enough to be decent and left my room to make an investigation.

Everything was in its usual place, except the suits of armour assembled in the great hall. But I recognised the tattered, mismatched things as the same the servants had taken to assembling in the corridors from the pieces of the soldiers who had misguidedly gone to vanquish the Beast and I might still have believed it had been all just a bad dream - if I didn't then see the mage's lantern lying overturned by the fallen doors. The servants had apparently carried me to my bed and built ornaments from the mage's illusion but did not care for righting the lamp spilling oil onto the floor.

The Keep was quiet, just like any normal day. There was no other trace of the mage's visit - except perhaps a flagstone maybe hadn't been cracked until I'd been flung off the balcony and landed on it. There wasn't a hint of magic on the air, not his copper or my burning herbs.

I sat down to stare at the lamp. I couldn't help but think that a man with magic. I thought over every moment of his short visit to Keep, picked through my actions and his. I came to the memory of that dark emptiness inside, where he'd torn me out of the curse's control, just for a moment, and wondered if he could have been just the person to do something more permanent about my curse - if only I hadn't run him off.

Regret. It chewed at me. I'd let animal instincts provoke me, and what had it gotten me for my trouble? Nothing but bruised bones and another broken flagstone.

I picked up the lamp myself and brought it to my rooms. It looked out of place, a batter, rustic thing amongst the finery my forefathers had arranged the Keep for their comfort long before I was sent here, but I liked the effect. I let it

sit amongst all the soft furnishings and decorations and comforts I could ever have thought to miss in my incarceration and haunt me; the Keep's silence was complete and there was no peace in solitude – there was no distraction from the thoughts that bit me in the wake of the mage's visit to my Keep.

That mage had done something to the curse and the magic hadn't been able to take control of my body.

What if, I worried, that effect was permanent?

If the curse-magic could not seize my body, it could not force me to make the curse-breaking demands. With no demands, I would not be compelled to kill those who refuse me. I would be safe for those around me.

*I might go home.*

A heady thought. My entire existence was waiting until I could go home; folk with a destiny to become cursebreakers were rare, and there are far more cursed ladies about than heroes with the talent to free them. I had spent nineteen years under the curse, I knew, each one marked down at the same time as the wise woman's annual ritual on the winter solstice in claw strikes on the wall by my bed. The rest of the year, I loosely kept time by the invisible servants' redecoration of my home in keeping with the festival calendar. My only other visitors were wandering folk and hot-headed young knights, and they did not come around regularly either. For nineteen years.

I found myself at the wall that encapsulated the Keep, gazing out through the wrought iron bars that separated me from the world beyond.

There was a wide, cleared path leading out into the forest, the trees arching high overhead and leaving the way in cool shadows. I leant against the gate, listened to the soft noise of birdsong and wind in branches, and pressed on the latch holding it shut. It was not locked; this wasn't a real imprisonment, after all. I could leave at any time and return to humanity. I could know real companionship, not just the ephemeral touch of the servants. I might have more friends than just the ancient wise woman who came sometimes to gather from the gardens.

I could have chosen to leave at any time - if I had ever been content to let the curse have its wicked way with every man I came across. If I had been content to unleash myself upon the world and become a real monster.

Only, *now*, I could go home and not be compelled to kill all the young men I came across. It was all I wanted – had wanted for years.

I put my hand on the latch... and let it go again.

I didn't dare do it.

My family would gladly take me in. They would have to hide me from everyone else; the beastly curse and the refuge of Aulkin Keep would still be a

carefully kept secret in the intimate and a monster like me would never be fit for company.

I remembered the cruelty of the people, back when the curse had first struck me. It hadn't been a factor to consider nineteen years ago - since it was the compulsion to kill young men that drove me to live in isolation - but, now, it might be the only thing to stop me from returning.

I was only half a beast - and that was worst of all - because I could look down at a woman's body, dressed in the same clothes I'd worn before the curse gave me the other parts - the clawed paws for hands, the lion's mane for hair, the horns, the fangs, the *snout*. Once I broke the mirrors, I could almost forget - until I next went to bathe or drink and saw my hideous reflection gazing back at me.

If I went back to Stonerow, I wouldn't be able to forget it for a second. How could I even think of leaving Aulkin Keep when there were only screams and women fainting and exorcists calling and attempts of murder waiting for me outside?

This chance to trade this self-imposed isolation for a life lived from the shadows, but at least not so alone. Was it worth it?

I could not decide.

I brooded for some indescribable time and I paced the Keep for just as long. I made circuits that brought me back to the gates, but I did not open them.

With all my hope and fear, I could not bring myself to *act*.

I waited. I thought. I walked. I was used to finding such ways to fill my hours. Between visitors, I could spend months at a time settled into circular thoughts, sleeping through afternoons and waking just to change my clothes. Time tended to move strangely for the cursed.

Endless, aimless wandering through the halls. Putting off a decision. If time passed - and surely a great deal of it did - I didn't feel any of it.

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I only knew for certain it was more than a few days - but it could have been or weeks or even months between the mage's visit to the house and the next time - when the magic of the curse reached out and snatched me, no warning.

The faux scent of incense filled my nose as it slid into me and through me as easily as it ever did. My first thought was impossibly foolish, tied up with

bizarre relief. So the curse still could control me. I shouldn't be relieved, but I couldn't help that I was.

If I did not have to stay away, then I might have to go home – still with my beastly deformities. And that was a terrible thought, as awful as it had been when I was first afflicted, nineteen years of loneliness doing nothing to soften it.

*Vanity*, I scoffed. A beast's scoff is a lot like its laugh – a thin, nasal bark.

It turned to a baying roar as the magic took my throat and forced my legs into a lope, announcing me to my visitor, whoever he was.

Invisible servants scattered from my path; they knew better than to get in the way of a curse-propelled beast. My feet took me at a lope down the back stairs and out through the kitchen gardens. I ran around the whole eastern flank of the castle and slowed to a prowl at the front gates.

He waited in the great hall – a Knight half in plate armour; pauldrons and greaves, a leather doublet with faulds. He had no helm, no shield, but his gauntleted hand held an unsheathed sword. He stood with his back to the wall, facing the main stairs at the rear of the room where he expected me to appear.

My entrance was an enormous leap – landing in a crouch atop the fallen doors with an almighty crash.

The Knight startled, turned too fast and stumbled – recovered quickly with the sword blade raised and flashing in the sun.

With no helm, I saw his hair, unremarkable brown but remarkably curly. Blue eyes blazed beneath the heavy wings of his brows, the cheek below the left cut across with a thick red scar from ear to nose. Not a handsome man, not with that sort of scar – but he was young and tall, and that was forgiving even to worse faces.

I knew at once that the curse would have him.

And I felt that feeling that always rose, equal measures hope and fear, that he would be the one – that he was my cursebreaker, come at last. Or he was not, and soon he would be another of the dead.

He recovered his wits only a moment behind his recovered balance. 'Beast,' he said boldly.

He had a nice voice. Commanding. There was no surprise in him. Clearly, he had known I would be here when he set off.

Most likely, he wasn't a cursebreaker, just another knight come to kill me. His assessing looks weren't identifying my strange, beastly deformities on my mostly-human body – he was probably calculating my weaknesses and planning his attack.

The curse knew it too, vicious thing that it was. It brought me into the room slowly, pacing around him, driving him until his back was to the door. The sword raised, and I stopped where I stood.

The curse had to give him a choice, after all - a chance not to fail at the first test.

If he were to charge now, I wondered how badly I might be hurt in that battle. He was young and fit - probably inexperienced if he thought beast-hunting was a worthy pursuit - but I didn't think I'd overpower him without taking a few injuries of my own.

Even if he was the most skilled swordsman in all the kingdoms, he would still die under my claws; no number of stabs were enough to stop me since the curse wouldn't allow me to die from the blows. There were plenty of scars on me from other knights that curse had ordered me to kill.

The anticipation made me feel ill.

The Knight considered me solemnly, taking my measure. 'You won't attack me,' he murmured, 'if I don't attack you?'

I heard the long vowels and roll of a Ruus accent, felt a shiver slide down my spine. Then the words registered in my mind and I found myself nodding.

If the curse manipulated him, I couldn't tell, but the Knight chose to lower his sword and rise from his crouch.

And it was no trick; he did not wait for me to relax, then lunge and strike - instead, he sheathed his blade.

Oh, you fool. Now the demands would come spilling out of my mouth to the curse's script, and he would deny me, and I would have to kill him anyway. It was so much easier when they just attacked and I could kill them like the mindless beast they thought I was.

He bowed - a neat, courtly thing - a shocking thing for this strange situation we were in.

Though he didn't lower his head and risk pulling his eyes off me, I noticed.

'Well met,' he said politely once he'd straightened.

When had I last heard a greeting that wasn't a cry of disgust and dismay? What a strange, strange man, to lower his weapons and greet a monster kindly. I was inclined to curtsy in return, but the curse still held my body in a beastly slouch.

I could grunt, though, graceless reply as it was. It was only manners - I might as well, especially if I would be killing the poor man soon.

And then he shocked me all over again.

‘Will you not speak to me?’ he said. The scar rippled disconcertingly as the corners of his mouth turned up. ‘I want to bargain.’

I snorted with surprised laughter. What was this? If he thought I was a wish-granting sort of monster, he would be sorely disappointed.

And soon; I felt it coming, the curse was stirring, rising in my throat to make my demand-

‘Bargain?’ the magic asked, through my mouth.

Alarm shot through me. That was *not* what I was meant to say.

Just as when it had screamed at the mage, the magic was not doing as it was designed to. It should voice my three demands, then compel me to carry them out – no more and no less.

And I told it so, with all the furious thoughts inside my head.

The magic only swirled in reaction, strengthening its hold on my body.

Another stroke of fear trickled down my spine. My curse was plenty old enough to have become a sentient thing, it occurred to me. How many generations had it been in the family? And it had adapted to afflict a woman – perhaps it was changing in other strange ways.

‘You have demands,’ the Knight was saying.

I startled; I had almost forgotten he was here with me.

I did not want to deal with this knight now. I wanted to retreat, examining the magic for flaws with everything I had.

No matter that I could do nothing, even if I found anything.

No matter that the curse would hold me here until it was done.

‘Demands,’ the magic spoke, and then, every word another violation of its terms of existence, it continued; ‘It is all that is owed to us.’

He nodded as if he agreed. He could not know, of course, that my frown wasn’t part of my words but the real me's concern for the magic’s willingness to play this unscripted game.

It had never broken from its pattern, not in all these years. Why now? Just because the mage had so terribly offended it last time? What new, terrible thing was this curse preparing to unleash on me?

‘You want food, you want drink,’ the Knight said, listing them off on his fingers, one, two.

How did he know my curse-orders? How could he say them so casually, as if he did not know what would happen if and when he refused?

‘And...’ He hesitated for the first time in lifting that third finger. ‘The third.’

‘The third,’ the magic sighed through me.

I had only heard the third demand of my curse once before. I had spoken the words then, to the knight’s cry of horror and fury. I had been made to meet his drawn sword with claws and fangs.

Of all the times I had been attacked, that was the first when I had truly wished that I might be killed - if only so that no one could accept the offer.

‘I do for you,’ the Knight said, at last, ‘and you do for me.’

The magic did not voice a reply; it was listening, very carefully.

He gave me an uncomfortable, assessing look. ‘I can swear to fulfil your three demands. If you can swear to fulfil one of mine.’

The magic did not warn him that he would accept my orders or it would drive me to kill him - and I was not allowed the words to warn him. But if he offered his obedience willingly... The curse *wanted* to be broken - what did it care to mix another bargain into the great magic already at work?

‘Swear,’ it challenged.

Triumph filled his face. ‘I swear to you, beast,’ he said soberly, earnestly, ‘that I will give you what you demand- I will give you your three favours so that in return you will give one favour to me.’

‘Agreed,’ I said, at once.

Perhaps he thought he could win an oath not to harm him. He did not know that there was already a bargain here - his obedience in return for his life.

So that is why the magic had twisted the script. It knew what he wanted, and it knew that his request would only set him all that firmer on the curse-breaking path.

My impotent fear drained away. The magic was not turning rogue, it was just doing its work, if in an unconventional manner.

When had I become so set in my ways, so terrified by any hint of change? I could have laughed if only I had control of my mouth. A breathy little grunt slipped out anyway, and the Knight gave me a look.

‘I will make it a binding,’ he murmured. His smile was a little grim, mostly relieved. I tried a smile in return, as best as a beast’s snout could make it. Poor fool. ‘Blood Oath?’

I recoiled. Was this knight a mage too? Two visits from two magic-users, one after the other. It couldn’t be mere chance.

His gauntlets were off in two expert tugs, cast aside with a clatter. He produced a thin blade from his boot and the magic, unthinking and unconcerned, made me nod.

He pricked a finger, showing it to me. I felt his power well up from the wound, tasted green wood under my ash, gaining shape and purpose with his words; 'I will obey your three demands.'

The curse curdled with satisfaction; I extended one clawed paw, wincing at the sight of it. He walked to me, knife raised, and I had time to think that he could so easily cut it off at the wrist, he could plunge it into my belly, my eye-

And he pricked the skin of my thumb. Just a little sting.

I blinked. 'I will grant you one favour.'

He retreated out of reach, swiftly replacing his knife in his boot. He straightened, with his grim, satisfied smile still in place. 'You will ask now?'

The scent of incense drifted over the scent of blood and his green-flavoured magic. With that, the magic pulled me from my body and took over my flesh - proving that only parts of me were beastly but nothing of me was *mine* - and there was no way to fight.

'Feed me,' the curse ordered through my mouth.

The careless smile slowly turned solemn and his face paled again. 'Let us eat, then,' he invited.

He'd come prepared, I saw at once. There was a satchel stashed beneath a table along the wall. He took it and removed a great hunk of raw meat.

Of course, it would be raw. What did beasts eat but meat, raw and bloody? Only, I would prefer good, hearty bread, mild cheese, *fruit*.

The curse magic had me take it - no thought for a plate - and thrust it between sharp fangs to tear at. It didn't ever taste awful - the worst thing. But my nose was too clogged with the ethereal incense to taste much of anything in truth.

And the knight watched me with a distracted sort of disgust. He was even starting to relax. Fool.

Unless it was poisoned? I had been dosed before by a knight who thought he knew what I wanted.

But no. He had sworn with blood to accept my demands. Why do that, only to poison me? No, he believed my demands were simple. He thought it would not be so hard to do what I asked.

I ate, messily and quickly. Blood dripped down my furry chin and chest, staining my dirtied shift.

When it was gone and my claws licked clean, I waited for the curse to demand more. It always did. A man might easily give up his dinner, but how easily would he kill his horse for me? And even if he *had* slit his good mount's throat, would he do the same to his faithful hounds?

'Give me drink.'

I startled at that; the curse had gone ahead to the second demand. Another deviation from the usual course.

Or had the knight known to walk in here without his horse, thinking to spare it?

And there was a skin of wine, easily produced from another bag. He unbound it with a smile and gave it to me to drain.

I poured it down my throat. It was good wine, I thought. I wished he had brought a cup for me. Perhaps the curse would have let me use it, let me keep some dignity. I could only be grateful that I did not have to eat yet another innocent, trusting horse.

Now there was wine as well as blood and muck on my shift. I tried not to let that affect me, but I was thinking that I would have to walk out of here wearing it since nothing else stashed in the bedrooms was any less grimy or less moth-eaten.

And with that thought, it suddenly sank into my head that this strange knight would break the curse. Fool that he was, he hadn't given himself a choice to *not* break it.

I almost choked on my wine. I coughed and drool dripped from my chin, onto my shift. It was as red as all the other stains, with all that I'd eaten.

The Knight had that same magnanimously tolerant expression on his face through it all. Poor, ugly beast, all alone in the castle ruins, only wanting meat and wine. He wasn't even disgusted anymore.

Oh, but he would be again soon. I knew what was coming next - and if he thought he was prepared for it, in any way, he was wrong.

*I will be free*, I reminded myself. I could feel that beautiful promise, somewhere. It was heavily marked by shame. *He chose to do this*.

Even for my freedom, I would not ask this of my own choice.

I did not have the choice.

The words rang in my brain before my mouth even opened. Once I spoke, there would be no escape. Already, there was no way to stop the words.

He looked at me expectantly, unconcerned. And he would be horrified but he would still agree because he was bound by magic to obey me. He did not know what he had sworn to - and now the magic rode us both.

All the stars in the sky and all the magic on earth must have aligned for this moment; he could not deny, and I could only demand.

‘Lie with me.’