

Ursidae

By Madeleine Dougherty

Once upon a time, there lived a pretty little girl who grew up the happy daughter of a duke. Her mother and father loved her very much, naming her Dicax for she spoke before she was even six month old. One would think she would become a rotten little girl from how spoiled she was living in a castle, but she was sweet and kind and very independent, always reading her father, the Duke's books and feeding stray animals. Her mother would never have left her family, but found herself needed elsewhere. A call for help had come, begging for the nurturing magical power the Duke's wife possessed. So, the little girl's mother left, traveling through the forest. When she did not return, the Duke and his men searched for her. All they found was blood splashed across the ground and trees deep in the forest.

Dicax grew into a young woman, beautiful and smart, more inclined to be riding and running around outside than any of the feminine pursuits. Her father forbid her from entering the forest that had taken her mother from them. Eventually the Duke's heart healed enough to love again. He found a new wife, the lovely Azela with her raven black hair. She joined the little family along with her son, Ferre whom she loved too well. Dicax tried to be welcoming, but Azela was poisoned against her when she learned that none of her children with the Duke would be heir to his title. The Duke insisted that his daughter would inherit the power as he had promised her mother she would.

Cruel Azela, desiring that power, called upon her son to spill Dicax's blood. As an obedient son, Ferre lead the trusting Dicax just passed the edge of the forest. Upon raising his blade to her throat, Dicax begged for her life, her tears staying his hand. Her beauty in that moment shook him, his heart shuddering with newfound love.

“I will protect you,” he told her and reached out to dry her tears.

“What is this?” cried Azela as she came upon them, “Kill her and be done with it.”

“No, I will not. I love her,” Ferre said. He pushed Dicax behind him.

“Then, you will join her in darkness,” Azela called upon her powers of pain and torment.

Her love for her son kept her from killing him, but it did not keep him safe from suffering. A great swirling darkness covered Ferre. When it dissipated, in his place stood a huge, ferocious bear. It roared its displeasure and ran into the forest. Dicax screamed in fear. She collapsed, moaning faintly.

“This is all your fault,” growled Azela. Turning her gaze on the poor girl, the darkness rose up again. Dicax jumped away. Crashing back into the forest, she ran. Azela’s raging cries were lost behind her. The trees pressed close forcing her to stumble and slow. The bear’s path led Dicax deep into the heart of the wood. She was shivering in the cold night air when she came across a cottage. Its windows shown with warm light. An old woman covered in shawls beckoned her from the door way. She gently led Dicax to the rug by the fire and served her a mug of warm cider.

“What brings you into this wood, child? It is dangerous here,” the old woman said. Dicax told her of Azela and the curse on Ferre.

“This curse is not one I can break. Only the one who cast it can reverse it. But I can give you protection,” the old woman said, holding forth a sparkling ruby ring that tickled the walls with blues, greens, and purples. “This ring will shield you from your stepmother’s spell. It will also call Ferre to you. He must be present for the reversal to work, but you must convince her to help her son.”

Dicax thanked the old woman and returned to the edge of the forest. There, in the early dawn, the Duke and Azela fought; the Duke wished to go after his daughter, and Azela demanded he stay at her side.

“Father, do not fear. I am home. Azela, you must reverse your spell. Do you not love your son?” Dicax said.

“You have poisoned him with you wiles. It is you who I will be bewitch. You I will kill,” Azela cried. Jets of purple sprung from her fingertips, but the power slipped around Dicax, leaving her unharmed.

“How?” Azela said.

“An old woman in the woods gave me a gift,” Dicax said, holding the ring high. The Duke gasped.

“That is your mother’s ring. I gave it to her on the day of your birth. She never took it off,” he said.

“Mother lives?” Dicax sobbed. With an angry roar, Azela threw her power at the two. Before it could reach them, a mighty roar echoed from behind them. The bear burst from the trees and tore into Azela. She squealed once before her throat was removed by monstrous jaws. With flesh hanging from between his teeth, the bear turned to Dicax and her father. The Duke pulled her back, but Dicax held her hand out to Ferre. He rubbed his massive cheek against her tiny hand, licking it gently in a kiss.

“We must return to Mother. She can fix this,” Dicax said, leading the men back into the forest. Again, the old woman greeted them at her door. The Duke gripped her tight and kissed her, moaning in painful relief. Dicax hugged her mother for the first time in years.

“Mother, Azela is dead. Is there nothing else to break this curse?” she begged.

“I have not the power to remove the curse. Perhaps I can change it.” Spreading her arms wide, golden light brushed the fur of the bear. He shrunk and stretched back into his handsome human form. “This is not a cure. Two spells reside within him. He is both bear and man, never free from either.”

“I cannot let him live alone with such a burden. Do the same to me,” Dicax said.

“Daughter, you know this will make you both woman and bear, too,” the woman asked, looking into her daughter’s determined face.

“Yes. I love him. Please, Mother,” said Dicax. With another wave of gold, Dicax turned into a bear and back. Ferre swung her up into his arms, kissing her madly.

With heavy hearts, the Duke and his wife returned to the castle. Dicax and Ferre lived happily ever after in the cottage in the forest.