

*SHE WAS A CHARMER,
AND I HER UNWILLING ASSASSIN.*



When Leena walked through death's door, she offered four magical beasts in exchange for her freedom.

She didn't know who I truly was.

She didn't know who'd placed a bounty on her head.

She didn't know there was no escaping her fate—escaping me.

And I couldn't fathom how I would ever survive her.

I was certain of one thing only:

Killing Leena would be the hardest thing I'd ever have to do.

KINGDOM
of **EXILES**

**MAXYM M.
MARTINEAU**

Copyright © 2019 by Maxym M. Martineau
Cover and internal design © 2019 by Sourcebooks, Inc.
Cover art by Neils Antone

Sourcebooks and the colophon are registered trademarks of Sourcebooks, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems—except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews—without permission in writing from its publisher, Sourcebooks, Inc.

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious and are used fictitiously. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

Published by Sourcebooks Casablanca, an imprint of Sourcebooks, Inc.

P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60563-4410

(630) 961-3900

Fax: (630) 961-2168

sourcebooks.com

Printed and bound in [Country of Origin—confirm when
printer is selected].

XX 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my family and husband.

Thank you, Mom, for teaching me at an early age that it's okay to dream, to find joy in a good story, and to believe in the worlds others might not see.

Thank you, Dad, for teaching me the meaning of perseverance. Without you, I wouldn't have the work ethic I do, and this book wouldn't be here.

Thank you, Chaz, for being the world's best brother, for showing me what it means to dedicate yourself entirely to your passion, and for always making me smile.

Thank you, Jacob, for being the husband I always dreamed of and for supporting me and loving me with everything you have. Just remember, I will always choose you.

To the rest of my family near and far, I love you, too.

ONE



LEENA

BY THE TIME EVENING FELL, three things were certain: the gelatinous chunks of lamb were absolute shit, my beady-eyed client was hankering for more than the beasts in my possession, and someone was watching me.

Two out of the three were perfectly normal.

I slid the meat to the side and propped my elbows against the heavy plank table. My client lasted two seconds before his gaze roved to the book-shaped locket dangling in my cleavage. Wedging his thick fingers between the collar of his dress tunic and his neck, he tugged gently on the fabric.

“You have what I came for?” His heavy gold ring glinted in the candlelight. It bore the intricate etching of a scale: Wilhelm’s symbol for the capital bank. A businessman. A rare visitor in Midnight Jester, my preferred black-market tavern. My pocket hummed with the possibility of money, and I fingered the bronze key hidden there.

“Maybe.” I nudged the metal dinner plate farther away. “How did you find me?” Dez, the bartender, sourced most of my clients, but brocade tunics and Midnight Jester didn’t mingle.

I shifted in the booth, the unseen pair of eyes burrowing

farther into the back of my head. Faint movement from the shadows flickered into my awareness. Movement that should have gone unnoticed, but I'd learned to be prepared for such things.

"Dez brought a liquor shipment to a bar I frequent in Wilhelm. He said you could acquire things." He extracted his sausage fingers from the folds of his neck and placed his hands flat on the table.

Believable. Dez made a mean spiced liquor that he sold on the side—a cheap yet tasty alternative to the overpriced alcohol brewed within the safe confines of Wilhelm. But that didn't explain the lurker.

Hidden eyes followed me as I scanned the tables. Cobweb-laden rafters held wrought-iron, candlelit chandeliers. Every rickety chair was occupied with regulars in grubby tunics, their shifty gazes accompanying hurried whispers of outlawed bargains. Who here cared about me? A Council member? A potential client?

My temple throbbed, and I forced myself to return my client's gaze. "Like a Gyss."

The man sat upright. Yellow teeth peeked around chapped lips in an eager smile. "Yes. I was told you have one available."

"They don't come cheap."

He grimaced. "I know. Dez said it would cost me one hundred bits."

One hundred? I tossed a sidelong glance to Dez. Elbow-deep in conversation with a patron at the bar, he didn't notice. One hundred was high for a Gyss. He'd done me a solid. I could've handed over the key right then and there, but I had a rare opportunity on my hands: a senseless businessman in a dry spell looking for luck. Why else would he want a Gyss?

“One-fifty.”

He launched to his feet, nearly upending the table, and his outburst grabbed the attention of every delinquent in the place. Dez raised a careful eyebrow, flexing his hands for effect, and the businessman sheepishly returned to his seat. He cleared his throat, and his fingers retreated to the thick folds of his neck. “One-fifty is high.”

Crossing my arms behind my head in an indolent lean, I shrugged. “Take it or leave it.”

“I’ll find someone else. I don’t need to be swindled.”

“Be my guest.” I nodded to the quiet tables around us. “Though none of them will have it for you now, if ever. They’re not like me.”

He hissed a breath. “Are all Charmers this conniving?”

I leaned forward, offering him my best grin and a slow wink. “The ones you’ll deal with? Hell yes.”

“Shit.” He pinched his nose. “All right. One-fifty. But this Gyss better work. Otherwise, you’ll have to find a way to make it up to me.” With obvious slowness, he moved his fingers to his chin, tracing the length of his rounded jaw with his thumb. A faint gleam coursed through his gaze, and I crossed my ankles to keep myself from kicking him under the table. I needed the money, and I didn’t want to dirty my new boots with his groin.

I barely kept the growl from my voice. “I can assure you the Gyss will grant your wish. One every six months.”

“Excellent.” He extended his hand, waiting for the shake to seal the deal.

“You know Gyss need payment for every wish, correct?”

His hand twitched. “Yeah, yeah. Fulfill a request, get a wish.”

“And I’m not responsible for what the Gyss requests. That’s on the beast, not on me.”

“Fine. Get on with it already before Sentinels ransack this shithole.”

Sentinels? He wished. The capital’s muscle-bound soldiers wouldn’t come near this scourge. The festering dark woods of the Kitska Forest were crammed flush against the west side of Midnight Jester. The errant, bone-shattering calls of monsters scraping through the air were enough to deter even the bravest of men.

No, Sentinels would never come here.

I clasped the businessman’s outstretched hand. Clammy skin slicked along my palm, and a chill crawled up my arm. He moved away, reaching into his pocket for a velvet coin purse. As he pulled at the leather strings, a handful of silver chips and gold autrics clanked against the table.

One hundred and fifty bits. Funny how pebble-size pieces of flat metal carried such weight. Those of us living outside of Wilhelm’s protection had to fight for our coin. Ration our supplies. My last bits had gone to a much-needed new pair of leather boots. This man probably had fine silk slippers for every occasion.

With this kind of money, I’d have the chance to get something much more important than footwear. I slid my hand into my pocket and extracted a bronze key. Power vibrated from the metal into my palm, and I shot the businessman another glance. “Are you familiar with the Charmer’s Law?”

His eyes skewered the key. “Buying and selling beasts is strictly forbidden—I know.”

I rolled the key between my forefinger and thumb. “Not that. The Charmer’s Law is meant to protect the beasts. If I find out you’re mistreating this Gyss, I have the right to kill you. In any way I deem fit.”

The man’s face blanched, sweat dampening the collar of his tunic. “You’re joking.”

“I don’t joke about beasts.” I dropped the key on the table. Offering him a wolfish smile, I cocked my head to the side. “Still interested?”

He wavered for only a breath, then made a mad dash for the key. Thick hands pressed it flush to his breast pocket. “That won’t be necessary. I’ll treat the Gyss right.”

As he pushed away from the table, he offered a parting nod. I jutted my chin out and kept my expression tight. “Think twice before wishing. The consequences can be extreme.” A familiar sliver of unease threaded through me. I hated dealing in Gyss, but his needs seemed straightforward enough. Money. Power. He’d never be able to fulfill the boon the Gyss would require for more.

This Gyss wouldn’t be used against me. Not like before. The breadth of their ability was dependent on their master, and this man didn’t have the aptitude for true chaos. No, my exiled existence would be safe a couple hundred years yet. There were Charmers who lived well into their late two hundreds. At the ripe age of twenty-nine, I had plenty of time.

The invisible daggers, courtesy of my mystery lurker, dug deeper into my back. Maybe I was overestimating my life span.

Tracking the businessman’s escape, I settled into the booth’s cushions to count my coins. No need to rush with the stalker’s eyes on me. A thief, maybe? Bits were hard to come by, and I had enough to get me to the south coast and back with room to spare. The Myad, and the opportunity to prove my worth to my people, was within my reach.

I just needed to acquire the blood of a murderer—given freely, with no strings attached. It was a necessary ingredient for the Myad’s taming, and something that wouldn’t happen in Midnight Jester where bartering patrons couldn’t distinguish

favor from paycheck. I'd deal with it in Ortega Key. For now, I needed to get there before the beast disappeared.

"You taking off?" Dez sidled into the opposite side of the booth, a toothy grin pulling the jagged scar running from his earlobe to his chin tight. With a square jaw and a nose broken one too many times, he had a rugged charm about him. "It's nice having you around."

I toyed with one of the silver chips. Living above the tavern had its perks. Giving Dez a quick appraisal, my mind flashed back to the night before when we'd been tangled in the sheets. A carnal release with none of the attachments, at least for me. We'd never broached that discussion, but I often caught his gaze lingering when it shouldn't have. I'd have to deal with that eventually. There was only so much of myself I was willing to give.

"I'll only be gone for a short while. There's been a rare beast sighting in the south, and if I hang around here, I'll miss it." I reached for my coin purse and slid my earnings off the table.

"You know you don't have to prove anything to anyone here." Voice low, he let his gaze wander from head to head. "Hell, you're easily the best person in this establishment."

"In your eyes." My people would rather welcome a flesh-eating Tormalac into their homes than allow me back into our sacred grounds. "Charmers are only as strong as the beasts they keep. I have to be prepared."

"Prepared for what?" Dez asked. I knew what he wanted. A little bit of honesty. An ounce of trust. I just couldn't cave. There was a reason I was the only Charmer for miles around, and telling him the truth meant he could be used to find me. The Charmers Council had worse rulings than exile.

"I'll come back. You know I love this place."

"You know you love me." Another glimmer of hope.

“And you know I don’t do love.” I leaned in, a slow smile claiming my face. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy your company.”

His eyes shone. “I’ll take that. For now.”

Heat ignited in my stomach. Maybe a few more hours wouldn’t hurt. “Can Belinda watch the bar?” All thumbs with her head in the clouds, the bar maiden skipped across the floor, sloshing frothy beers and ales as she went. She couldn’t handle a serving tray to save her life, but her tits raked in money Dez couldn’t ignore.

He didn’t bother to look away and check. “She’ll manage.”

“Good.” As I made a move to stand, a high-pitched whine sliced through my mind, and my feet cemented to the floor. Iky—my camouflaged beast I kept on hand during all black-market dealings. With senses sharper than a Sentinel’s blade, he would’ve been able to discern any shift in the tavern’s close quarters. We’d had a few brushes with two-bit murderers and thieves before. Nothing he couldn’t handle. It looked like my unseen stalker was going to make his move after all. “Actually, we’ll have to revisit that idea.”

I scoured the tables. By all appearances, everything was fine. No one jumped. No one made a move to block the bar’s only door. The regulars I’d grown to know over the years were neck-deep in their own worlds and not the least bit interested in my dealings. But with the weighted stare abruptly gone and the body count the same, something was definitely off.

“What? Why?” Dez shifted uncomfortably in the booth.

“Any shady characters in recently?”

He raised a brow. “Seriously?”

“Shadier than usual.”

All humor wiped from his voice. “What’s going on?”

“I’m being watched. Or I was. Iky noticed a shift.”

Dez's hardened gaze spied the lopsided coatrack tucked against the wall. Forgotten threadbare coats clung to the hooks like leaves that wouldn't die. It was Iky's favorite place to lurk. Dez discovered Iky once when he most unceremoniously tossed another left-behind cloak and missed. A floating red garment gave even the regulars a scare.

"All right. Promise me you'll take care?"

"Of course." I rested my hand on his shoulder. "I'll be back before you know it."

"Sure." Dez stood, spreading his hands wide and gesturing to the crowd. "I just came up with a new special, folks! Cured pig with red flakes." A signal only local outlaws would truly understand: danger, potential spy.

For a moment, everyone stiffened. Eyes darted in erratic patterns before the slow murmuring of mundane conversation—weather, the royal family's upcoming ball, anything other than what we were all here for—flitted through the air. With his coded warning in effect, Dez took up his place behind the counter, polishing glasses with one eye on the door and the other on his patrons.

Always assume they're snitches. Dez's previous warning rattled through my brain as I reached for the busted iron doorknob, a still-invisible Iky right on my heels. How long had my deal with the businessman taken? I'd stationed Iky behind me before that, which meant his hours in our plane were waning. I'd have to send him back to the beast sanctuary soon. With no time for delay, I pushed through the door and met the evening air with guarded eyes.

Staying in the tavern wasn't an option. What if the Charmers Council had finally caught on to my crimes? I couldn't jeopardize Dez or his establishment. This place was a haven for those who had nowhere else to go. Myself included.

I glanced east in the direction of Wilhelm, our capital

city. I'd never had the opportunity to pass through those gleaming white walls of marble and diamond. Stretching tall to kiss the underside of the clouds, the concentric, impenetrable towers guarded an impressive mountain where the royal family lived. Where the fortunate lived. Most of us scavenging on the outskirts were banned for one reason or another from passing through the magic-clad ivory gates.

Shaking my head, I quickened my pace. Though the royal family's jurisdiction technically covered the continent of Lendria, everyone knew that law didn't apply past those glistening stones. Out here, magic and darkness and questionable dealings reigned supreme. Iky let out another private whine, and my gaze jumped to the forest line. My stalker was back. Invisible to me, but not hidden from my beast's senses. My destination was the train station, but if this lurker was from the Council, I didn't want them getting a whiff of the Myad and stealing my beast. I needed to deal with the threat first.

I know you're there, creep.

Flipping the collar of my jacket up, I picked my way down the winding dirt path away from Wilhelm and the train depot. Lure them out, trap them, free and clear. Easy enough. The descending sun crept toward the riotous treetops of the Kitska Forest. Steeped in shadows, the dark leaves shivered in the dusk air, and a small whistling met my ears. The sheer density of the woods invited a certain level of hysteria to the unfamiliar—out here, one couldn't tell the difference between a pair of eyes and oversize pinesco pods.

Needles and mulch crunched beneath my knee-high boots, and my feet screamed at the ache of unbroken leather pressing against my joints. Soon enough, I'd wear the boots in and be wishing for more bits to replace the holes.

A twig snapped in the distance, and I splayed out my right hand. One of the forest's many monsters, or my stalker?

The Charmer's symbol, a barren rosewood tree on the back of my right hand, exploded to life. A crisscross network of roots inked down my knuckles and wrapped around my fingertips in gnarled directions. Iky responded to the flux of power and distanced himself from me. Searching. Pursuing. The lack of his watery scent left me unnerved, but I needed to give my lurker a chance to strike. Then Iky would snare him.

A frigid breath skated along the back of my neck.

I whirled, thrusting my hand forward and focusing on the well of power humming beneath the surface. But Iky had done his job without fault. Just beyond my reach stood a tall, slender man dressed entirely in black. With a voluminous pompadour, thin-rimmed silver specs, and freshly polished dress shoes, he looked suited for a night in Wilhelm—not a stroll in the Kitska Forest. His arms pressed flush to his sides, he was rendered immobile, and an unused, glittering black knife limply dangled from his gloved fingertips.

I dropped my hand, and the ink work along my skin receded. "Iky, be a dear."

Iky materialized at last. Tall and amorphous with see-through skin, he adjusted his body constitution, color, and shape to suit my needs. With elongated arms, Iky had wrapped the man in a bundle, pressing him so tightly his chest struggled to inflate.

"Give him a bit more breathing room."

Iky loosened his arms, and the man let out a sharp gasp. The shadows clinging to the forest's limbs seemed to darken.

"Who are you?"

No response. Harsh ice-green eyes speared me. The high planes of his face sharpened, and a small vein throbbed along his temple.

“Why were you trying to kill me?” I glanced pointedly at the knife. He dropped it to the ground, and Iky nudged it toward me with a newly formed extremity. It receded as quickly as it appeared, folding back into his body mass with a quiet splash.

The man pursed thin lips, and a rattling breeze ushered in more thin shadows. It was no secret that these woods were cursed, but this darkness was thicker. Unfamiliar. Something else was going on here.

Deal with the threat, and get the hell out.

“Iky?” I nodded toward my beast. Iky’s arms tightened, and the man sputtered. “If you don’t tell me something, this is only going to get worse.”

The sharp snap of a splintering rib broke the silence. He wheezed, words I couldn’t make out intermingling with pained gasps. I glanced at Iky, and he stopped.

Murder dripped from my would-be killer’s glare. “I’d never dream of telling you a damn thing.”

My brows furrowed. “That so? Iky, you know what to do.” A new extremity formed, wrapping its way around the man’s pinky finger. With a sharp and fluid motion, Iky snapped it.

The man swallowed a cry, face gone parchment-pale as I studied him. He wasn’t a familiar presence in Midnight Jester. Most of the men and women who stumbled through the tavern were scarred, reeking of bad choices and worse fates, but this man? From his immaculately trimmed hair to the smooth glow of his clean skin, everything about him screamed privileged.

I resisted the urge to glance back toward Wilhelm. “Who are you?” Taking a few steps forward, I studied his black garb. Long-sleeved, button-up tunic. Satin, no less. Slim-cut trousers hemmed just about his shoes. Not nearly ethereal

enough to be a Charmer. Certainly not brilliant enough to be a Sentinel. Their armor threatened to outshine even the brightest diamond.

He glowered. "I don't see the need to repeat myself." In my peripheral vision, onyx tendrils slithered across the forest floor and edged toward me. A heartbeat pulsed from their swirling depths. Whatever monster watched us from the forest, we were clearly running out of time.

"You're too scrawny to be a Sentinel, though you certainly have the arrogance of one." I inched away from the cursed wood. "You don't have the emblem of a Charmer, so you're not one of my kind." Thank the gods for that.

"Are you done fishing?"

"No." I flicked my wrist, and Iky broke another finger. The man's scream rattled pinesco pods, sending misshapen dead leaves to the ground. Shadows devoured them whole. "You were trying to kill me, which means you're likely a murderer for hire."

A slow smile dared to grace his lips. "You won't make it out of this alive."

Oh, but I would. And a new idea was brewing in the back of my brain. One that had to do with favors and blood and the golden opportunity standing right in front of me.

I started to circle him, assessing his potential. The problem was, offering freedom in exchange for his blood didn't exactly mean the blood was "freely given." Semantics, but in the game of taming beasts, semantics were everything. "And why is that?"

"Because I'm a member of Cruor."

The world slipped out from beneath my feet. Heavy ringing filled my ears, and the treetops spun together. I'd assumed assassin from the get-go, but *Cruor*? Who would go to such lengths as to hire the undead?

Realization struck hard and fast, and my gaze jerked to the pooling mass of darkness near his feet. He leached shadows from the corners and hidden crevices of the forest. Even the once-solid blade had dispersed, joining the curling tendrils around my captive. They licked his skin and gathered in his aura, waiting to do his bidding. That wasn't some Kitska monster gathering the darkness—it was *him*.

He'd been toying with me all this time, and I had seconds to react.

“Iky, serrated. *Now*.” Iky shifted, coating his arms with thousands of miniscule barbs that punctured the man's clothing and skin, and locked him in place. Blood trickled from a multitude of pinprick holes. Gleaming red droplets that wormed their way out and oozed down his ink-black coat like veining through marble. Blood I couldn't use. The first wasted rivulets dripped from his fingers and splattered against the gravel path. He watched them with fierce eyes, and the dark wisps receded. Good. At least he had enough sense to realize when he was beaten. “If you try to dissipate on me, you'll end up as mincemeat. Why am I on Cruor's shit list?”

Irritation tightened his face as my beast and I so deftly turned the tables. “I'm not going to dignify that with a response. As if I'd tell a *job* the details of my work.”

Egotism, even in the face of death. The Charmers Council had to be behind this. If they'd somehow caught on to my underhanded dealings, they'd sooner hire someone to kill me than leave the sanctity of Hireath. But Cruor? I chewed on the inside of my cheek. Charmers valued all life. Execution was rare. Hiring someone who walked with the shadows all but guaranteed my death. With me already sentenced to a lifelong exile for a crime I most certainly did *not* commit, they must have felt a more extreme response

was appropriate. No chance to plea my case. No chance to return to my people.

Gripping my hands into fists, I glared at the assassin. “Gods be damned. Killing was not on my agenda today.”

A brittle laugh devoid of humor scraped through the air. “If you kill me, another will be sent.”

He was right, of course, and I prayed my next words wouldn’t be my death sentence. I needed this bounty gone. I had business in the south I couldn’t postpone. The Myad was my only hope of ever going *home*. “Then take me to Cruor.”

His green eyes widened a fraction. “Your logic escapes me.”

“Good thing it’s not your job to understand how I think. Take me to Cruor, or Iky will end you. Plain and simple.”

“As if you could kill me.”

Iky snapped another finger without my prompting, and the man hissed.

“What were you saying?” I asked.

“Fine.” He rotated his head, peering around trees before jutting his chin to the left. “You won’t like this.”

Tendrils exploded in a swirling vortex that blanketed out the Kitska Forest. Rivers of black surged beneath our feet, and my stomach turned itself inside out. We were thrust forward, and yet we hadn’t moved a muscle. Intertwining shadows sped through us, around us, careening us toward a destination I couldn’t even begin to pinpoint. Tears pricked the corners of my eyes, and I sucked in a breath.

And then we came to a screeching halt, the outside world slamming back into us as the darkness abruptly receded. I white-knuckled a fist against my stomach and glared at the assassin in Iky’s arms. His smirk was maddening.

The comfort of Midnight Jester was now what felt like a world away.

Slowly, I unfurled my hand and caught sight of my

Charmer's symbol, weighing Iky's branch and my apparent insanity against his time. Every beast had a weakness, and his was a shelf life. Two hours of strength for every twenty-two hours of sleep. With every minute that passed, Iky's limb retreated to the base until it would fade from existence, forcibly returning him to the beast realm to regain his stamina.

I had fifteen minutes, give or take.

Stepping to the side, I gestured to the woods. "Let's get this over with. Iky, pick him up." His hooks retracted a fraction, and Iky cradled the man to his chest like an overgrown child.

The assassin scoffed, unintelligible curses dropping from his lips.

The void had transported us close, but I still couldn't see the hidden death grotto known as Cruor. Yet I could feel it. The weight of eyes and shadows. My hairs stood on end as we made our way through the suffocating foliage, darkness dripping from limbs like tacky sap. Above us, birds squawked and feathers scraped together as they took flight, swirling upward and chasing the setting sun into the horizon. A heavy branch creaked. A shadow more human than night rocketed from one tree to the next. The assassin stared after the figure without saying a word, but smugness laced his expression. One of his brethren, then, going to alert the others.

Icy hands wrenched my heart, and I gripped the book-shaped locket hanging about my neck—the miniature bestiary all Charmers carried—and begged the gods for favorable odds. I could have waited. Could have called forth another beast, but Iky's strength took a serious toll on my power, and my arsenal that could fight off the legendary might of Cruor was small. Besides, summoning another could be the

difference between a peaceful negotiation and a declaration of war. The latter I would surely lose. I needed every chance to run I could get, in case negotiations went south.

Mangled iron fencing battled against the overgrowth of the cursed forest, marking the edge of Cruor's property, and I paused at the gates. In the distance, the evening sky birthed a manor shrouded in darkness. Alone on a hill and two stories tall, with more windows than my eyes could count, the guild was just shy of a castle.

Slate black and covered in vibrant red gems, a rycrim core glittered from between neatly trimmed hedges and the side of the house. Magic energy pulsed from it in an invisible dome over the mansion.

I'd begged Dez to invest in a rycrim core for months. Changing every candle by hand, warming the bathwater over a fire—I wanted the simplicity of self-lighting fixtures, a faucet that immediately poured scalding water. But convenience cost more bits than we could afford to spare. Murder apparently paid well.

Iky whined aloud, a low vibration thrumming through the air. Less than ten minutes left.

With a heavy breath, I pushed the gate open and tried to shake the eerie grating of hinges as I stared down the winding path leading me straight to death's door.

TWO



NOC

THE WOODEN DOUBLE DOORS BANGED open, and a gush of cool air swirled into the foyer. Wild, dark eyes lit with anger found mine. Slamming the doors in her wake, an assassin sped toward me.

“Sir, it’s Kost.”

All sounds, save the fire, died. Even the voices bleeding through the walls halted. With their senses heightened by death, the rest of the assassins living in Cruor would’ve heard the sentry’s panicked entrance.

I stared at the woman. A rare glimpse of fear threaded its way through her gaze, setting my pulse on high alert. I’d only passed along the bounty to Kost, my second-in-command, yesterday. “What about him?”

Emelia hid behind a sheet of glossy black hair. “The Charmer. Somehow, she got the best of him. She’s at the gate.”

My blood cooled. “Are you certain?” Jobs weren’t without risk, but given our talents, we rarely encountered issues. Fueled by fear and dark rumors, we were often met with stunned terror instead of the wrong end of the blade.

Calem, a top-tier assassin and one of my closest friends,

turned to stone beside me as he glowered at the front door. “Want me to greet them?”

“No.” I fought for control. Cruor was the only family I’d ever be able to claim as my own, and Kost was the first of my newfound brethren I’d grown to call *brother*. If anything had happened to him... “Is he still alive?”

Emelia cleared her throat. “Yes. She’s held him hostage somehow. I can’t see... There’s so much blood.”

My mind reeled. With night slipping through the windows, the bronze chandeliers winked to life throughout the manor. Shadows pooled in the dark corners of the room, crawling along the floor and snaking toward my quaking fingers. I was their leader. I had to protect my own.

“Where’s Ozias?”

Perma-smile wiped clean from his face, Calem only turned his chin away from the door long enough to offer me a quick glance. “Out back. Training some of the new recruits.”

Calem’s stiff spine told me he wasn’t going anywhere, and I couldn’t blame him. Kost was a brother to both of us. Slipping my hands into the pockets of my trousers, I hid my balled fists to keep the calm facade in place. “Emelia, get Ozias immediately.”

Since I’d sent Kost alone to deal with the bounty, I had little in the way of details. We only collected information we absolutely needed. Anything else invited room for judgment, and moral quandaries only caused problems.

Emelia disappeared in a plume of shadow and smoke, calling on darkness to speed through the night unseen.

Calem fidgeted. “Can I murder the Charmer?”

I understood his sentiment well. I’d lost too many loved ones before not to acknowledge the unease in my gut. Losing Kost wasn’t an option. We might have been agents of death, but that didn’t mean we welcomed it in our own home.

Killing was a by-product of a centuries-old decree left from the time of the First King. Exiled from cities sanctioned by the king, yet forced to fulfill his contracts simply to survive. Death was necessary.

But not like this.

“Let the Charmer come.” The roaring fire cracked over the hushed silence immediately following my order. The manor kicked into full gear, bodies appearing out of every nook and cranny as members rushed to get a glimpse of Kost’s captor. They pressed firmly against the iron railing lining the second story, fingers wrapping around metal flowers welded to the bar. Thorns among roses—such was the life of the assassin.

I needed to protect them, as our former guild master, Talmage, had done. Tossing a quick glance to the fireplace mantel, my gaze snagged on a framed oil painting. Talmage stared back at me. Weighted down by heavy wrinkles, his gaze peered through me. The first time I saw those eyes had been from the flat of my back as he’d raised me from death.

“You chose your death. Kost found you without armor, without weapons, and with a smile on your face. I can’t say this life will be easier, but it will be new. You can move on. You can forget. We leave everything from our past in the ground.”

I thought death had wiped my slate clean when I followed Talmage and became a member of Cruor. I didn’t realize how wrong I was until it was too late. If death couldn’t cure me, then nothing would. All I could have was Cruor, and even that required a delicate balance between love and loss.

Never again would I trigger my curse, I vowed. Never again would I lose someone important. And now some Charmer with an army of beasts had Kost.

Careful footsteps thudded against wooden planks. Sinking into the black tufted armchair beside me, I capped

the fear and anger in my veins and hid my ire beneath absolute stillness. The bronzed handles jerked, and the doors swung open.

A woman stepped inside.

Wide hazel eyes flashed from left to right. She looked every bit the scoundrel I believed her to be. Faded leather breeches worn from constant use. Formfitting violet tunic with an errant thread dangling from the hem. She probably thought bringing Kost here could net her some extra bits.

She wouldn't live to spend whatever meager amount she kept in her change purse.

My brethren waited, completely still save their heavy stares and the subtle rise and fall of their chests. She studied each one, the color of her face dropping with every passing moment. Behind her, a transparent beast with the build of a slender man cradled Kost to its chest. Thousands of infinitesimal barbs anchored him in place, and blood dripped to the floor from his fingertips—three of which stuck out at odd angles.

Kost.

His green stare found mine, and his familiar stoic demeanor cracked to one of remorse as he lowered his gaze. He would view his capture as a failure. His downcast eyes sent a surge of rage deep into my bones, and I resisted the urge to lunge from the chair.

I couldn't break my composure in front of the Charmer. In front of my people.

"Now, what do we have here?" I said, as cold as any shadow.

Her head whipped to me, and a few strands of hair clung to her high cheekbones. She pulled her leather jacket tight around her and took a careful step forward. "I mean no harm."

My gaze slid to Kost. To the dried-on bracelets of blood circling his wrists. "I don't wholly believe that."

“Are you the leader of Cruor?” The slender beast sidled in closer to her. She dropped her gaze to her hand, and the frown pulling at her brows deepened. Interesting.

“Perhaps.”

“I want the bounty off my head,” she said. A few laughs rolled through the crowd before silence once again settled over us. She shifted her weight from one foot to the next, casting another quick glance at her hand.

I kept my tone even. “You’re a long way from home, Charmer. I will neither remove the bounty nor permit you to leave here safely.”

A peculiar sheen soaked her hairline, and the beast by her side shivered. She touched her chin to her shoulder, concern bleeding from her eyes, before taking a deep breath and meeting my gaze head-on.

“If you move to kill me, this man will die.”

The beast tightened its grip, and Kost’s sharp gasp was a fist around my heart.

Gods, Kost.

I dragged my gaze from Kost to her. *Control.* Expressing too much concern would threaten Kost’s life in ways the Charmer would never be able to understand. It was a careful calculus drilled into me by years living under the pall of my curse. “Kost does not fear death. He’s been there before.”

When Talmage was in charge, he’d insisted we leave fear behind for the sake of our work. I agreed, but there weren’t any rules about loyalty. Standing slowly, I gauged the distance between Kost and me. What kind of powers did this creature have? Would I make it in time?

Shadows gathered in my peripheral and flung themselves to me. Swathed me in a cool darkness that made movements lethal and nearly impossible to track. I lunged before doubt had a chance to freeze my muscles.

Thick tendrils flared outward in a puff of black smoke, and suddenly I was before her. I wrapped my hand around the soft flesh of the woman's neck, yanked her from the floor, and held her suspended above the ebony tile. She was so fragile. Breakable. Hard to believe she'd somehow managed to trap my second-in-command. What made her so dangerous that she warranted a bounty? No matter: one swift jerk and I could end her life. Fingers wrenched between mine, and her watery eyes widened.

Behind her, the monster reacted. Arms shifting and tightening around Kost's ribs, the hooked barbs sank deep into his skin. Blood splattered outward. My fingers tightened, and the woman's muscles spasmed beneath my grip. Flicking my wrist would cut off her airway, but there was still the matter of her beast. I wasn't sure I was fast enough to break her neck before it stole Kost's life.

A gruff whisper squeaked through the woman's lips. "I'll give you a beast."

I loosened my fingers a fraction, and my gaze snapped to her. Charmers didn't offer beasts lightly. "You'd trade your monsters? What Charmer would be willing to do such a thing?"

"Negotiate. Please." Her vocal cords flared against the palm of my hand. I could end her right here...but beasts were a rare find.

Like the monster caging Kost. A beast like this could execute the more dangerous jobs, the ones that could get us captured and carted back to our door—or worse, dead. There were also tales whispered from drunken lips, rumors of a beast that could fulfill anyone's deepest desires. I'd tested every manner of a cure except this one. Charmers were too hard to find, too hard to subdue. And they never parted with their beasts, no matter the price—or threat.

The toes of the Charmer's feet skated above the floor, and her creature shuddered. Kost moaned again, and Calem inched closer. In less than a minute, I wouldn't have the opportunity to bargain. He would strike to save Kost.

"Release him. As a show of good faith."

She lifted her right hand to the side, and a soft light emanated from her Charmer's emblem. Rosewood markings flared, and the grating of a heavy door scraping against floorboards cut the air. My eyes peeled away from the woman for a moment in search of the sound, but the hidden realm remained invisible.

"Iky, return," she murmured. A soft hum droned as the beast exhaled. Dropping Kost to the floor, Iky disappeared in a flood of light, and her insignia returned to normal.

Unlatching my fingers, I released her neck. "Kost. Medical wing. Now."

"Noc—"

"Now," I said. He nodded once before taking his leave up the stairs. "Calem, stay with me and the Charmer. Everyone else, leave us. Immediately."

Murmurs of discontent drifted down the stairs, but misty darkness curled around their ankles like the thick vines of the forest ensnaring its victims, and they left.

Calem's muted-red eyes targeted the woman. "Hell of a show. You've got a brass set of balls, that's for sure."

I couldn't fathom how he found it in his heart to compliment her. Not when she'd strung up Kost like a scarecrow and set him on display. "Calem."

"Yeah, yeah." Quick to anger, quicker to cool. His tense jaw relaxed, and his stare shifted from murderous to an intrigued, slow-moving appraisal. I fought the impulse to send him away. The gods only knew what she could summon, and I wouldn't be caught off guard.

“What’s your name?” Boots clipping against the tile, I circled her in a slow walk.

Her voice cracked. “Leena.” Purplish bruises swelled in the shapes of fingerprints along the paper-thin skin of her neck. Guilt didn’t even bother to rear its head.

“Noc. Welcome to my home.” I nodded toward the other open armchair and stepped back, waiting for her to pass. The confident jerk of her chin threw me, and some of the anger stoking in my core snuffed out. I couldn’t help but admire the way she carried herself. Like an assassin unafraid of death. She arranged herself in the chair, her gaze slanting from me to Calem.

“Most Charmers would sooner die than part with their precious beasts,” I said, pulling her attention back to me.

Something dark flickered behind her eyes. “What beast do you want?”

“Before we discuss what you’ll be handing over, we should touch on the quantity. I require four.”

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “Two beasts. Clearly you don’t understand the difficulty involved with managing more.”

“You manage more than one.”

Rotating the rose-gold ring around her pointer finger, she ground her words through clenched teeth. “Ensuring my beasts are happy and healthy is vital.”

“*There’s* the Charmer blood in you.” So not just a black-market scoundrel trading for bits. There were morals tucked away beneath that hardened expression. “I can assure you the beasts will be well cared for, but I still require four. One for myself and one for each of my closest votaries.” Kost’s stricken gaze played on repeat in my mind. Never again.

Her eyes shifted to Calem, and he winked. “Kost will

be thrilled to have a permanent reminder of his unfortunate meeting with you.”

“Enough, Calem.” I waved him off, turning back to Leena. “B-Class or higher.”

She scoffed. “Fuck off.”

“Are you incapable of procuring B-Class beasts?” I finally took the seat opposite her and met her heated glare head-on.

“No.” She fingered a strand of hair the color of ancient oak trees—layered with rich browns that deepened in color at the crown of her head.

“B-Class it is, then. Shall we see what you have available in that pretty little bestiary of yours?” The book dangling in her cleavage called to me, sparking a flare of intrigue. But intrigue was a complicated thing. It often led to interest, and interest to something far more dangerous.

Parting with her beasts, wandering far from the Charmers’ sacred homeland—she was anything but an ordinary mark. Curiosity burned brighter. It was my job to unearth secrets, to use them to further my agenda if needed, but there was more to this Charmer than her bounty.

After a moment that stretched for what felt like an hour, a log on the fire split in half, and she looked up at me through her lashes. “I was heading south for business. I’ll tame four B-Class beasts during my travels and bring them back once I’m finished.” Her tone wavered at the end, just a slight dip in her timbre. She was hiding something. Then again, she was bartering with an assassin, so she’d be a fool not to.

Sighing, I reclined in the chair. “No.”

“It’s that or nothing at all.”

“I think you forget who holds the cards here. My guild has a bounty on your head. Your life is mine to bargain with. You follow my rules.”

She gripped the arms of her chair, a defiant glare threatening

to bore twin holes through my skull. “How do you think I’ve come to earn this bounty? I make a living dealing with people like you, and I always set the rules.” A low whistle slipped past Calem’s pursed lips, and I shot him a murderous glare. “You want beasts—that much is obvious—so I think I’ve got more bargaining power than you realize.”

I rested my elbows on my knees and leaned in, intent on the minute changes in her expression. “What happens to your beasts when you die?”

Her boldness fled in an instant, leaving nothing but cold fear in its wake. “What?”

Her reaction said it all. “If you don’t comply with my demands, you die. It’s as simple as that. I can live without your creatures. So can my brethren.” I gestured to Calem, his lazy smile dangerous as he studied her. “But the question is, can your beasts live without you? What kind of fate would they endure if you died? A fate you *chose* because you were too stubborn to negotiate?” Her lips trembled, but guilt wasn’t something I was about to entertain. I stood, looking down at her. “Go on, then. Tell me again how I don’t hold all the chips.”

The air between us sparked, and she clenched her hands into fists before finally lowering her gaze to the floor. “I don’t have any on hand to give you. Those I do have are already bonded to me, and breaking that connection would kill them. What do you propose?”

There was a certain level of satisfaction that came with outmaneuvering an opponent, mentally or physically, and I couldn’t stop the smirk. “I’m so glad you asked.” I turned to Calem. “It seems we’re taking our work on the road.”

“Awww yes.” Whatever remaining anger simmering in his veins disappeared completely, and he clapped his hands together. “This time of year, the south will be brimming

with beautiful women. What part, exactly?" He peered around me toward Leena.

"Wait, what? No. I don't need an escort. I promise on my life I'll return with your beasts." Gripping the hemline of her tunic, she stood slowly.

Calem's eyes dipped to her cleavage. "Sorry, sister. Noc doesn't change his mind."

I tilted my head to the ceiling, tracking the invisible path to the medical wing on the second floor. "I'll have Kost make travel arrangements for us."

"Wait—" Leena's voice faded in the wake of Calem's excited holler. She banged her fist against the oak mantel, the board vibrating from the force of the hit, and we turned to stare at her. "I. Am. Not. Taking. You." A rosewood glow erupted from the symbol on her hand, and roots stretched toward her fingertips.

I effortlessly slipped into the shadows and reappeared behind her. Wrapping my fingers around her wrist, I applied gentle pressure and brought my lips close to her ear. A tantalizing mixture of vanilla and lilac filled my nose. "Think twice before you do something you'll regret."

Gooseflesh trailed down her neck, and she went completely still beneath me. Her pulse thrummed against my fingers. Such a delicate thing, and yet there was strength to her stance. The kind of determination and grit that came from battling against terrible odds and somehow coming through it all alive. "I have one more...request."

"Oh?" I released her, but didn't move. Her eyes darted to my neck, gaze lingering on the collar of my tunic. Did she want to strangle me? Payback for what I'd done to her? There was intensity in her eyes I couldn't place. As if she was debating, but unable to come to a solid conclusion.

Finally, she shook her head once. "Never mind."

Before I could probe further, the crash of double doors banging against masonry erupted through the empty halls. Swirling darkness swept through the room, and Emelia and Ozias appeared. Leena leaped a few inches backward, crashing into me, and then scrambled away yet again beyond my reach.

Chest heaving, Emelia spoke first. “Sorry for the delay—he was out farther than anticipated.”

“It’s fine, Emelia. Please return to your post.”

She sank into a wave of shadows, returning to her overlook in the high trees of the Kitska Forest. She’d stay until her shift was over, only to be replaced by another. Members of Cruor could effortlessly summon a path to our shrouded home, but it was still possible for intruders to trek through the cursed wood and find us. We had plenty of enemies.

Spine rigid, Ozias clenched his hammer-size fists by his sides. “This her?”

“Easy, big guy.” Calem strolled toward him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Noc’s sorted it out.”

Dark-brown eyes jumped from Leena to me, and the heavy folds across his forehead smoothed. Relaxing his hands, he brushed them along his sweat-stained work shirt. “Emelia filled me in. I should have been here, but the recruits—”

“I know.” We only raised those we couldn’t live without. Dead loved ones. Lifelong friends. Not everyone had been a criminal prior to the change, which meant our activities—and the powers we used to execute them—were hard for some to grasp. “Give them time. For now, meet Leena. She’ll be providing us with beasts.”

Ozias’s thick brow shot into his cropped hairline. Leena offered him a tight nod, taking a small step back. Dominating in presence, his hulking frame outshadowed every assassin in Cruor, and yet he was the least of Leena’s worries within my walls.

Kost's face bled to the surface of my thoughts. He'd want to murder her on principle. Time to make this deal official. "Once we have all four beasts, I'll deal with the bounty. Until then, you're stuck with us."

"And by deal with the bounty, you mean refuse to execute it, correct?"

Clever woman. If she'd never placed a hit with us, then she likely didn't know about the magic attached to her bounty. And yet, she'd scrutinized my words in the span of a breath. Her survival instinct was admirable. Pity she wasn't one of ours.

Feigning dismissiveness, I started to make my way from the room. "Follow through with your end of the bargain, and I can assure you one of my men won't come after your head."

One of my men, no. Me? That was another matter. This time, she didn't catch on, but she threatened me just the same.

"You should know," Leena warned, "all beast trades are subject to the Charmer's Law. Meaning, if you or any of your assassins harm the beasts I give you in any way, I am permitted to kill you."

I paused, glancing back at her. The heat in Leena's glare was warmer than the fire, but an unhurried grin claimed my face. "I welcome the day that happens."

Pallid pink anger tinged her cheeks. "I want our deal in writing. Not some verbal agreement that can't be used as proof."

I raised a brow. Verbal, handwritten, signed by the king himself—it didn't matter. The magic of Cruor's Oath couldn't be stopped. "Fine. Though that doesn't stop someone outside my guild from coming after you."

"If that happens, I'll deal with it." She toyed with the flaps of her black jacket. "We need to leave immediately."

"Day after tomorrow." I ignored her obvious frustration. "We need time to prepare."

“Sign me up for some beach time!” Calem danced in place, tossing a grin in Leena’s direction. “Bringing any bathing garments?”

She scowled. “Keep your imagination to yourself.”

I turned to my third-in-command. “Ozias.”

“Yes?”

“Show Leena to her room. East wing.”

She stilled. “Wait. How do I know you won’t come for me in the night?”

Calem couldn’t resist. “If I come for you in the middle of the night, I can promise you won’t regret it.” Leena balked, and I swallowed a groan. Keeping up with Calem’s succession of flings had never been an issue before, but I hoped this time he’d be smarter. He couldn’t lose sight of what had happened to Kost, no matter the temptation this fierce Charmer might represent.

Clearing my throat, I frowned at Calem. “Go pack.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He spun around and took the stairs two at a time, whistling the whole way.

“No one will kill you while you stay in my home. That’s an order for all my brethren, and you can rest assured they’re listening. Now, Ozias, please take Leena to her room.”

Tremors of fear touched Leena’s body again, but she angled her chin up in defiance and followed Ozias without turning back once.

So much for those survival wits. She should have watched her back the whole way to her room. She had no way of knowing I’d keep my promise. Yet, there was something about the confident nature of her steps. The way she kept her head high.

After they disappeared, I took the stairs and hooked a left at the loft, heading toward the west wing to check on Kost. Palms flat against the worn wood, I pushed open a

set of double doors without a glance to the bronze plaque reading *Medical*. The sharp aroma of bleach and lemon assaulted my nose.

Kost sat shirtless on a cot, gloves and tattered dress tunic discarded on the sheets beside him. A spare lingered untouched on the pillow. The medical attendant was missing, but a silver tray next to Kost brimmed with needles and thread. Not like he'd need stitching. His skin would resew within the hour of its own accord.

He pinned me with a strained stare the moment I entered. "I'm sorry. I underestimated her."

I blew out a low breath, parking my hip on the desk by the door. Parchment crunched beneath my weight. "I hope that's not an oversight we'll make again."

Kost stilled. "What do you mean?"

"I made a deal with her."

He stood slowly, anger working its way through the muscles of his forearms. "You know I won't question you."

"Good. Because she traded beasts to have her bounty removed."

Kost's hands went slack, and his brows dipped toward the frames of his glasses. "Does she know about the oath?"

I shrugged. "No. Does it matter?"

"I guess not."

"Good." Pushing off the desk, I reached for Kost's arm. "Transfer ownership."

He froze, stricken. "I can handle it once the deal is complete. There's no need to take on the job yourself."

Again, the sight of Kost skewered by the beast resurfaced. This job should have been mine to begin with. Not to mention I'd promised none of my men would take her life. Not lying, but not telling the whole truth, made for clean work as an assassin. My voice level, I placed a gentle hand on

his shoulder. “This isn’t a reflection of your ability. I made the deal; I carry out the task. Not you. Not anyone else.”

“But—”

“This isn’t up for discussion.”

Kost relented, turning his inner wrist upward and revealing an inked scythe the size of a silver chip. Grasping his forearm, I pressed my skin to his and the mark sparked to life. Flesh seared, and I grimaced. When the sizzling faded, I dropped his hand. The magical oath now binding me to the bounty gleamed up at me, sharp black lines neatly cutting across veins.

Now, if I didn’t kill Leena, it was my life on the line. Such was the agreement for all bounties placed with Cruor. Folklore suggested it was the god of death’s doing. When Zane, the first of our kind, had escaped his clutches and returned to the land of the living, the god of death had been enraged. All our contracts were steeped in his magic so he wouldn’t miss his opportunity to claim us a second time. True or not, it didn’t matter. All I knew was the oath couldn’t be broken, and that level of assurance welcomed the darkest of dealings. “The woman who ordered the hit—did she contact you with any more details after I assigned you the job?”

Kost shook his head once. He’d take this personally as a mark against his perfect record. “No. She wore a mask and was covered from head to toe, even wearing gloves. I did notice a currant-colored glow around her hand when she summoned a beast after the deal was done.”

She was smart to keep her identity hidden. The right amount of bits could convince anyone to spill any manner of secret. “A beast? Interesting.” So Leena’s own people were after her. “What about the job itself? Any specifics?”

“Yes. The woman wrote down the job’s details on

parchment: Bones must be delivered within six hours of death.” He glanced at the silver watch cradling his left wrist. “I was supposed to meet her within the hour at Devil’s Hollow.”

I didn’t blink. It wouldn’t be the first or last time we were asked to do something strange with the remains. But Devil’s Hollow was dangerous. Tainted by dark magic and even darker omens. “Devil’s Hollow?”

Kost grimaced. “Unfortunately, yes. I requested we meet elsewhere, but the client insisted.”

“All right. We’ll keep the meeting brief.”

Black tendrils of shadow slunk toward me. Kost nabbed the spare tunic, slipping into it with ease, and followed suit, his own power lashing out against mine. Turning our backs on the medical wing, we rushed on the cold wind through the double doors and set out to meet our employer.

THREE



NOC

DEVIL'S HOLLOW WASN'T FAR FROM Cruor, but we didn't visit the clearing often. We knew better than to tempt the magic of the damned. If the Kitska Forest was a festering wound, then Devil's Hollow was the poison that made it that way. Milky fog drifted across mulch and brown grass, stretching out to meet the gaping mouth of a cave with stalactite teeth. The cursed wood came to a screeching halt in a perfect circle around the opening, as if the whispered wails echoing from the cavern's maw were spells even monsters dared not trigger.

A single barren tree with ashy bark and decaying limbs entrenched its gnarled roots around the opening. Upright spikes of blood-red flowers shooting out from the tips of branches were the only splatters of color—save the client cloaked in a mercury robe standing with his hands clasped before the cave's opening.

I shot Kost a quick glance. Shoulders tense, he only offered a tight grimace. Surprise visitor, then.

I kept my voice low so as not to disturb the dark magic of the cavern. "I expected a woman."

"She has other matters to attend to." The man glanced

back and forth between us. With his cloak pulled tight, his features remained hidden. “Where’s the Charmer?” Leather fingerless gloves hid his hands and wrists, and he folded his arms across his chest.

“There was an unexpected mishap. I take full responsibility for the delay, and I’m now handling this job personally.” Beside me, Kost flinched.

The man tilted his head, and the cloak moved enough to reveal a close-cut beard. “I see. And you are?”

I slipped my hands into the pockets of my trousers. “Noc. I’m the guild master.” A haze of shimmering magic brewed at the opening of the cave in response to my claim, and my pulse thundered in my ears. I did my best to ignore the silky murmur of power. The wretchedness here was far more putrid than the shadows we commanded, beckoning lost travelers to its bowels and stoking the fire of forbidden magic. Those who answered its call never survived.

Seemingly unaffected, a nasty smile crept over the man’s lips. “Interesting. May I ask what happened? Your colleague seemed capable enough.”

Kost fisted his hands. Taking a small step forward, I drew the client’s attention to me. “Nothing of note. Any additional details you’d like to share about the job?”

“Other than the fact that Leena Edenfrell is extremely dangerous? It sounds like you’ve already discovered that.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Indeed.”

“You’re aware of the conditions?”

“Yes. You’ll have your bones within six hours of death. It won’t be an issue. And the bits?”

A sneer dominated the lower half of his shadowed face. “Ten thousand bits. Enough to fuel your quaint little manor for a few solid years.”

I gave him a tight nod. “Then we’re good.”

He flexed his hand, and an invisible door groaned open. A beast unlike any I'd ever glimpsed appeared at the man's feet. With a head the size of a boulder, its lizard-like mouth stretched open, and a formidable air current sucked at the space around it. A swirling white portal flickering with electricity sparked in its unhinged jaw.

With a harsh laugh, the man reached down and stroked the beast's scales. "We'll be 'good' when you deliver on your promise. Just remember that while Leena Edenfrell is formidable, your client is far, far more powerful. The last thing you'd want is for something to happen." He angled his chin toward Kost. "Again."

With that, he passed through the sparking portal and winked out of existence, along with his beast.

Anger swelled in a rush of heat, and the calm facade I'd maintained exploded with his absence. I paced in front of Kost and gripped the back of my neck. Two threats against my people in one day. Both by Charmers. Just what were we really dealing with? Grinding my teeth, I paused and stared through the empty space where the man had been, right into the open cavern.

The sharp tang of magic rushed outward, racing over my skin and leaving a fresh sting in its wake.

How many dark mages were buried in this crypt? Their magic was a toxic lull that could weaken even the strongest of men. The fact the Charmer was unaffected only attested to his power.

And his arrogance. He'd called us here to show us what we'd be dealing with if we failed.

"Noc." Kost gripped my wrist, and the harsh pressure of his fingers dulled the sultry whispers of dark magic. "We shouldn't linger here."

Shaking my head once, I turned on my heels and

welcomed the odd relief that came with the swirling onyx vines and knotted trees of the Kitska Forest. We'd have to put distance between ourselves and the cavern before we could let the shadows carry us home. "We need to work. Fast."

Kost matched my stride and side-eyed me. "Something's wrong."

"Of course something is wrong." Twigs snapped beneath my feet as we walked, and I focused on the sound to stay calm. "Our client is brazen. Our mark is brave. We've never had so much interaction before. It's unsettling to say the least."

"Our mark is brave?" Kost pursed his lips. "Bravery means nothing in our line of work. You know that. We've killed honorable people for less." He pushed aside a branch laden with pinesco pods and stepped through, holding the leaves back until I passed. "Tell me what's really bothering you. Is it the curse? I'm fine. I can assure you, I—"

"I have it under control."

Competing emotions flickered across his expression. Relief. Hurt. Something I couldn't place. For a moment, I set aside my usual frozen detachment and placed a hand on his shoulder, letting the smallest measure of my true feelings show through. "I'm glad you're unharmed. It would have killed me to lose you."

And I swear I saw it. The first signs of my curse. The subtle darkening bags beneath his eyes. Skin chafing and faintly cracking around his lips. Next would come the cough flecked with blood. Then a fever. Then death. I'd seen all those symptoms play out before in my past. Twice with people I loved romantically. Countless more times with those I loved platonically.

Once with Kost, when I let the true depth of my brotherly affection show. He'd nearly died, saved only by my ability to wrestle my emotions into an icy cage and detach

from my feelings. It'd taken weeks for him to recover, and the callousness I'd been forced to exude still hung heavy over my head. But it'd saved his life.

Chills skittered down my neck, and I removed my hand. Kost tracked the progression with keen eyes. Only he and Talmage knew of the curse and what it meant. Anything beyond the most tenuous bonds always ended in death.

"Let's get back. We need to prepare for our journey." Shadows began to fester beneath us as the vortex to Cruor opened. I could keep up this distance from my brethren for the rest of my life if need be. Anything to keep them safe. But there was a glimmer of hope now.

One that bloomed from a bestiary belonging to a curious Charmer waiting for us back home.



The moment our feet crossed Cruor's threshold, my pulse returned to acceptable levels. My foul mood, however, did not dissipate. The quiet halls whispered of Leena, of her presence in my home, and assassins stuck to themselves to avoid my fried nerves.

Sinking into the armchair, I stared at Talmage's portrait. There were still matters left unattended. "Who stays to run things while I'm gone?"

Kost's voice wavered. "As your second, I understand it's my duty to rule in your stead. But we don't know what she's capable of." He ghosted his fingertips along his forearms where her beast had pinned him.

"Not to mention our clients." Bile soured my tongue. "You're coming. So are Calem and Ozias."

With a tight nod, he settled back into his usual calculated demeanor. He retrieved a white cloth from his breast

pocket, removed his glasses, and began to polish his lenses. “As much as I hate to admit it, that leaves Darrien in charge.”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I groaned. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

“If it’s necessary, I’ll stay—”

“No. Like you said, we don’t know what kind of arsenal she has. I’d rather have my strongest with me. Darrien will be fine. If not, I’ll kill him.” Shrugging, I pushed out of the chair. My legs itched to move. To act. To do something, anything, to get this deal over with. Somewhere in my halls, Leena was settling in for the night. In my own damn house. “She was surprisingly bold.”

Kost cleared his throat. “There you go again. Bold, brave... Since I wasn’t there for the bargaining, is there anything else I need to be aware of?”

It’d been fifty years since I’d been raised. Thirty since he’d watched me pine over someone I couldn’t have. Twenty since the curse had nearly claimed him. He was perpetually poised for me to cave again, no matter how absurd the notion was. “What are you really asking?”

His expression remained indifferent. “I simply wish to be prepared. I shall begin travel arrangements, then. We’ll have to take the train to Eastrend and find mounts there.”

“Perfect.” I started to pace.

“Noc.” Kost’s tone rooted my feet in place. “Be careful. If something happens while we’re gone, I won’t be able to contact a mage quickly enough.” With a pointed stare, he targeted the ring on my finger. Silver scales layered upon a heavy band surrounded an intense emerald in the center. The key to my secret and the life I had before I died.

“Understood.” Fingering a strand of black hair that should’ve been white, I let out a tight sigh. Leave it to him to unearth something better left buried without even

mentioning the topic. “Go. Get everything together so we can leave the day after tomorrow.”

He was gone in a flurry of darkness before I could finish my sentence.

The fire crackling in the hearth seemed to laugh. A job in my home. A job that would take me away from Cruor and leave Darrien in charge. A job with clients more sinister than the job itself.

I leaned against the mantel, tipping my head to the ceiling. This job could provide safety and a cure. It had to be worth the risk. What would it be like to allow myself to feel something as simple as affection again? Love? Even the thought set me back, had me reflexively tensing. Notions like that were dangerous.

Cure first, wishful thinking later.

My moment of solitude was shattered by the sudden swell of shadows slinking across the floor. They pooled at the foot of the stairs and burst outward in a flood of dark mist. Darrien appeared, steel-toed boots clacking against tile as he strode toward me. Smoky tendrils lingered in the curls of his shoulder-length brown hair, and a smile pulled at the edges of his lips.

“So I couldn’t help but overhear—”

I repressed a snarl. “Sure you could have. Yes, you’ll be in charge while I’m escorting the Charmer. It’s only temporary. Don’t get any ideas.”

His grin deepened. “Of course not. Talmage named you our leader, and so out of respect for him, I will obey.” Amber eyes sparked, and he folded his arms across his chest. Darrien was the oldest member of Cruor. Everyone, myself included, had expected him to inherit the guild when Talmage passed. He had been loyal. Efficient. A friend, even, to Talmage. But when I was named, something snapped. Something I

couldn't prove or pinpoint, but I knew he considered our late guild master's last ruling a betrayal. He knew nothing of my past or how I came to be, but if he did, he'd use it against me to divide our ranks. To take what he thought was his.

Possessiveness, heated and angry, simmered beneath layers of iron control. Cruor was *mine*. I couldn't deny Darrien his place here. He'd never overtly stepped out of line, but calculated indifference was almost as dangerous as a formulated attack.

Darrien shifted under the weight of my stare, rustling the bow strapped to his back. Unlike most of us, relying on shadow blades and close-combat killing, Darrien molded arrows from the dark to do his bidding.

A sword? Fine. Battle ax? Sure. But there was something about killing from a distance that soured my mouth. Anyone who wasn't willing to get a little blood under their nails wasn't worth trusting. Not in our line of work.

"Any specific tasks I need to be aware of?"

"You'll need to assign any jobs that come in. Make sure you review them carefully."

One of his brows arched. "Wouldn't want a repeat of this mishap, now would we?"

"Careful. I'm not in the mood for insubordination."

Darrien raised his hands in mock apology. "Right. Though I wonder what Talmage would think of this. A job in his home. I bet the very notion has him seething in his grave."

I ignored his baiting. "That will be all, Darrien."

He eyed me for a moment, then chuckled. "Understood."

I turned away from him and stalked to the kitchen to pour myself a stiff drink. He wasn't entirely wrong. A job in my own damn house. Darrien at the helm. But a cure... There was a possibility. An avenue I'd yet to test. I just had

to see if there was a beast that could do it, and then I'd take care of the woman and go back to leading my people.

One job, two paychecks, no harm done. That was a deal I'd die for.

FOUR



LEENA

STANDING IN THE CENTER OF my temporary room, I'd never felt so claustrophobic. Not because it was small, but because Ozias's frame squandered all light from the outside hallway, blocking my exit. He leaned against the doorframe, and the wood gave a soft creak. How he ever survived as an assassin baffled me.

"Thanks." Flush with the wall was a monstrous bed draped in down blankets. Heat spread from a small, coiled structure in the corner of the room. A low orange light simmered around it. A rycrim heater. Yet another thing I'd longed for during the cold nights at Midnight Jester. I shrugged off my jacket. "I'll need to stop by my place tomorrow to grab my things."

"That won't be necessary." Ozias folded his arms. "Kost will account for everything."

I glanced at the oil-rubbed oak dresser to my left. "Clothes?"

"Kost will handle it." Amused brown eyes bounced from my face to the armoire and back again.

"That seems unnecessary."

Ozias shrugged. "Do you need anything specific?"

I pulled out the gray stool from the vanity and sank

onto it. Slowly, I began the arduous task of unlacing my boots. “Toiletries?”

Pushing away from the doorframe, Ozias sauntered over to a door tucked along the far wall. “You share this bathroom with another woman.” He pushed it open and candles lit, muted yellow bouncing off mirrors and silver furnishings. He nodded toward a similar door on the far side of the restroom. “Just be sure to lock both handles when you’re in there. Unless you’re in the mood for some unexpected company.”

“Noted.” Standing, I pushed both boots to the edge of the bed. A soft moan escaped my lips as I curled and uncurled my toes.

Humor danced across Ozias’s broad features. His skin was a flawless rich brown with cool undertones, and he had a dazzling smile. “Long day?”

“Just breaking in new boots.”

He kicked one foot out, displaying tan work boots with brass eyelets and faded laces. “I buy a bunch at once so I can break them in at the same time.”

My voice fell flat. “Not all of us get the luxury of multiple pairs of shoes.”

His smile disappeared, and my mind spun. His regret was instant and surprisingly human. He placed his foot back on the floor. “Sorry. Anything else you need?”

My brows drew together. Cruor was full of famed assassins. Their power over the shadows gave them the reputation of being legendary agents of death—nothing more, nothing less. The fact that there were people beneath that darkness...

“I’m going to wash up, but after, can you point me in the direction of some food?” Uneaten lamb surfaced in my mind, and I placed a hand against my stomach, trying to keep the gurgling to a minimum. “Since Kost so rudely interrupted my evening plans, I’ve yet to eat.”

Surely he wouldn't offer me a decent meal. He'd laugh and walk out and tell me to deal with it on my own, possibly—

"That's no good. Go ahead and clean up. I'll wait. Then I'll show you the kitchen."

It was an effort to keep my shock veiled. I guess starving me wasn't part of their strategy. Leaning against the wall, he nodded silently toward the bathroom. I made my way to it, shutting the door firmly behind me and locking the handle. Without so much as a window to sneak through, there wasn't any chance of escape. And with an assassin waiting behind either door, well... I frowned.

I grabbed a washcloth and ran it under steaming water from the sink before scrubbing my face. When my skin was pink, I shut off the faucet and stared in the mirror. How on earth did I end up here? I'd been selling beasts for years, waiting for the Myad to appear so I could have a chance at returning home. And now, as soon as I got wind of the creature, I'd been caught. The gods were cruel.

I dallied longer than I should have, hoping Ozias would give up and leave me alone so I'd have a chance to escape. These people were *dangerous*. I could find another murderer in Ortega Key—no need to test my luck here. But when I emerged, Ozias was still there, waiting with a patient smile on his face.

"Feel better?"

I grumbled. "A bit."

"Good. C'mon." He led me out the door and down the hallway. Once we made it to the bottom of the staircase, he nodded toward an archway on the other side of the fireplace.

"I need to get some affairs in order for our travels, but you'll find the kitchen through there. Take whatever you want."

"Whatever I want?"

He blinked. "Yeah. Didn't you say you were hungry?"

“Yes, but...” I tilted my head to the side. “You’re not worried I’ll run off?”

A warm chuckle bubbled from somewhere deep in his belly. “You can try, but I wouldn’t recommend it. There are eyes everywhere in Cruor.” Gesturing to the walls where shadows seemed to linger as if in response, he climbed the stairs. “Go on. Eat something.”

With his back turned, my gaze immediately targeted the double doors leading out to the Kitska Forest. I *could* run. Try to navigate the swirling maze of vines and trees, even though I didn’t have the faintest idea how we’d arrived. The vortex had winnowed us here in no time at all, but we could’ve traveled miles from Midnight Jester. Maybe more.

Wandering alone in the forest at night, low on power from Iky’s drain and without food, was not a smart decision. Not with monsters hiding in the cursed wood waiting for easy prey like me.

Turning back to the stairs, I caught Ozias watching me with an easy smile.

“Good night.” I waved. He let out another quiet laugh and then disappeared into the hallway. Giving up on the idea of escape, I headed toward the kitchen. The manor was quiet. Buttery-yellow lights glowed softly at the end of the corridor, and my stomach reminded me to pick up the pace. As I tiptoed toward the opening, a quiet thud met my ears.

Hidden in the dark mouth of the hall, I peeked my head into the kitchen. In black, slim-fitting trousers and a cream-colored long-sleeve tunic, Noc stood over a cutting board with a serrated knife in one hand. Cuffs rolled past his elbows, he sawed through a freshly baked loaf of bread. The blade made soft clunks each time it touched the board, and the ice cubes in the empty glass beside him shifted.

I rotated the rose-gold ring around my finger. Noc was unlike any being I'd ever seen. Tall, with a chiseled jawline worthy of sharpening a blade, he lorded over the counter. Even the way he sliced the bread, so precisely and fluidly, reeked of danger. And then he shattered that illusion entirely with a quietly hummed lullaby. I didn't recognize the tune, but the soft notes had his lips turning up in a smile, and the visible tension in his neck melted away. His gaze softened as if lost in a memory. Seeing, feeling something beyond my comprehension.

And then my stomach growled.

His hum died in an instant, but he didn't look up from the loaf of bread. Corded forearms flexed, and he set the knife aside. "You know I can hear you."

My heart leaped into my throat. I froze, not daring to move.

Sharp and inquisitive eyes—ebony in color, with a metallic sheen like a hematite gem glinting in the sun—cut in my direction before sliding away. "When was the last time you ate?"

I fisted my hand against my navel. If only my stomach had remained silent. There was something endearing about the way his whole body had lightened with that song. But now... He was frigid as ice.

Maybe I was wrong. Ozias had been warm when I'd expected nothing but harsh words. Perhaps Noc would be the same. Stepping into the light, I moved toward an open barstool. "I had the opportunity to eat some shapeless lamb earlier, but I thought it better to starve myself than risk illness."

Those obsidian eyes drifted once again to my face. "Is that so?" He swapped the bread for the meat and reached for a smooth carving knife. He began cutting without looking,

his unnerving gaze trained on me. Dexterous fingers moved with ease, and my pulse skittered in response.

“Yes. Won’t you cut yourself that way?” My mind snapped back to the moment he’d hovered above me, his neck so close I could see the veins beneath his skin. If only I could have made his blood part of our deal. But it wouldn’t have been given freely. I needed another option, another way.

Please cut yourself. Cut yourself, and let me pretend to fuss over you. Let me get a napkin and wipe away the blood so I can save it for the taming. Please.

He held my gaze, a distant smile teasing his lips. “Highly unlikely. Do you want one?” He started to work on the white cheese.

Toying with my ring, I prayed he’d miss his mark. “Sure.”

“What is that?” He nodded toward my ring before pulling two plates from an overhead cupboard and pushing the knife to the side. Disappointment caught in my throat, and I swallowed the exasperated sigh before it could give me away. He set the dinnerware out before him and began to assemble our sandwiches.

“Just a ring.” I hid my hand under the lip of the countertop. Rose gold with an opal stone resting above a thin leaf, it was a gift I cherished above all else. The remaining piece of my past I couldn’t throw away. “Do you cook frequently?”

Noc raised an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t call this cooking, but either way, the answer is no.” He slid my plate in front of me. Thick wedges of sourdough bread cradled a slab of ham and cheese. My mouth watered, and I sank my teeth into the sandwich before he could take it away.

And then I paused, half-chewed food coming to a standstill in my mouth. I’d almost forgotten where I was. What job he’d been hired to do. Even though I’d watched him prepare the meal, there was still the possibility he’d poisoned

it. Maybe he'd thought twice about our agreement and decided he was better off without the hassle. I should've called Tila from the beast realm to test my food.

Noc studied the sandwich in my frozen hands and then glanced at my scrunched expression. He took a bite of his own meal. "I don't poison guests unless they forget their table manners."

I forced myself to swallow. "Noted."

A faint smile pulled at his lips. "I take it you've had to watch your back for quite some time."

"Mhm." Deeming the food safe, I continued to eat in a more civilized manner.

"Why is that?"

I lifted one shoulder. "No one's perfect. I did some bad things."

Noc watched me for a moment before setting his sandwich down. "Tell me about yourself."

There was a foreign strain to his voice that didn't match his composed expression. He reached for a crystal bottle full of amber liquid and poured a hefty amount into his glass. A spiced burn lingered in the air, and he took a long swig.

"No." I swallowed another bite. What was I supposed to say? The very people I had trusted most, the members of the Charmers Council, had exiled me without a second thought. If trusting them had been a grave error, then relaying anything to this assassin, active bounty or not, was surely a death sentence.

He chuckled, and a spark flared in his dark gaze. This bounty changed things. Yes, I'd broken the law. I'd traded beasts for bits, a cardinal sin for my people. But only because I had no other means of survival. Because I had placed my faith in a lover whose ambitions superseded our relationship.

If Wynn was coming after me now with the power of

the Council at his back, the only thing I could do to survive would be to clear my name. Even if I escaped Cruor's bounty, another would be placed. But owning a Myad would help. The legendary—and impossibly rare—creature's trust alone would give them pause. All I needed was one moment, one chance to tell my side of things.

Noc's voice brought me back. "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing." I brushed thick crumbs off my lips, and his eyes followed my fingers. "Why does it matter?"

He pressed his elbows to the counter and leaned forward. "Because you don't fit."

"Excuse me?"

His unexpectedly boyish grin pulled me in. "Meaning, you're not the usual mark. You're a puzzle piece that doesn't fit, and I love a good puzzle."

Gods help me, these assassins were not what I was expecting. Moreover, Noc really was a case of fire and ice. Where he'd been removed only moments before, now he was engaged. Active. Food forgotten before him, he studied me in a way that made me feel entirely too exposed.

This conversation needed to find safer ground. "Why don't you tell me what kind of beast you want."

Noc frowned. "I'm not overly versed in the beast world, but I'll be sure to study up on our way to Ortega Key."

Tipping my head back to the ceiling, I let out a low hum. "I'll show you my bestiary. It's far from complete as I'm only a B-Class Charmer, but that will give you a good idea of what you'll have access to."

Eyes dipping to the locket dangling below my collarbone, he leaned a fraction closer. "That would be fascinating to read."

Heat followed his stare, and my stomach clenched. This

man was pure danger. I could still feel the burn of his grip on my neck, and yet the adrenaline I felt had nothing to do with his ability to end my life and everything to do with the way his intensely curious gaze unraveled my nerves.

He edged around the corner of the island, bringing himself closer as if pulled in irresistibly by the mystery my bestiary represented. “How does it work?” His honeyed scent drizzled over me, and suddenly I was too aware of his presence. Of the way his fingers traced the rim of his glass as he thought, eyes drifting from my bestiary to my face. Lips slightly parted.

I grazed the chain of my necklace and swallowed. “Only a Charmer can remove it or open it. You’d have to have one nearby to turn the pages, too.”

“Good thing I have one nearby.”

I grappled with the urge to open the book for him right there. I’d said I’d share, but I hadn’t expected this level of intrigue. It was thrilling and unnerving, and I wasn’t sure how to process it. “I’m not about to just hand it off. It’s not a quick read, and there’s a lot of information to digest.”

“I don’t mind taking my time.” His mouth lifted at the corner. “If you don’t feel comfortable removing it, I can always read over your shoulder.”

Heat flushed my skin, and his attentive stare locked on my cheeks. And then he blinked, and the curious, almost warm man before me was gone. Lost. Noc took a definitive step back and glared at me as if I were a siren. He pressed his drink to his lips and drained the glass.

“Did you need something?” he said, his voice nothing but ice and steel.

The sudden switch left me reeling. “What?”

“I have matters to attend to.” He looked past me to the dark mouth of the hall. “You’re taking up time.”

“You were the one asking all the questions.”

His expression was cold. Threatening. “Thanks for answering. Always good to have information.”

So *that’s* what this was all about. Ozias may have been genuine, but Noc was still a cunning assassin playing a human to get what he needed. Glowering, I pictured him roasting over a fire on a spit. “Thanks for the food.” I leaped from my seat at the island and sped out of the kitchen before taking the stairs to my room. Slamming the door behind me, I sent up a silent curse.

Angry tears pricked the back of my eyes, threatening to spill over. *If only I were home.* No. I shook my head, sinking to the floor and firmly pressing my back against the wall. My people cast me out long ago. I couldn’t think like that anymore. I was nothing to them, and they were nothing to me.

Splaying out my right hand, I channeled power into my emblem and watched as the rosewood markings bled to life. I sifted through the list of available beasts in my mind and settled on Poof, an E-Class creature the size of a child’s kick ball. When the light receded, Poof appeared at my feet, circular pink eyes blinking up at me.

I shouldn’t have called another beast. I should have held on to some of my power reserves in case danger reared its head in the form of an assassin. Law of hospitality in place or not, I didn’t trust them. I was alone in a den of murderers, each one appraising my body and abilities as if I were a weapon and not a person. I needed a little comfort.

“C’mere, you.” Poof was a Groober. A round, fluffy beast with white fur softer than rabbit’s fluff. With stubby arms and legs, he wasn’t much of a fighter, but he was a mean cuddler, and his scent glands emitted a potent mixture of lavender and valerian to aid with sleep.

Wrapped in my arms, he nestled in the crook of my shoulder, purring into my neck. Fat tears broke over my lids. “You’re just as special as any A-Class beast.” Kneading the space between his ears, I worked my fingers over his fur. Oils perfumed the air.

I never imagined a life where I’d sell the very things that made my existence bearable. And yet here I was, doing exactly that. All because I’d trusted Wynn. Years of devotion and love, and for what? To become a scapegoat? My exile was his fault, and yet I had been the one to lose everything.

And now Noc.

A chill raked over my skin. He was exactly the wrong kind of person to be around. Deadly and intriguing and too damn cunning. The type of person who could coax secrets from lips that had long since been sealed.

But not me. Not ever. If I could survive Noc, use him to get what I needed—blood from him or one of his brethren, just like he was using me to get his beasts—I might have a chance to clear my name.

I might still have a future.

ARE YOU CHARMER OR CRUOR?

TAKE THE QUIZ AT
WWW.BEASTCHARMERS.COM

