

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.

Sliding the meat to the side, I 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

further 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 returned 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. Sliding my hand into my pocket, I 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." Reaching for my coin purse, I 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 meeting 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. With his arms pressed flush to his sides, 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 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.