

Untrue Love

“Please share your vows of commitment,” the warlock officiant said to the couple standing beneath the flower-strewn arch of twisted vines. “Briar, you may begin.”

Gwenda shook her head. Truly, Amell was a disgrace as a warlock, allowing such a farce to continue. Moreover, no true adept of magic would allow his eyes to *twinkle* in such a fashion.

Seemingly unconcerned by their officiant’s disturbing lapses, Matthias and Briar spared not a single glance for him or for the several dozen people witnessing this solemn ceremony. Instead, they turned to one another. Briar claimed both of his hands for her own, her soft gaze meeting his.

“I give none of my heart to you, Matthias, and make no promises of fidelity.” She offered him a tremulous smile. “Should you become ill, I will likely smother you with a pillow. Should you grow poor, you shall know me by the cloud of dust trailing my fleeing form. I would rather marry Bitey the Bucktoothed Mule than bind myself to you, as you are, by far, the most egregiously terrible human being I’ve ever met. I loathe you, passionately and forever.”

“Awwwww,” the crowd murmured, and the elderly woman beside Gwenda dabbed at her wet cheeks with a ratty handkerchief.

Gwenda rolled her eyes.

Overcome with emotion, Matthias took a moment to recover, and she began a mental list

of the items she'd need to procure from vendors the next day. Eye of newt from the village vegan, although the eye-substitute cost an outrageous sum and required more eyes per spell to maintain optimal efficiency and power. Perhaps some willow bark would—

“From the moment we met, your hideousness astounded me.” Matthias raised one of her hands to his mouth, pressing a fervent kiss to her knuckles. “But I quickly discovered that the sheer horror of your appearance was but the least of your many deficiencies. Your character is dreadful. Your heart, bitter as pith. Your company, excruciating.”

The old woman to Gwenda's right *sobbed* at that, babbling something about *the sheer romantic grandeur of it all*.

“Surely this isn't a legally binding ceremony,” Gwenda remarked rather loudly.

Beneath his thick red-gold beard, she could have sworn the warlock's cheeks creased in a suppressed grin. But even if she was mistaken, he didn't stop the proceedings.

At long last, they reached the final bit of ridiculousness.

“Do you, Matthias, take Briar as your partner in life and love until your last breath?”

“No,” the young man declared proudly, and the warlock nodded in acknowledgment.

Amell was letting that response stand? By the heavens, what a slipshod officiant!

“Do you, Briar, take Matthias as your partner in life and love until your last breath?”

The young woman shook her head, black curls bouncing. “Most definitely not.”

“Truly, Amell?” Gwenda narrowed her eyes at him. “You're truly allowing this?”

“Your commitment is complete, Briar and Matthias.” Amell bestowed a fatherly smile upon them both. “May your union overflow with joy and love.”

Enough.

Gwenda stood, flicked her fingers in a single graceful motion to shed her disguise, and stood before them as she really was. Not some doddering village curmudgeon, but a woman of strength and authority and terrifying ruthlessness.

No wand ever made could contain her power. Only her hands sufficed to channel such a

gift. She cast them in the direction of the twisted-vine arch, drawing what she required from the young, happy couple in a stream of dazzling light. Briar and Matthias gasped under the pressure. Strained. Cried out.

The elderly woman, still seated beside Gwenda, made a distinct *meep* sound. Otherwise, silence fell over the frozen crowd like a shroud, and Gwenda gloried in the moment. In her ability to dazzle or destroy, all at her whim.

But it couldn't last, sadly. Task accomplished, she lowered her arms.

"Fine," she said crankily. "You've fulfilled the curse's terms, and I've removed the spell of untruth upon you and your fated partner Matthias, Briar. You and the entire Rose family, along with your descendants, and so on and so forth, are hereby forgiven for not inviting me to your mother's wedding. Go forth in happiness, et cetera, et cetera. Just don't expect a commitment gift from the list you provided. We both know you don't require plates of such exorbitant cost."

Briar winced, but she couldn't argue.

Tempted to address the young woman's dubious need for expensive crystal stemware as well, Gwenda instead turned away and checked if the enameled kettle she'd bought for the couple still remained safely positioned among the other presents. It did.

"Thank you!" Briar called out.

"Bah," said Gwenda.

Behind her, the celebration had begun, and the couple was still blathering excitedly over the sound of plucked strings as the musicians tuned their instruments.

"Now everyone can know how things really happened." Briar sounded delighted. "When I met Matthias, I meant to praise his handsomeness, but instead found myself telling him he had a countenance that could sour milk. Then he smiled at me and said my presence gave him all the pleasure of a boil upon his backside, and I saw a witch nearby who looked precisely as my mother had described her. I understood at once who she must be, and since the family curse fell

upon fated mates only, that was when I knew what Matthias and I had: It was untrue love.”

Raucous laughter echoed in the lofty chamber, and Gwenda harrumphed.

“They think she’s clever,” she grumbled. “But Untrue Love is the name of the curse, and I named it, so *I’m* the clever one.”

With a sweep of her hand, she cast a spell of untruth over the celebrants—everyone but Briar and Matthias—that would cause them to say the exact opposite of what they meant. This version of the curse had nothing to do with love, and it would lift at dawn, but it relieved her feelings quite a bit.

As the spell took effect, there were some gasps and startled cries, but then the previous conversation and laughter resumed. If anything, people seemed *amused* by the curse.

I’m getting old, Gwenda thought. *Old and soft.*

“I don’t know about your cleverness,” said Amell, who was suddenly at her side. “But you are definitely the most charming witch I’ve encountered over my five hundred and six years on this earth.”

He was standing too close, his smile warm upon her, and she eyed him suspiciously.

She was not charming. She’d never been charming. There was only one reasonable explanation.

“I cursed you with untruth,” she informed him. “I thought you were too powerful to succumb, but you have.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Does that mean yes, you have?”

He kept smiling at her.

She glared back. “This is very frustrating.”

Though Briar and Matthias hadn’t seemed to find it so, much to her secret relief. If she could have broken the curse decades ago and left her fearsome reputation intact, she would have. But since she wouldn’t court such humiliation, she’d compromised by letting Briar see her.

The young woman might have exuberant tastes in stemware, but she wasn't a fool.

"Let me tell you about the beauty of the wart on your nose." Amell tucked her hand in his arm and guided her out of the hall, away from the happy couple basking in the ill wishes of their friends and families. "It's sublimely placed just *so* on your nostril. Stunning."

She patted her nostril with her free hand, and it felt far from sublime. "You're lying."

"No."

"Which means yes."

"I suppose you'll find out soon enough," he said comfortably, and led her out into the moonlit night.