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TO TAME A BEAST

CHAPTER ONE: THE FIRST STORY

Always, the first story Lin told was one that had been told to her.

The story calmed her. It was a link forged through time to the first telling, by her father while she resisted the lure of sleep.

Lin sat near the hearth and prepared for the tale more diligently than ever, thinking through each of the well-known words and the inflections and pauses she would use. Beside her, a wide-eyed child stared. In a corner, the mother who had invited Lin to stay argued with the father in percussive undertones.

Lin tempered their dialogue with her story's first words, whispered, meant only for the child. "There lived a husband and wife who loved each other very much."

"Who are you?" the child whispered back as if Lin's beginning had been the cue, finally, to speak.

"A storyteller," Lin answered. Her voice wavered only a little.

"My father doesn't like you." Indeed, the couple's discussion persisted with some energy.

"He doesn't know me." The words were too near a plea.

Lin distracted herself with the surroundings. The three-room cottage was simple and clean. It smelled faintly of hot coals and iron, the home of a blacksmith, and Lin, a blacksmith's daughter, rejoiced and grieved to be in a place so familiar and yet so alien.

The argument ended. Lin pretended not to notice how the blacksmith studied her.

What must she look like to him? Her black curls were matted by grit roughly combed loose

with raw fingers. Her clothing was worn thin and mended, unwashed for too long. Her boots were stuffed fat with leaves to keep her feet from the worst of the cold. She was too thin and too pale, but she was not to be pitied.

Lin was a storyteller. It was a craft and profession that had once been revered by all and practiced by only a talented few. She could not help that the world had changed.

The mother thumped four bowls to the table then glared at the father. He shook his head but sat down. The mother nodded to Lin.

Suddenly, Lin feared she sat too near the hearth. The day had been another long, cold walk, and the heat that seeped into her body loosened muscles and resolve. She wanted to sleep and never have to wake up. She scooted a few inches away, stool legs scraping too loud in the quiet, and cleared her throat to begin.

“There lived a husband and wife who loved each other very much but had no child to share in their happiness. Friends had children who grew and had children, and the husband and wife loved them all and tried not to mind that they had no little one of their own to tuck in at night.

“Then one day the husband caught himself gazing at his lovely wife. This happened to him often, no matter that her hair had faded from auburn to peach, but this time he could not turn away nor recall what he had been about to do. She pruned the wild roses that grew up the smithy wall, and as she reached to guide a vine to a surer route he noticed her belly was no longer flat.

“The husband was afraid for her well-being, but she looked so steady and bright, he could not be fearful for long.”

Here, Lin’s da had used to pause and ask if she knew what came next. Lin did the same, and the solemn child before her whispered, as Lin had used to whisper all those many years ago, “A baby.”

And like her father had done, Lin tapped the child’s nose and said, “But first there were melons.

“That summer, rain and sun and earth contrived to produce more melons than could be counted. Overnight, gardens that had neat rows of carrots, beans and squash disappeared under

swarming twists of giant-leafed vines, every one bursting with melons. They grew over fences, up trees, across roofs and into houses. To cut them back was to double their growth, and already the melons grew so fast that children held strings around them to feel the threads slide through their fingers.

“Every meal was melon and every drink was melon and even the animals ate melon and became sweeter for it. And no one minded, least of all the wife. To her, the melon was like eating the sunlight that glittered on a mountain brook. She could not get enough of it.

“Her belly grew big. Friends teased her that a melon had taken root and, should the child be born a child and not a melon, she must name it ‘Melon’ anyway. The husband and wife often teased back and said they were considering it.

“Finally, the summer’s heat broke into a crisp fall morning. The last melon was picked, and the baby was born. The husband and wife had a little girl to tuck in at night, and though she loved melon, they named her Rosalind.”

If she was still awake, Lin would say, That’s me, and Da would agree and kiss her head and say, Good night, my sweet melon. But her parents never really called her ‘Melon’ nor even ‘Rosalind.’ She was always ‘Rosy-dear’ to them.

Since their deaths, Lin was only ever called ‘Lin.’

“Was it magic?” the child asked.

“Of course not,” the father grumbled, throwing Lin a sharp look.

She lurched back to the present, again taking in the family that had taken her in. A blacksmith, but too tall, a mother, but too plump, and a child, solemn and awed. A family like hers had been, but not her family at all.

Lin gave the broken smile that she had learned to piece together and agreed with the father. If there were magic, her parents would be with her today.

CHAPTER TWO: ESCAPE

The mother served dinner. The father continued to be wary of Lin, but the family ignored it and talked about the day, the meal, Lin's story and what they might have done with so many melons, each new idea sillier than the last.

Lin was hungry. Despite the nearness of winter, the meat and vegetables tasted summer fresh, and she tried to enjoy each bite. But the family's closeness piled around her like rocks. Soon she could no longer raise the spoon to her lips. She stared at her half-full plate, swallowing hard against the food caught in her throat. She had once had meals like this of her own and couldn't stand it that she never would again.

The mother asked if she was all right, and Lin nodded and helped to clean the table. She told a few more stories, all perfectly real with no hint of magic or exaggeration, and later laid head to foot with the child under a thick quilt. Sleep, which earlier had been so fearfully near, eluded her.

Da had been a storyteller of a long line of storytellers once eagerly welcomed by all from princes to shepherders. Then he met Lin's mother. It was only his first season out, but he immediately cast aside future adventures and took up her family's trade. He had never seemed to regret the decision. It was Lin who had felt the loss of generations past and very early decided to follow in his steps.

She practiced phrasings while chopping wood and enunciation while Da hammered iron. She tried new stories at the dinner table, knowing she had fit together the right words and tone if her mother forgot to eat. At night, Da taught her the stories he had learned from his father.

Though her father should have taken an apprentice for the smithy, he didn't. Later, Lin appreciated what a gift that had been for her and their family to have those years together uninterrupted by a strange young man.

Her first season out, she wandered through the small ring of communities near her village and did well. Her father was not only a very good blacksmith, he could read and write as well.

People farther away than she would have imagined knew her family and invited her in.

But the world had begun to change even before her father left the trade, and it changed still more while she traveled safe in her parents' sphere. Storytellers, less welcome, became fewer. The honest sweat of labor, rightly valued, became valued more exclusively. Families worked hard tending pigs or harvesting grain. Why should they shelter and feed a person who wandered about telling stories, most which weren't even true? Besides, tinkers traveled as far, bringing news and useful items to trade. What use were fairy tales compared to the birth of twin calves three towns over and a new mill a day's ride away? A good life was a practical one, and storytellers were highly impractical.

Lin experienced none of this her first season out. It was only later, when she had no need to circle back to her village and traveled in a straight line away.

Coals quietly collapsed in the hearth. The child murmured and shifted closer to Lin. The darkness was made safe by the strong presence of the mother and father nearby.

This was what Lin had wanted, to knock on a door and be welcome, to share stories and a meal and a warm bed on a cold night. Now it caved in on her. She couldn't breathe. To ease the pressure, she sat up, swung her legs over the side and reached for her boots. She touched the three small things in her pack that she always touched, to ensure they were still there, and as always her heart stuttered. A moment to catch her breath then she rose and left the cottage.

Outside, she paused to yank out the leather thong tangled in her hair and secured it back in a freshly tight loop. There were hours still to dawn. The cool prickled her skin as deeply as the stars pricked the sky, but she could breathe again.

"You should stay."

Lin jumped, equally startled by the words and that they were spoken by the blacksmith.

"The snows are coming." He looked out at the village snug in its corner of the world. "We have done well this year. You will be safe with us."

She thought of the cottage, of the parents and child settled in for winter, of the warm fire and laughter and love. So perfect a familial vision and so perfectly wrong.

Lin said nothing. He sighed and handed her a small bundle. “There is one last town ahead.
After that, I don’t know.”

Lin nodded and walked away.

CHAPTER THREE: THE ROAD

Dawn revealed a road that must have been earth-rich brown once. Now the road was gray, the color beaten out of it by feet, hooves and wagon wheels. It had been deeply churned before the cold set in and held ridges, sometimes a foot high, and crevices equally deep. No cart would make this road again until snow packed the hollows. A rider would risk his horse's legs. Only someone on foot could navigate the road as it was now, and only with difficulty and extreme care.

Lin avoided the problem entirely and walked with the cold-burnt grasses and saplings that crowded each side of the track, forced there by the massive trees that looked down on passersby.

She shrugged her shoulders against the increased weight of her pack. The bundle the blacksmith had given her included a bit of hard cheese, dried meat and a round of bread broken open and stuffed full of butter and jam. A feast. At the moment, it seemed impossible that she might eat a single bite.

She told herself this was the beginning of another story, that just beyond where her eyes could see waited the tale which would be the greatest of her life, and she had to keep moving until she got there. But she had told herself this story many times the past few years, and the thoughts were now empty of comfort. She watched her feet thread between the clinging, knee-tall grass and kept moving.

The blacksmith was right. She should have stayed. With them or any of the previous families who had offered shelter and friendship. Though they had grown fewer the farther Lin traveled from her home, they all had been genuine. It was their sincerity that had driven her off—she had not been brave enough to accept it. Logically, she knew that she could never outrun her grief nor reach the parents so impossibly far away, yet she walked on.

Every now and then her narrow path was barred by one of the wood's great trees. Each time, Lin circled it by returning to the broken mass of road rather than entering the wood. It was not a practical thing to do. Walking the ridged road slowed her down. She would move faster if she

walked deeper in the wood since the ground beneath the trees was clear. But the wood was too scornful of the day's sharp gray light. A girl could only be that much less welcome. She feared that if she circled the tree by going into the wood, the wood would trick her to circle and circle and never let her find her way back to where she started.

So she walked beside the road and in the road when necessary. She walked, seeing no one and hearing nothing, and interrupted her tumbling thoughts with the beginning of a tale.

"There was a wood," she began but was unnerved by how her voice crumbled away in the cavern of too distant treetops and endless road. She reminded herself of the many woods she had walked beside, never once feeling afraid.

She began again with the carrying voice that had once cut through the ring of hammered iron. "There was a wood empty of all but aged towers of trees." She squinted into the dark maze beside her. "Aged pillars of trees." Chewed her lip. "Aged columns of trees. A grown man at its edge felt like a child in a crowd of adults. But this wood was silent, no need for the maternal shush of leaves."

Lin paused and cocked her ear. The wood was silent. No scabble of squirrels, no whistle of birds, not even the creak of trees shifting on their roots. She shivered for the wood loomed too large to be so empty, but she told herself it was the chill in the air. The blacksmith was right in this, too—snow was coming.

Lin pulled a wool-wrapped hand from the meager warmth of her armpit and shielded her eyes from the sky's silver glare. The road stretched on. Her stomach woke. She shrugged the pack off, sat at the road's edge and tore into rich, dark bread.

Her eyes needed a rest from the unvarying sameness of the craggy road, but when she looked too long into the trees, her heart thudded hard. She settled on looking up.

The trees were enormously tall. The instincts of her craft kicked in. How could she describe these trees to someone and have them "see" what she saw now? To say "tall" was insufficient. It did not describe how the wood warped perspective and made her feel like a rose chafer clinging to the lowest leaf on the vine. She chewed the bread. Like a chinch bug nibbling on a tuft of

grass. She swallowed, pursed her lips. Like an aphid? A weevil? A grub?

Nothing seemed quite right. All were intruders in a healthy garden, and finally she stumbled on the word that fit best.

“Trespasser.” She breathed the word out and imagined the trees stiffened like soldiers at their posts.

She remembered a tinker she had tried to ignore many towns ago, back when she still had energy to resent tinkers and the place they had taken in her world. He spoke of a forest no one hunted. Now here she was at a wood that implicitly warned “Keep out,” and she couldn’t help but wonder at what it might hide.

The thought raised another shiver. She told herself she had sat still in the cold for too long. She touched those three small things from her parents then returned the pack to its place across her shoulders.

The light had changed and no longer hurt her eyes. She studied the stretch of road ahead, hoping it would bend or do anything other than go straight into nothingness. It was unchanged, though everything around her was tinted more deeply gray. She moved briskly forward. The day was only half done, but she did not know where the town might be and did not want to be alone with the wood when night came.