

The Beast and The Beauty

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Once upon a time, in the kingdom of La, there lived a fair maiden. She dwelt in a hidden cave guarded by iron bars to protect her from a terrible Beast which prowled the night. She was called Beauty and her lips were red and sweet and her eyes the color of the deep green sea which gently washed the beaches of La.

Now everyone loved Beauty, for she was kind and generous and always carried a basket filled with smiles and laughs and little twinkles of joy which she shared with all she met. And, as she was so beautiful and sweet, noble princes and brave knights as well as artisans and laborers thought it would be a fine thing to have this fair damsel as a wife. But alas, this was not to be, for long ago a wicked wizard had laid a curse upon Beauty.

The wizard often took the form of a lazy lizard basking in the sun and, one day, Beauty happened to come to a stream where the water was clear and cold. It was hot and she was thirsty. She laid her basket on the grass and bent to drink when suddenly a scuttling sound frightened her. She looked up to see a fat grey lizard running as fast as his legs could carry him and in his mouth, he gripped the handle of her basket.



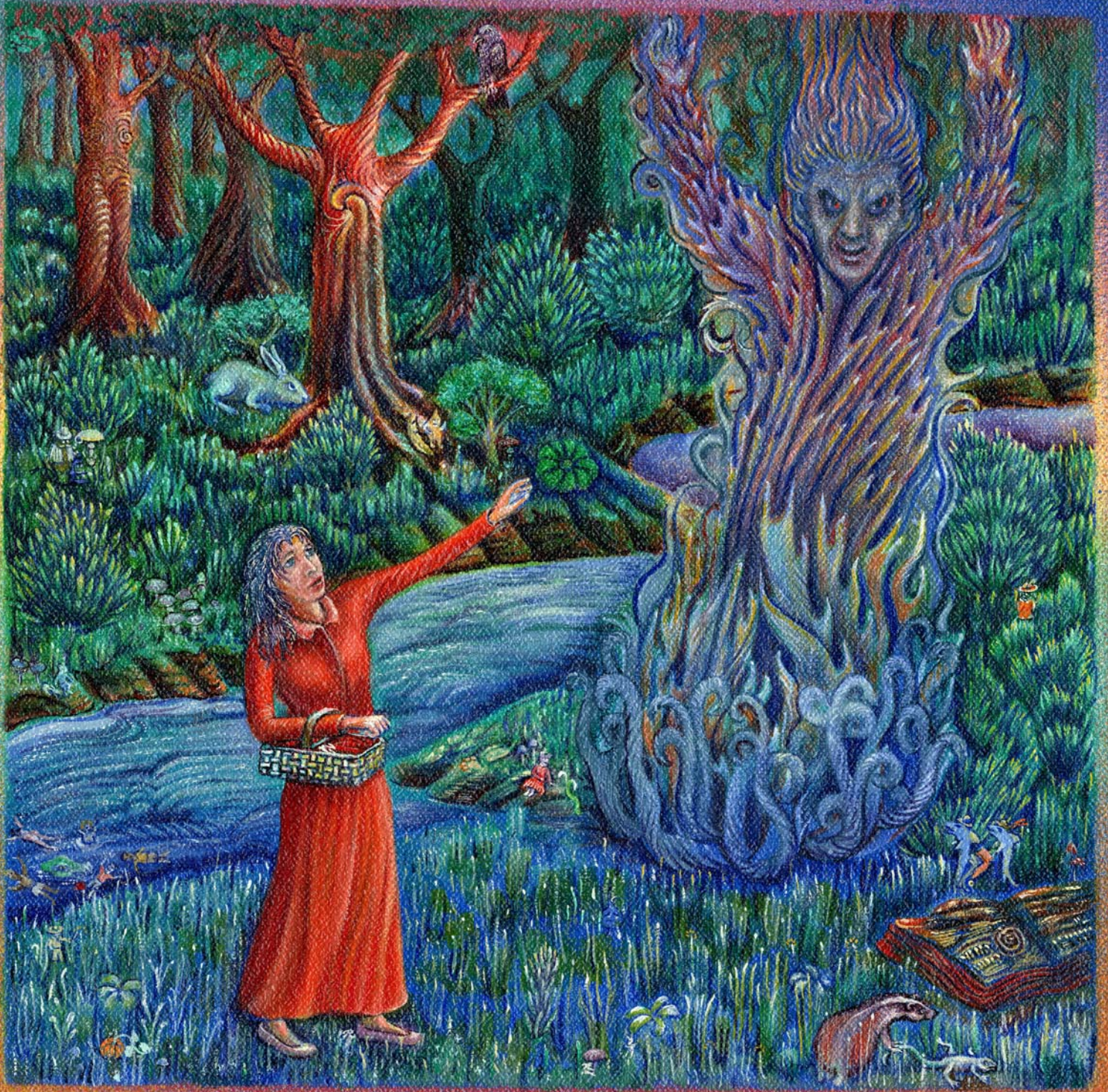
Beauty jumped up and ran as fast as she could to catch the lizard and claim her property. She ran and ran and the lizard ran and ran, until at last, she caught the panting creature. He was so tired from running that he dropped the basket and Beauty snatched it up. Then, in her anger, she gave the lizard a good kick. The lizard cried out and, suddenly, a great puff of smoke came up from him and the smoke quickly turned into an old man with a long black cloak.

He was fearsome to behold with sparks and smoke dancing about him. He said he was a powerful wizard and he would have her basket or lay upon her a terrible curse. Beauty was very afraid, but she was a brave and honest girl and said she would not give up the basket no matter what. Then, the wizard held his hands to the sky and spoke in a loud and angry voice. He said that from this time forth, this maiden should find no love nor ever be happy for she must answer to every proposal with these words: "tomorrow is promised to no one." And, as the echoes of his words faded away, the wizard vanished.

Being a young girl, Beauty thought no more about the wizard. As she grew to be a lovely young woman, young men were always to be found flocking about her. They offered her gifts and amusements and did all they could to win her heart, and she found many handsome and clever. However, whenever any should ask for her hand, she became sad of heart and tears fell from her eyes and she said the cursed words, "Tomorrow is promised to no one."

Now, in the kingdom of La, all the people were industrious and worked from the first rays of the rising sun till the last glimmer of the setting sun. During the time when the sun was not in the sky, however, they stayed in their huts and never ventured out. This was because of a terrible black Beast which lurked in the shadows of the night waiting for a victim. If someone should chance to pass, he would swoop down upon them and fold his blackness about them and drain every drop of joy and hope out of them. From that time the poor unfortunate would wander the kingdom, sad and empty, waiting for their end.

Thus it was that, as long as the sun was absent from the sky, the people dared not go forth, but must stay by their stoves and make do at home. At sunrise, however, the Beast was, likewise, forced to return to his black hole for he could not bear the sunshine which blinded him. So it was that the day belonged to the people, but the night belonged to the Beast.



Now everyone in the kingdom knew of the basket of joy which Beauty carried, even the Beast, and it was because of this basket of joy that Beauty had to hide and protect herself, for she possessed more joy than anyone in the land. Perhaps it was because she could find no joy of her own, but Beauty always had plenty of joy for others.

To the east of La there was a vast expanse of rocky mountains and empty sand as far as the eye could see. This was the home of the black Beast who had his lair under a mountain of black granite. Down below the scorched rock the Beast spent his countless lonely hours lost in ancient texts he had discovered in the tunnels and caverns of his domain.

These books spoke of the stars and planets and magic formulae using glyphs and signs to calculate the paths and trajectories of the heavenly bodies. It happened that the Beast learned of an event which was predicted in the coming days wherein the moon would pass before the sun, obscuring its odious light for a short time. This knowledge had greatly excited the Beast, for it portended an opportunity to catch the people of La unsuspecting, in the pursuit of their daily tasks. If only he could find the hidden cave where the maiden Beauty dwelt, he might be there at the destined hour and, at last, take her basket of joy for himself.

Now during the day, this Beast was a foul stinking creature such as any beast, but in the darkness he became as a shadow himself. He was a shapeless phantom without substance and could ride like the wind over the sand to the distant kingdom. His form was a darker shadow moving in the gloom, silently and swiftly, hunting for travelers or young lovers who might steal out into the night to meet. As the fated day drew near, the Beast left off the hunt for lovers and bent his whole effort to finding the hidden cave of the maiden.

He listened at doors for laughter and searched the windows for the twinkle of joy which the maiden gave. By following the trail of happiness she left, the Beast was finally able to come to a place where there was the unmistakable tinkle of laughing and joy sparkled everywhere. He knew she must be very near and he redoubled his efforts. His luck held and, at length, on the very night before the eclipse, he found it.

There, up in the hills he found a small cave with iron bars, and from the entrance he could see her bright glittering presence. From within the music of laughter spilled out into the night. The Beast was elated to be so near his quarry. He found a strong stick and began to dig in the soft earth- before the sun rose, he had fashioned a hole in which to hide until darkness fell at noon. He climbed into his hole and pulled a large rock over himself to await the moment of triumph.



The sun rose bright and hot over the people of La that morning. As quickly as the first rays spilled down on the land, the doors opened and the people came forth to greet the day. Presently he heard the squeaking of rusty iron as the gate to the cave swung open. He heard the sounds of broom sweeping and water running, and the steps of the maiden going to and fro doing her morning chores.

Presently, as the hour of the eclipse drew near, the Beast heard footsteps coming very near to him. He smiled his beastly smile down under the rock, and waited. Not long after strange cries and lamentations began to rise from the people of La. They saw that a shadow was moving across the sun and twilight was growing in the sky.

As the darkness increased, the disquiet of the people became louder and the Beast knew the time was almost at hand. Lifting his shoulders, he shifted the rock aside just enough to peek out. He saw the last rays of pure sunshine were flickering out at that very moment. He felt his body become light and vaporous and he boiled out of the hole and rose into the air. He spread his dark form on the wind and dove down at the maiden with a basket on her arm.



In an instant he was upon her, swirling around her terrified form. Before she knew what had happened, Beauty was alone again, but there was no basket on her arm and there was no smile on her face. Her lips were pale and her eyes were bleached grey like her hair. She seemed to grow old in only a moment. She slowly hobbled on to her cave and limped up the stairs, not bothering to close the iron gate.

The Beast rose up into the sky with his prize and flew over the kingdom like a storm wind. His passing left a wake of destruction as black clouds flashed lightning and trees bent under the gale. In no time at all, the Beast was over the sand and approaching his granite crag. He poured down into the crevice leading to the deep chamber of his lair just as the sun burst forth from the shadow of the moon.



Below he composed his form and stood gazing at that which he had sought for so long. Becoming calm, he reached out and lifted the lid of the basket. From within a glow escaped and a sweet perfume filled his nostrils. He reached inside and felt about. His fingers touched something warm and a tingle ran up his arm. He pulled out a small object, a ring. It was a plain silver band with nothing whatever to mark it. The Beast scowled and put the ring on the stone table. He felt again. This time he touched a cool hard thing which he pulled forth to reveal a small jar. It appeared to contain some jam or fruit preserve. The Beast frowned again and put it down. Then he reached again and felt- this time, he touched a sharp pain. He winced and felt for a second time and pulled forth a red rose with thorns down the stem. This was not what the Beast had expected at all.

Feeling now, he found nothing else in the basket. He turned it over and shook, but it was empty. The Beast was angry. He thought himself the victim of some trick- all those stories about the basket had led him to expect some marvelous magic to be within, but only ordinary common objects of no great value were there. The Beast's anger rose up in him and he roared his rage at the stones. All his cleverness was for nothing and he had not even drunk the joy of one helpless soul during the eclipse.

His hunger was great, and there was nothing for it but to taste the jam and see if it were sweet. Picking up the jar, he pried off the cover and held it to his nose. A curious scent came from it, neither pleasant nor foul nor any scent he could recognize. He put his finger in and tasted the jam. It was bitter and made him shudder. Not fit to eat, he thought and set it down. Then he took up the rose and smelled it- the flower was wilted and had no scent at all. Once again he pricked his finger.

Finally, he examined the ring. It was battered and scratched, bent a little out of round, and without any beauty he could see. He tried it on one finger and then another. It fit on the ring finger of his right hand. He took it off, but as he did so, a sadness came over him. He put it on again and the sadness vanished. This was a curious thing for a ring to do. He repeated his experiment with the same results. At last, the Beast tired of this foolish puzzle, and feeling the weariness of his ordeal, he retired to his stone bed to sleep. No sooner had his beastly head rested on the rock when he fell into a deep sleep filled with strange and disturbing dreams.



When the light returned to La, the people were stunned. Never before had they known such a thing to happen and were glad to have it pass without incident. However, soon they were to discover the harm which had visited them during the darkness. No more did the maiden Beauty walk about with her basket, and if she was seen at all, it evoked pity and grief in their hearts. This was so because she had changed in the way of all victims of the Beast, for she was old and tired and hopeless. Worse still for them was the fact that she no longer gave her joy to anyone, for she had none. It went worse still for the men who loved her. They saw that she was no longer the fair maiden, but a wrinkled grey thing who inspired only sadness.

Her parents were sent for from the far northern lands to come and take care of her, and at length they arrived. Now Beauty's mother was a hard old woman who looked much as Beauty did now, with her own wrinkles and grey, and her father was likewise overcast with gloom. When they entered the hidden cave, they found the maiden sitting in the shadows staring into space as if nothing in the world could be of import. Her father spoke to her, but she answered not, but sat as if deaf and dumb. Neither the songs of the birds nor the fresh sea breeze brought any smiles to her face and she would not take food nor drink.

In despair the father raised up his hands and spoke strange words and, lo, a cloud of smoke formed in the cave and sparks danced about and there was the wicked wizard of yore. It was he who had cursed her, her own father, and she knew not what to say or do. "It was you who did this to me", said the maiden, her voice full of bitterness and recrimination.

The old wizard hung his head and replied, "I did it for your own good, dear daughter. I saw how your beauty would grow and flower, and I knew you would be sore tempted by this beauty. All men of every stripe are attracted to such a one as you like moths to the flame. It was to protect you from yourself I gave you your curse, for no one has yet come forth to break it, and none has been worthy. I let you take what meaning you would from those words, but I knew one day you would find more there. That meaning would come in due course, as all things come in their rightful time. Where you heard no one, I said know one. You see, it is quite a different meaning. Tomorrow is promised, to know one." Beauty broke into sobs as did her mother and they embraced in their despair and her father joined in with his own tears, and for this one moment in all the long years, all of them shared equally one heart.



When the Beast awoke, it was night again. He felt quite unusual- his spirit was different. He remembered the dreams he had in his sleep. He had dreamt of dark forces and enchantments and being transformed from a noble prince to a horrid beast by some lizard thing which spoke curses at him. He remembered some forgotten past when he was not a beast which stole the joy from others, but was one who had a joy of his own. He remembered a small boy so happy and filled with promise that he sang and danced and played. He remembered how, little by little, he had fallen ever deeper into the gloom of the night and how, in time, the light of the sun had become unbearable to him. The Beast was troubled by these dreams and pushed them from his mind.

He rose from his bed and saw the jar on the table. Perhaps this was the source of the dreams. He picked it up once more and smelled it. This time, it was more to his liking than before. He tasted it again- this time, he found a new flavor where there had been only bitterness. And again, and with each taste, it seemed to be sweeter than before. Then he remembered the ring- he had slept with it on his finger. He tried to take it off but strangely, it would not come off. Not only that, but it seemed to be brighter and smoother and altogether more precious than when he had gone to sleep.

And then, he noticed the rose there on the table which had been wilted before. Now, it was as fresh as if it had only just been cut from the garden. He lifted it to his nose and it was sweet with the scent of spring and sunshine and love. The Beast was unable to understand these things and their apparent changes, but he felt a thing in his heart which had been lost for as long as he could remember. It was a faint glimmer of joy, there inside his own heart. The Beast also felt a new weight to his body, even though it was night. He felt more real than he had in memory. And so, as the night passed, the Beast tasted the sweetening jam and smelled the ever sweeter rose which seemed to be forming itself back into a new bud. And on his finger, the silver band became more polished and brilliant.

Before the sun rose, the jar was empty, the rose was a new bud, and the ring was as a mirror wrapped around his finger. And, when the hour of the sunrise came, the Beast could not help himself, but was drawn to the entrance of his lair and, for the first time, he longed to step out into the light. The morning was cool and fresh and the air was crystal clear. Birds filled the blue sky and their music gave him a new feeling of happiness. The Beast was drawn into the light and he walked for the first time out of the darkness and felt the warmth of the sun on his face. And his face was wet with tears of joy. He walked through this glorious new world, drinking in all the sights and sounds and smells of daylight.



And he walked on and on, without regard to where he was or where he was going. When, at last he became aware of his surroundings, it was growing dark again. He was happy, but so tired, and he saw a gate standing open not far away. He approached it and ascended the stairs to a soft light coming from within the cave.

As he came to the entrance, he felt a sudden flood of something he did not understand. For when he looked inside, he saw the most beautiful sight that he had ever beheld. It was a young maiden, one whom he should have known, but did not, and the very sight of her gave him such happiness that he could not help but enter and approach her. She looked up at the strange Beast before her, but he was a beast no more, but a man. And he looked into the maiden's eyes and held his arms out and she looked into his eyes and advanced to meet him. And they embraced and clasped hands, hands which each wore silver rings identical in every way.

And from behind them were the father and mother looking in amazement at what was happening before them, for in that moment, Beauty became the beautiful maiden she had been and her lips were red and her eyes were deep sea green again and her hair was like a rainbow of every color.

And then the man and the maiden kissed and he spoke his love for her and she of hers for him. And he asked for her hand. First of the mother, then of the father, and then of Beauty herself. And Beauty answered, yes, for tomorrow is promised to know one, to love one, to be one.

The End



