

Her grave is in the Old Growth.

Among the gnarled roots and twisted vines, where the shadows lurk and the magic is so ancient it hums in her bones. Vibrates into her marrow, wraps claws around her heart and squeezes in a rhythm known only to the old oaks and maples. This deep in the Old Growth, no one will find her bones. She'll die here alone and forgotten. Lost to time and plucked from living memory.

She doesn't remember how she got here. She remembers sitting on her sill, familiar curled in her lap, and watching the rain. Magic spilt from her fingers as she Weaved a protection spell for the man down the way. Remembers that she stepped into the damp and chill for just a moment when there was a knock at her door.

Perhaps that's why she was here.

Or maybe not? She's not even entirely sure where in the Old Growth she is. There was just darkness, like a gaping void, the maw of a monster, yawning open and ready to swallow her up into the deep. Ivy licks at her bare feet, curls around her toes to root her to the ground. The magic here is alive and tainted by something *foul*. Something is whispering to her in the language of garbled mud and grinding rocks. It's closed around her, trapping her in a bubble of pitch and tar. Nothing could ever be as tenebrous as the darkness surrounding her. Nothing has ever made her feel so insignificant— so detached from her soul and body and magic. She feels like a single drop in an ocean of black that's as still as the first snowfall of winter. Nothing.

And, yet, here she is. Her eyes open, eyelashes fluttering like butterflies on a fresh corpse and a creeping mass roaring to life between her ribs. Her breath hitches and she tries to blink away the reality around her. Or was it fantasy? She can't tell anymore. Without her magic, she feels adrift. Unable to ground herself into what *she* knows as real. She's staring into the gaping maw of a ravenous beast that circles closer and closer and closer—

Minutes pass like that. Maybe even hours. There's no time in this fathomless place, just the sound of her unsteady breaths and the creaking cold of something Other. She's left alone with her racing thoughts and trembling bones, digging her fingers and toes into the loam of the Old Growth. Trying to coax some of the magic there into her, but it recoils when she tries and leaves her numb. Refuses to give her a scrap and wraps a vine of thorns around her legs, spills her blood to the soil, and greedily drinks the red down down *down* into roots older than time. The Old Growth is bleeding her dry and pulling her into its embrace. When it's done with her, creatures will nest in her bones and peonies will bloom where her eyes once were.

A distorted screech jolts her from her silence. The creeping dark melts away and she can see the fuzzy outline of trees in front of her now. It's still dark, but it's not as all-encompassing as before— like she's woken in the night after a forgotten dream. She pulls the ivy from between her toes and unwinds thorns from her flesh. Blood drips to the ground, clover blooming where it pools, and the Old Growth shrinks on itself. She paws at the flesh of

her face, half expecting her eyes to be gone, plucked from their sockets by ravens, even though she can clearly see around her. She has the distinct feeling, though, that she isn't seeing through *her* eyes, but something else. Her fingers clumsily trip over her face, trying to memorise every line and curve, to force her sight to be *hers* again.

The vision she was seeing shifted, pitched forward like it was rolling closer to the tangle of moss and knotgrass. Her heart stutters, her stomach rolling violently at the change in perspective when she hasn't even moved. She wheezes and tries to swallow around the feeling of claws dug into her throat. Tries to shut her eyes against the twisting fluidity of her sight and sobs when the whiplash makes her stumble. As suddenly as it started, the sight focuses once more in the darkness and she can hear the snapping of something unbearably large in the brush. The Old Growth shudders around her, magic whipping wildly and trees groaning under the weight of a presence that doesn't belong. Her heart constricts, muscles tightening across her bones as adrenaline kicks through her weary body. She's blind, seeing through the eyes of something else, something *wrong* and not welcome among the trees. She has to run run *run* and get out of there, wherever there is, but her legs stubbornly refuse to obey her. The cracking of broken wood and wails of the oaks and maples crescendos as whatever is moving draws closer.

A presence heavy like sludge and reeking of death and rot slithers through the boughs of an oak. It drops in front of her and she can see a person, trembling and barefoot and bleeding from thorn scratches. At that moment she realizes with startling clarity that she's seeing through the eyes of the thing in the trees. It was looking at her, but it was like it wasn't quite *seeing* her. The thing seemed to know she was there, but not exactly where. She's not sure why this thing of decay and murk is standing still, waiting. She watches through its eyes as the dim outline of her figure trembles and she heaves in a shaking breath. A small whine lodges in her throat, eeks out into the air, and she can see a wisp of colour escape with the sound. Something akin to a snarl, guttural and fathomless and otherworldly, rips from the being. It shreds through the darkness, lights the Old Growth in shades of green and blue, slips beneath her skin and settles into the marrow of her bones like an aching pain. It feels like something is stretching and pulling thin thin thin and then it *snaps*.

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The rain is pattering against the window and the grey of the sky makes her wince. She jerks her head down, tries to shield her eyes with her hands and get a grip on the nausea twisting her insides. Something soft winds between her legs and she flinches, presses back into the wood of her sill and blinks down at her familiar. It sits at her feet, watching her with wide yellow eyes, unperturbed by the trickle of fear it senses from her. A nightmare, then. She shakes her head and sighs. Thinks about the feeling of something from the depths of the unknowable taking root in her spine and stares too long at the edge of the Old Growth. Mother said to not stray too far into the trees or they'd snatch her and fold her into their bark. Sometimes, when she wanders a bit too far, she can see the agonized faces of less fortunate folk in the elms and

birches. The oaks and maples aren't as obvious with their warnings, prefer to trip their prey and turn them around, pull them into the loam and ensconce them in their roots. She's shaken from her reverie by a knock at the door. A sliver of fear skitters along her skin and her magic crackles at her fingertips.

At her door are two elderly women, neither touched by a speck of rain and looking out of place among her peonies and blackberry brambles. One has a set of thick glasses perched on her nose and a mismatch of summer clothing. The other has her hands stuffed deep into the pockets of her trench coat and peers at her with milky typhlotic eyes. There's something off about them, but she can't place her finger on what it is.

"Dearie me, sorry about that." She's not sure which one spoke. Her eyes are having a difficult time focusing on one or the other for more than a few seconds.

"You seem a bit lost, dear," one of them speaks again. The one in the trench coat smiles a bit too wide and, for just a moment, she thinks she sees rows of too many teeth that are too sharp. As soon as she tries to look closer, though, there's nothing there but a prim, sympathetic smile.

The one with the glasses reaches out and cradles her face in leathery hands. She raises a nearly hairless eyebrow and prods at the skin beneath her nails. The other, hands still deeply ensconced in her trench coat, leans forward and gets uncomfortably close to her face. Peers at her with lachrymose eyes that look into the depths of her soul. Rends all of her wards and protection spells from her like gossamer beneath talons and *looks*. After a moment, she pulls away and tuts.

"Oh, dear," they mutter in unison and look at each other.

"A bit too late for this one." The one in the trench coat is firm with this assertion and she's tempted to ask what's going on, but she finds that her voice has escaped her. Blind eyes observe her once more, and then she nods.

"A speck," comments the other in a sing-song voice. She folds her leathery hands into the fabric draped around her form.

They nod together once more and turn to leave. The familiar at her feet chirrup and butts its head against her shins. She looks down for just a moment to chide it, but when she looks back at the elderly women are gone. Her peonies have closed up and the blackberry bramble trembles in the rain. She blinks and—

What was she doing outside?

She shrugs and turns to go back inside, but trips over the door jamb. She expects to hit wooden floors and bruise, but moss greets her instead. Clovers spring underneath her hands

and a bed of knotgrass cradles her knees. She looks around and sees faces of terror carved into an old elm. The gleam of a bone blooming beneath an oak. She heaves and scrambles to her feet, scrapes her palm against a sharp rock and yelps at the pain.

Twig snaps.

Trees groaning.

A low growl, something that had been dredged up from the depths of a pit and left to rot in the darkness for much too long. Sludge and death, a miasmic terror that curls in the pit of her stomach. Her heart stutters to a halt, then rabbits in her chest and her breath comes too quick, then too slow, then *not quick enough*. That thing from her nightmare was lurking, slithering through the dark like an oil spill and trying to find her. She thinks it sees by *sound* and she tries to quiet the rattle of her breaths and the frantic beat of her heart. Her hand presses to her mouth and she tastes the tang of blood on her lips. She tries not to wretch and braces herself to begin to move. That thing in the dark is getting closer, she can feel the weight of it beginning to press down around her. She wishes more than anything that she could pull a spark of light to her fingertips, but her magic is *gone* again and the Old Growth is screaming around her, lashing out when she tries to borrow from it. It's too dark for her to see properly and her eyes aren't adjusting fast enough and she's going to *die* here among the trees and brush and—

She slips on the slick of a rock and can't contain the shriek that flies from her when she loses her footing and tumbles into a bramble of thorns. Pain blooms along her skin as she fights out of the thicket, flesh tearing and sobbing uncontrollably. The thing in the dark howls and cackles, a sort of noise that grips at her spine and rakes claws down her rib cage. It crashes through the undergrowth, clicking and trilling, slick and slimy in its decay. She pulls herself from the thorns and *bolts*, kicking up rocks and leaves, and slamming through the brush. Her heart is jackhammering in her chest, beating and drumming so hard against her sternum that she fears it's trying to break free to save itself. To crawl away on ripped arteries and *survive*.

The oaks and maples bend out of her way, elms push her in different directions and she's not sure if they're trying to *help* her or send her into the maw of the beast. The thing behind her is relentless in its pursuit and she can *feel* it nip at her heels. She trips when a cherry, in its haste to move, upends a root and sends her sprawling into the ground. Everything goes silent for a minute as she huddles on the ground and tries to make herself smaller. Branches sway and snap, but the muggy feeling of the thing from the dark doesn't draw any closer. She can breathe without feeling like she's choking on rot. In the distance, she can see a faint glow between the trees and she hopes and prays that it's her way out. She pushes to her feet, a stitch panging in her side and limps as quietly as she can toward the light.

The Old Growth isn't screaming anymore. It hums around her and she wonders if that *thing* has given up and decided to lurk elsewhere. She doesn't even realise that she's stopping moving until she feels the tickle of a vine wrapping loosely around her ankle. Her mind tries to

tell her to *keep moving*, but her muscles have something else in mind. They tense, pull taut over bone and sinew, as though in anticipation of what is to come. She waits and waits and *waits*—

She's alone.

She takes a single step, sinks into springy moss, and tries to hear something other than the quiet of the forest. Nothing. Her breath is still coming in harsh pants that make her wheeze and want to hack out of her lungs so that they would *stop burning*. She aches down to the very atoms of her being, as though she had been running a twisting maze for years. The Old Growth groans around her and she thinks that maybe, just maybe, she had imagined the whole thing. A waking nightmare.

She casts a look back at where she had come from, but everything looks the same to her. The trees garble nonsense she can't parse and she's about to turn back towards the dim light in the distance when she feels it. Icy fingers wrap around the back of her neck. Fingertips like smoke caress the thin skin over her carotid and the pinpricks of claws pinch her flesh. It's a phantom touch like it's not *quite* there, and she has the feeling that if she tried to see if there was a hand around her throat there would be nothing there. The feeling of icicles tapping against her skin and the soft whir of rotten breath behind her is real enough, though. She closes her eyes, tries to summon her magic again, and the thing holding her snaps teeth at her fingers. With her eyes closed, she can see through *its* eyes again. It's looking at her curiously, flexing tenebrous trails around her form as it tries to fix her in its head. Gauge how long she'll satisfy its hunger when it crunches her bones between its teeth and sucks the marrow from them. She whimpers at that and sees a billowing cloud of colour leak from her mouth. It shrieks in glee now that she's lit up in gold and terror. Its supposed jaws crack open with a sickening sound and colour explodes in her vision once more.

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When she opens her eyes, the grey of the sky makes her wince. Her familiar winds between her legs and chuffs. Confusion swirls in her head, but she can't dwell on it for long when there's a knock at her door.

There are two elderly women outside her door, neither touched by a speck of rain and looking out of place among her peonies and blackberry brambles. One has a set of thick glasses perched on her nose and a mismatch of summer clothing. The other has her hands stuffed deep into the pockets of her trench coat and peers at her with milky typhlotic eyes. There's something off about them and she can't shake the feeling that she's seen them before.

"Dearie me, sorry about that." She's not sure which one spoke. Her eyes are unfocused and she feels off-centre.

"You seem a bit lost, dear," one of them speaks again. The one in the trench coat smiles a bit too wide and, for just a moment, she thinks she sees rows of too many teeth that are too

sharp. As soon as she tries to look closer, though, there's nothing there but a prim, sympathetic smile. She tries to tell them that no, she's fine, just feeling a little strange. Probably something she ate, but her mouth won't open.

The one with the glasses squishes her face between two leathery hands. The other peers at her face a little too closely, looks into the depths of her soul and unwinds all of her wards and protection spells.

"Oh, dear," they mutter in unison. It sounds like a thousand trees talking over each other and screaming. Her head feels like it's going to split open.

"A bit too late for this one." The one in the trench coat is firm with this assertion. A sense of déjà vu washes over her.

"A speck," the other echoes back.

Her familiar chirps at her feet and, in the split second she looks down to acknowledge it, the two women are gone. She can't remember why she opened the door. When she turns to go back inside, she trips on the door jamb. Her hands meet moss and knotgrass.

A strange sense of foreboding coats her and she thinks she can taste death on her tongue. The Old Growth shudders around her when she gets to her feet. She wanders between the trees and tries to draw on some of the magic there, but receives thorn pricks in return. She hisses at the pain and feels a cold dread grip her spine when she hears a bone-rattling growl in the dark.

The Old Growth was her grave.