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### A Lost and Lonely Soul

Last year, my parents went missing for several days. A friend of mine discovered their dismembered bodies on a trek through the forest: cold, with blood caked on their clothing. They were buried in a small lonely graveyard on the doorstep of that dark and unforgiving wood. I did not attend their funeral; instead, I retreated into the lonely recesses of my parents' house, seldom venturing out into the open.

Every day without fail in the following year, my older sister Maryanne urged me to end my self-enforced seclusion, at the very least to go pay my respects to our mother and father. She would approach me in my weakest moments, wheedling and begging me to rejoin the rest of the world. "You owe them that much," she would say. "Stop hiding and visit them!"

I'm not hiding, I told her over and over again. I just don't want to go out.

"You're hiding," she would insist, in this tone of voice that made me desperately want to slap her or throttle her or just make her go away.

I grew to dread these conversations because I could never seem to defend myself against her. My voice would quiver when I spoke, and I was forever afraid that our conversations would only consist of our parents' graves and my insistence on neglect.

Our conversations were of even worse quality when the weather was foul, as neither of us could escape the other if we needed space. So it was that the next time that

dark clouds rolled in and thunder rumbled, I ordered Maryanne to stay put, maybe even go to sleep, and when I was certain she was shut up in her room and would not follow me, I put on my heaviest coat and set out toward the village. I hoped to spend the night with Victor, a good friend with whom I had seldom spoken since my parents' deaths.

Why did I choose that particular day to abandon my solitude for the company of a friend? Why had I never left before? Even I was not entirely certain, but I was surprised to discover that the thought of venturing into the village excited me.

The world I entered was one darker than I remembered. I had been anticipating a sky swept clear by sun and wind. The early afternoon sky I saw was dark, as heavy clouds in the air covered the sun, making the day as dark as night and leaving an unpleasant chill in the air. I hugged my coat closer to myself. The walk from my parents' house to the village was long, though I enjoyed being able to make the journey in solitude. Above me, the clouds crackled and rumbled but did not let loose any rain, as though they were holding back, waiting for me to reach my destination.

Just as I finally stood outside my friend's door, a torrent of rain fell from the sky. Eager to be indoors, I pounded on the door and shouted to get his attention, but only the wind and the rain were there to hear me.

It's me, I said as loudly as I could over the thunder.

There was no response.

"Victor's not here," a voice bellowed behind me, just loud enough so I could hear. I whipped around in surprise; I hadn't thought anyone else was out. Behind me stood a tall figure, maybe a little shorter than my sister, with stooped shoulders and a heavy coat that obscured the person's face.

I stared for a moment, unsure what to make of this, only able to think of how I wanted to get indoors.

“Come inside,” the figure said, or at least that’s what it sounded like under the din of thunder. The person led me to the house across the street and I followed.

Before you question my judgment, remember that it was quite an awful day to be standing about with nowhere to go. While in other circumstances I might have been more cautious about whose house I chose to enter, I was not one to wallow in the cold and wet when I had other options available.

“I’m surprised you came so readily,” the person said when we were inside. The voice – which I could now tell was that of a woman – sounded unnaturally loud in the sudden quiet inside the house of stone. After a few long dark moments, the woman lit a candle and I could see a few of my surroundings. I saw that dust had settled over every surface, as though the house had been un-lived in for some time. I removed my coat and left it on an equally filthy coat hanger. “Even in the rain, some would have been more reluctant to enter the house of an unfamiliar neighbor.”

That’s my sister, not me. She’s the one who prefers to stay in the gloom and the dark. I prefer the comfort of the indoors, if only to hide from everything else.

“Are you sure it’s the graves she visits so frequently? Or is it the forest behind them?”

I don’t know.

“I would not be surprised to find it’s the forest she visits,” the woman said. “That place has power.” She motioned me toward a small old rickety chair, which I took cautiously. She remained standing, lingering in the hallway. I still couldn’t see her face.

“You’re probably wondering where your Victor is.” I nodded. “He spoke about how he needed to see a friend of his who lives on the outside of the village. It was urgent; he probably won’t return for some time now.”

If Victor was headed to my parents’ house, then I would have seen him. I could not have missed him walking along the same path.

“Curious,” the woman said, sounding lofty and unconcerned. “I wonder if something happened to him,” she mused, and in her voice was the implication that something did happen and she knew and she was going to make me find it myself.

Within seconds I was on my feet and running, running past the girl and down the hall, and the front door all but crashed open at my touch and I kept running. Then I was outside Victor’s house, and I pounded on his door screaming for a minute before I realized the door was unlocked and I wrenched it open. Everything was dark and quiet except for the wild storm behind me, and I would have missed the note if a flash of lightning hadn’t illuminated the halls with a sick, pale gleam. The note fluttered from its position on an old table, and I picked it up and squinted at it for several long moments. It took several more bursts of lightning before I could discern the entire message. It read:

*It was a poor choice you made to leave your sister alone. Say farewell.*

“Pity,” the woman laughed, suddenly behind me. “By the time you get back, it’ll probably be far too late. Of course, I could always spirit you back home. It’d be much quicker that way.”

She grinned at me and I ran.

I don’t know if my return to my parents’ house was longer or shorter than my journey earlier this afternoon. I ran the entire way, but the path was muddy, slowing my

progress, and I fell several times. By the time I approached the house, I was in such a disordered frenzy that I'm sure I looked half-mad.

Everything looked the same as I had left it. I could have been returning on any other day, with Maryanne out doing whatever she does and me only wanting to be alone and hide from the world.

I whispered my sister's name into the dark hall, knowing and dreading that she would not answer. I fumbled for a minute as I endeavored to light all of the nearest candles, and immediately wished I hadn't; they bathed the walls in a weak glow and in lonely shadows, flickering, taunting me.

I wanted to scream to Maryanne, to call her name, but I could not quite work my voice up beyond a whisper. My heart drumming a swift tempo in my chest, I crept up creaking stairs to Maryanne's room, which lay immediately on my right. The door stood wide open, inviting; stuck to it was another note with the same hurried script.

*It's not too late. You know where she is.*

And so I found myself heading for the forest, the one place I had long ago decided that I would never approach. Almost as if anticipating my arrival, the rain died down to a faint misting and thunder rumbled only distantly, leaving the thick heavy smell of wet in the air and no lightning to illuminate my way. I wrapped my arms around myself, wishing I hadn't left my coat in the village.

My parents' graves called out a warning to me as I passed, clamoring for my attention; I had not visited since the funeral a year ago. I turned my back and did my best to ignore their presence but could not completely ignore the way the headstones gazed

into the back of my skull. That sense of being watched only heightened as I entered the forest behind the graveyard.

I proceeded slowly, watching for any signs of people and trying not to slip on fallen wet leaves. Several times I caught a motion out of the corner of my eye; often, I could not identify the movement's source. I told myself it was squirrels. The forest was eerily quiet save for the chatter of some animals and birds that remained invisible to me.

"So glad you could finally join me here," said someone, and I looked around, panicking when I could see no one. Then, a figure materialized in front of me, like a form made from vapor. It was Maryanne. She wore a long green cloak that blended in to the forest, making it difficult to see form. Vaguely I remembered seeing it in the house at some time prior.

As I stared at her, trying to understand, she spoke again without being prompted. "It's a pity you didn't come before now. I've been trying to get you to come here for so long, but what's done is done, I suppose."

What's going on? I demanded.

Then she flickered, sort of, and disappeared again and then her voice came from behind me and when I turned around again she was there.

"I told you this forest is a powerful one. You could have shared that power with me." Her skin was drained, pallid. Colorless like the face of a ghost.

What happened to you?

"The forest has granted me some of her powers, but in return, certain sacrifices must be made." In her voice was the same insipid laughter that the Witch had. "The

same sacrifices made a year ago on this very must be repeated. Victor came along rather willingly; why don't you join him?"

Maryanne raised her hand, and I heard the groan of some great effort, and I looked about me and saw that the path behind me was disappearing as trees stretched and moaned and grew, a tangled trap of green. There was no escape, yet I tried to flee. With every step I took, more trees blocked my path. Leafy tendrils sneaked out and reached for me like hands desperate to feed hungry mouths. I shook them off, but they kept returning insistently. "Give up," Maryanne commanded, and in that moment I thought that it must not be my sister I saw. My sister Maryanne had wheedled; she'd suggested; she'd snuck thoughts into my mind that refused to abandon me. Never before had I been powerless to refuse her.

Suddenly in a rage, I flew at her, desperate, with some wild hope in the back of my mind that I could escape her, escape this, escape everything. As I raised my hand to strike her, she shrieked, "You cannot harm your only sister!"

I couldn't.

This was the creature who had taunted me every day since the death of our parents, the monster I couldn't stand to be in the same room with for more than a few minutes. And I could not touch her.

So the leafy branches grabbed at me again, dragged me away, and I looked for some sort of sign on her face, a look of regret or sadness, but I saw nothing.

That night I went to join my parents, and I could only hope that somehow, someday, my sister Maryanne would choose not to go on like this, feeding on lost and lonely souls.