

Forest Creature

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[TRIGGER WARNING: This story contains discussion, though not depiction, of the death of a child. Separately, a stabbing murder is depicted, though not in gory detail.]

Like all who died before her, Anita knows better than to seek the forest witch.

Part of her longs for the warm smells of her bakery, for the lights of town. By now, her neighbours will be sleeping, ready for tomorrow's memorial. She should be there, says part of her, even if she is sick to death already of sombre bouquets and awkwardly offered condolences.

In all her thirty-five years, Anita has never roamed the woods at night, never broken the cardinal rule of the forest: *What remains after dark belongs to the witch*. She is surprised by the blackness, the swell of unsettling sound, her surroundings a void like the space between stars.

Fear leaps in her gut, and she stops walking, slams her hatchet into a nearby tree. The crack, the impact, grounds her, and the fear alchemizes back into anger, hot enough to warm her.

But she can't stop for long, or she will think of Jasper. Reminders of him are everywhere, and each one digs into her insides like swallowed glass. Anita wrenches the stolen hatchet from the bark, tries to breathe. The witch will find her, or she it. All she has to do is not turn back.

She forces herself on, flinching at every stabbing twig, every squelching puddle. It rained yesterday, and the woods are still sodden. This, Mina says, may be what happened to Jasper: a slip on muddy ground. His ankle was broken when they found his body this morning; the injury may be what kept him here after dark. A small, stupid reason for an enormous, terrible thing.

Accidents happen, Anita's sister said, even to the best of us.

She wouldn't let Anita see the body. Anita hacks randomly at the tangling branches, relishing every snap. Mina thinks she's protecting her, as if Anita hasn't seen a witch-killed corpse before. As if she doesn't know Jasper's heart was ripped out, his blood drained away.

As if she doesn't know that her son, just twelve, died screaming for his mother.

A hatchet isn't good enough. Anita longs for a real axe, for a butcher's knife, for something that will rend and tear and *hurt*. But a hatchet is what Mina left unattended outside her house, gleaming on a tree stump. So a hatchet is what Anita has.

The witch is a wild creature, her sister often says. No different from the bears and wolves. She's just trying to eat, like all the rest of us.

Another reason to flee to the woods when she did: had Mina tried to say that to her tomorrow at Jasper's memorial, Anita truly thinks she might have killed her.

She splashes into a stream, cursing at the cold, then freezes. Ahead, just visible through a thicket of wild roses, golden lights gleam. The windows of a wooden cottage.

Anita grips the hatchet so hard her nails bite her skin.

She starts to run, tearing at the thorny branches, stumbling as the ground slopes beneath her. She slams her whole body into the door, and it groans open, spilling her into the witch's den.

She'd expected horrors, Anita realizes—skulls and viscera—or perhaps a trap, a place that looks safe. This is neither. Instead, it reminds her—sharp as a punch to the chest—of Jasper.

The little room is crowded with junk: strands of jewellery hung like garlands, bloodstained dresses and cloaks pinned to the walls. A glittering array of coins paves the floor, lit by dozens of candles, and in one corner, a hill of stuffed toys watches Anita with dead eyes.

She frowns. There is an undeniable lovingness to it, a carefulness to how the objects are arranged. Jasper, too, was a collector, his room stuffed with bright leaves, plants grown from cuttings, smooth river stones. He soaked up every detail of the wood, and it left Anita breathless.

How did you get this smart? she once asked him. *How in the world did I make you?*

Her fingers close on one of the witch's treasures: smooth glass, a bright figurine of a bird.

She holds it for a moment, looking into the painted eyes. How old is this? Who did the witch steal it from, and how long has she kept it here like a trophy, miraculously unbroken?

A sneer curls Anita's lips.

She flings the bird against the opposite wall.

The smash is wonderful, bright and poisonous like the spite surging in her chest. Anita scrambles for something else, seizes a mirror. It explodes like a firework: radiant shards of silver.

She just barely stops herself from grabbing for more, just chokes down the livid heat inside her when she notices she's dropped her hatchet. She bends to retrieve it, dizzy with power.

And then she hears the singing. It's a crooning, wordless cry, high and eerie as the call of a loon. Just close enough to human to send a shudder through her bones.

Anita lets herself shiver as she follows the sound, taking careful, crunching steps across the glass-strewn floor and then the wet ground outside. She's so tense, it hurts to breathe. Then—

Anita sucks in a gasp and drops into the bushes. A lake stretches before her, smooth and silver as the mirror she has just destroyed. On the dimpled sand of its shore, a witch dances.

The sight of it makes her ache. Clad in a bloodstained violet ballgown, the creature is strangely beautiful, in the same way as a violent storm or the eyes of a wolf. Golden hair cascades from its head; that keening song spirals from its mouth. Its eyes are pure black, dark dead spheres set against snow-pale skin. Pointed teeth draw beads of blood from scarlet lips.

Awe and hate explode together in Anita's chest.

Do it, she tells herself. Come on.

Yet she waits, hatchet dangling uselessly from one hand. Some piece of Jasper is in her, after all; some part of her wants desperately to love this. She can't stop looking at its eyes:

they've begun to glow, twin points of light amid the darkness. With every note, they brighten and shift: no longer black, but a mosaic of grey and gold and violet and pink.

The creature throws up its arms, its song reaching a piercing peak, and its eyes flash pure white. It illuminates the land like a lightning strike, fast and unforgiving, and Anita freezes—but the witch looks up to the sky, not down at her, singing all the while. Magic heats the air, heady and choking as smoke. The witch draws one finger up, up, up as it whirls by on bare feet.

And the sun begins to rise, as if pulled on a string.

A strange feeling squeezes Anita's stomach—a thrill, or an urge to cry. She watches the sun paint the sky grey, then gold, inching ever higher on the witch's command. She knows she must strike, knows this is her moment, but she can't bring herself to move.

A wrong note saves her: it's so jarring, she flinches. The witch's bell-clear voice falters, coming out as a croak, a hiss. It stops dancing, skirts swishing, and the sun freezes in the sky.

With a clawed hand, the witch plucks a glass bottle from its belt. What's inside is viscous, red as a heart. A hot tang hits Anita's nose as the witch uncorks it. Blood.

And Anita knows exactly whose blood the witch last drained.

Her world narrows, the teariness vanishing. She is suddenly, terribly, entirely calm.

The creature swallows. The muscles of its throat contract like some writhing, blind thing. As it tucks the vial away, it begins to sing: beautiful once more, every note liquid birdsong.

Before she can stop to regret it, Anita stands, hurling the hatchet at the witch's throat.

It connects in a spray of blood, and the burgeoning light fades from the sky, plunging them back into blackness. The song is choked off, the witch heaving rapid, gurgling breaths.

Anita launches herself at the creature, knocking them both onto the sand, and she only faintly feels its claws. Over and over she yanks the hatchet from the creature's flesh, swinging down on its throat, chest, face, gut. The motion is soothing: no different from chopping wood.

When the creature rams her chest with metallic claws, at last Anita screams. She endures a second of vibrant awareness: a corona of pain, the wrongness of fingers on her beating heart. The witch writhes below her, shrieking in harmony. Anita's vision swims. *One last chance.*

As she makes her final swing, she thinks of her son and aims for the heart.

In the dark and cold of a cursed forest, a woman stands over a pair of bodies.

With the witch dead, the sun no longer touches these lands. The night has had years to grow stronger, hungrier. Deathly stillness stifles the world: no people, no animals, no rustling leaves. The trees reach bare, trembling branches toward an empty sky.

Without the sun, everything starves. But every year, the woman returns.

She searches for words. Her insides slosh full of stale guilt and hate and love.

"It was so ugly, what you did," she finally says. "But it was beautiful, too."

She has yet to find a better way of phrasing it. It's a beauty that aches and bites, an ugliness illumined by the best of intentions. They bleed together, inseparable. She's learned to make peace with this paradox, or at least she's trying to.

She knows there are still, among the former villagers, those who use the word *monster*.

She kneels to lay a wreath on the frozen ground: white roses twined in a rough circle. Her blood still lingers on some of the thorns. Straightening, she gives the bodies a long look.

Nothing remains of either of them now but bones. When you gaze at them like this, still entangled as if embracing, it is nearly impossible to tell one from the other.