

The Maiden's Forest

For Anonymous

By TheSpiralledEye

A long time ago; before borders and maps were set in ink and magic still affected the mortal plain, there lived a banshee who came to love a human woman.

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A long time ago; before borders and maps were set in ink and magic still affected the mortal plain, there lived a woman whose name was Inge. The young woman was a beauty, admired by all for her friendly face, golden hair and brilliant blue eyes. Her disposition was warm and she brought smiles to the faces of all who met her path.

Igne, like many peasants living far from major cities, lived a hard but rewarding life of simplicity. She worked hard to please her parents, obeyed their word and was content to be married to the farm boy from one village over as soon as she came of age.

When that day finally came, her parents gave her a small dowry to give to her new husband and wrapped it amongst her meagre belongings in cloth and sent her on her way. They warned her of course, to take the long and open path along the river that led to her future home and not to stray into the dark woods that separated the two towns.

It was not the first time she had been warned of that place, for all in her village knew the dangers that lurked within those unnamed woods. People went missing, strange sounds echoed in the night and despite none using the dirt path that was clearly laid out; it never faded or became overgrown. Almost as if the forest itself was willing somebody to enter it and be devoured by the dark.

Inge was a good girl, who had never disobeyed her parents as a child nor as an adult but as she set off and the clouds began to darken a temptation took her. The forest path would cut a full day off her journey, if the weather was to turn she would much rather have the shelter of trees to stave off the soaking rain. And so, Inge made the choice that would define her entire life from that day forth and entered the dark wood.

And so her fate was set.

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Inge sighed in relief as soon as she entered the sheltered path of the forest. The trees were packed in close together, so close in fact that traversing them would be a monumental effort if she chose to leave the path. Not that she would, it was one thing to enter the forest at all, let alone go wandering. She pulled her bundled shawl closer around her neck and walked quickly, trying to keep her footsteps as quiet as she could.

No local had travelled this path in years, of that she was sure, but surely travellers and such must have used it. She could see the faded marks of boots and wagon wheels etched into the ground after all. If this place was truly so dangerous surely nobody would pass through at all.

She just wanted to get to the next village and meet Jonathan; she had only met her fiance a handful of times but she was quite enamoured with him. From what her parents had said he was quite kind and the last time she saw him she'd been struck with just how handsome he was. Square jaw, strong arms and swarthy skin from working the fields; a better husband a peasant woman could not ask for. She was sure she would grow to love him in time.

She hurried along, a soft, excited smile on her face. Despite the slightly creepy surroundings of the woods she felt elated. Today had a special feeling about it, like it was the first day of her life really beginning. As she travelled through, the path began to thin and become less defined. Grass and weeds overtook it first, then the dark spindly branches of the trees that flanked the walkway began to stretch over it.

She ducked and weaved, trying her best to stay straight but it was impossible, the branches forced her to go around the trees and bushes and before she knew it, the path was gone all together. She turned to backtrack only to realise the foliage was so dense she couldn't even see her own footprints in the mud. Panic flooded her before she took a deep breath and squashed it down.

"Nothing to worry about, if you just keep heading in the right direction, everything will be fine." Inge reminded herself, peering up through the trees trying to pinpoint exactly where the sun was.

What little sky she could see was tinged pink, the day was over already? She couldn't tell which was East or West, the leaves and branches were simply too thick and if she couldn't

see the great glowing ball that was the sun, what hope did she have of using the stars to guide her? Perhaps taking the shortcut hadn't been such a good idea after all.

The cold air whipped through the trees and she shivered; that storm had been building all day now. If she'd taken the river road she'd have been frozen by now, at least that's what she kept telling herself to justify this stupid decision.

Inge began to panic, her movements becoming jerky and fast as she desperately scrambled through the undergrowth. Desperate for a clearing, or for the forest to thin out just a little. She was so hurried in fact, she didn't see the embankment until it was too late and her foot met open air instead of hard ground.

She tumbled forward and for a moment she was sure she was doomed only to hit icy water instead of hard ground. The shock knocked the breath from her lungs and she coughed, kicking and struggling to the surface to the pond, feeling the slimy tendrils of weed wrap themselves around her. Almost as if the pool was attempting to drown her. She grit her teeth as she yanked them away from her body, wincing in pain as they tangled with her long hair.

She tried to open her eyes to see which way was up but there was nothing but black water and silvery bubbles broken up with the occasional dark stripe of blackened reeds. Panic began to flood her system; her lungs were burning, she had to get air soon! She held on as long as she could before finally, she couldn't take it anymore. She opened her mouth and sucked in the water; expecting the burning pain of water filling her lungs but instead she felt...relief?

She could feel the water moving in her lungs but it felt as natural as air, she took a few more deep breaths as an experiment and her head began to clear; she was breathing underwater. Now that her panic was gone, as was her time limit to remove herself from the pool she was able to calm herself. Getting untangled from the reeds was a simple, methodical process, despite the darkness of the pool. Inge kicked toward the surface.

Two strong kicks and she was rocketing through the water, far faster than she had ever moved before. More shocking to her than anything though, was just how deep she'd managed to sink without realising. Even if she had freed herself, she would never have made it to the surface in time. Or maybe she would have, considering her current speed; how had Inge never realised what a strong swimmer she was.

A hand stretched out toward the surface, pale skin reaching for the fading sunlight as she broke the surface. She blinked the water from her long lashes and felt her brow furrow in confusion; the light wasn't from the setting sun at all but the fully risen moon. The silver orb was high in the sky, indicating the late hour but how could that be? She had seen the sun only seconds ago hadn't she?

Inge paddled to the edge of the pool and began to drag herself up the muddy bank only to freeze looking down at her hands. Her limbs were stick thin, far too thin to be natural and her hands large and spindly with stretched fingers and long black nails that glinted sharply in the moonlight. Those were not her hands!

She opened her mouth to gasp and instead what came out was a high pitched; terrifying wail. It sounded like the howling wind in the middle of a storm mixed with a woman's scream and it shook her right to her core. She slapped those long hands over her mouth in shock; how could such an unnatural sound have come from her own mouth?

She turned back to the pool, crawling to the water's edge and stared down at her reflection as the water began to still. A stranger stared back at her; no, not a stranger, a *monster*.

The monster vaguely looked like a woman, but with long thin features, high cheekbones and pale eyes to match her powerline white skin. Her hair had been changed to an inky black that fell over her face in long wet strands, not unlike the weeds at the bottom of the pool. Her lips were full but white tinged with blue rather than the rose pink she was used to and her body seemed to have somehow warped and changed shape entirely, becoming unnaturally thin, almost skeletal, with limbs far longer than normal. Even her dress had stretched to cover her lanky new form.

Inge screamed in confusion and shock and the sound echoed about the forest, it sounded like what she imagined a ghost would. What had happened to her. She tried taking deep breaths and speaking calm words to herself but all that came out were wails and moans. Her tongue seemed to have forgotten how to speak and no matter how hard she tried, all that came out were ghastly sounds.

She tried to weep but the sound was too distressing so she forced herself to sit in silence, long limbs wrapped around her form, they were so long now she could almost do it twice. How could she have been so stupid, wandering into this forest. Everybody knew some sort of deep magic was afoot here and yet she had still gone. And for what? To avoid some wind and rain? A lot of good that did her now as the clouds began to finally gather and pour down on her.

The rain was icy cold and yet, she didn't feel chilled. At least there was that blessing. She didn't bother looking for shelter, she already knew this forest would have nothing like that for her. Instead she slipped back into the pond, sinking beneath the surface and enjoying the quiet stillness that came from being surrounded by the water. She could hear the raindrops hitting the top of the pond, making the water ripple and light dance down around her. Had she not been through such a distressing few hours perhaps it would even be peaceful.

Inge sighed, breathing the water as easily as she could air. At least she need not fear drowning now. She was exhausted; she would sleep and then tomorrow perhaps she would wake up on the shore in her old body; golden hair and rosy cheeks intact and discover all of this had been a nightmare. She could only hope.

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It was not to be.

When she woke she was still beneath the cool water, nestled in a bed of reeds that felt as soft and comfortable as her bed at home. The water felt comforting around her and more than anything Inge felt...at home. That more than anything disturbed her and she kicked back up to the surface and did her best to squeeze her ragged dress dry. It was useless though, it was thoroughly soaked, just like the rest of her.

Still, the sun was out, surely she would dry in time. Unfortunately aside from that she had no idea what to do next. She couldn't continue on to her betrothed village could she? What would they think if they saw her like this? She slinked through the trees, her thin body manoeuvring much easier than her human body had. Perhaps it was her new pale eyes but even the forest itself seemed more open and welcoming. Unlike yesterday where she had walked in silence without even bird song for company the animals were out in droves now. She passed by deer and blue birds as she went who seemed to regard her for a moment before continuing on with their lives.

She plucked a plum from a nearby tree and bit into it, her teeth sliding through the fruit like butter. She ran a finger along them and realised they were all pointed and sharp now, like the fangs of a wolf. She ran her tongue over them and winced, she could feel the sharpness yet they didn't cut into her flesh; what did that mean her tongue felt like? She didn't want to think about it.

Eating proved quite difficult with her long fingers, the nails plunged into the fruit no matter how delicately she tried to hold it, and her sharp teeth sent juices all over her mouth and down her front. She looked like a messy child; well, maybe just messy.

After she'd eaten her fill and continued to wander, sounds began to meet her ears. Footsteps and voices, not far away.

“Inge? Inge!! Can you hear me?”

Her heart leapt, it was Jonathan, her fiance! He had come looking for her! Inge's heart swelled; she knew he was a good man, he would know what to do and soon enough she would be back to normal and living her perfect life. She moved towards the voices and found her way onto the path; there were several men, each holding a torch or pitchfork and walking

the path warily. The youngest among them, a boy really, held a small knife and nicked the trees as they went to ensure the group didn't get lost. A smart idea that might have ensured she never found herself in this situation to begin with.

“Forget it,” One man sighed, “If she truly did come this way, she’s been lost and we’ll be lost too if we don’t get out.”

“Inge is a good woman.” Jonathan insisted, “I refused to give up after only a few hours of searching, perhaps she twisted her ankle and is unable to walk?”

“These woods are dangerous.” The man warned again, “There is dark magic afoot, how else would the trees grow this close together and so twisted. I am telling you man, some fey magic has spirited her away, if she’s lucky, she’s long gone. There are many other fine women you can wed, I am sure.”

Jonathan sighed.

“Perhaps you are right, if she meddled with forces beyond us I cannot help her.”

Inge’s chest tightened; he was giving up on her so easily? No, he must simply be heartbroken. She would fix that. She called out to him, but all that escaped her lips was that same ghostly wail. The man all turned pale and backed into a circle, weapons and tools at the ready as Inge stepped out.

She held up her hands in a gesture of peace but that only made Jonathan yelled louder, shoving his own pitch forward toward her.

“Back, beast!” he cried, “Away with you!”

Inge wailed, trying to show that it was her.

“I-It’s fingers!” The boy trembled, “Look at its mouth!”

Inge looked down at her hands, stained dark red from the plums and realised that the same stickiness must still be staining her lips and teeth. She waved her hands back and forth in an effort to dissuade them but the movement must have only looked threatening because they all surged forward, poking at her with their tools and waving the flaming torches at her dress trying to set it ablaze.

Despite the fact that she'd been out of the water for some time, she was still damp to the touch and her dress hung off her in wet rags, refusing to be set alight. She wailed and screamed, sounds of terror that sounded like threats to the men's ears. With a broken heart Inge realised there was no salvaging this.

"It must have killed Inge!"

"It ate her heart!"

"Kill it!"

She dove to the side, using her spindly arms to clamber between the thin trees far faster than the men could follow. After a minute or two she glanced back to see their lights disappearing; they were too afraid to follow her into the deep wood.

"It's a trap, let's get out of here before it comes back."

It. Not she. *It*. Despite her long hair and obvious still feminine shape they only saw a monster. Any hope of Jonathan recognising her, let alone helping her, was dashed in an instant. She returned to her pool and washed the fruit juice from her mouth and hands, gazing at her reflection as she did so.

Even without the red juices staining her white skin, she still looked frightening. She would have to teach herself to speak again and figure out how to come across less threatening before she attempted to approach people again. Yes, Inge was a strong woman, she refused to give up. She would find a way to cure herself and take back the life that was hers. Once she was human again she was sure she could explain everything to Jonathan and they could be together again just like they had planned.

~

Inge spent several days attempting to learn to speak. The closest she could get was a slightly less threatening "oo" sound. No matter how she moved her lips or tongue, the only thing that she could make was a wail. Slowly though, with some dedication she managed to get a small word or phrase out; the problem being it was nearly unintelligible. The vowels stretched too long and the other sounds were clipped and short; she could barely understand what she was saying, let alone another person. And the words came so slowly

that even if she could figure out how to explain her situation, it would take half an hour to do and the odds of somebody standing still and listening that long were unlikely to say the least.

Still, she practised her friendly gestures; offering a hand to her reflection and trying to smile in a way that didn't reassemble a wolf bearing its teeth. Eventually though, the loneliness of existing in the forest all by herself began to gnaw at Inge and she decided today was the way. Her willowy frame made its way through the trees to the path, following it right to the edge of the wood. The trip took much of the day and by the time she arrived at the forest's edge the sun was setting on her old village.

She could smell the woodsmoke, even see her parents homestead just down the hill and it filled her with hope; if anybody would recognise her it would be them! She took a step forward, then another, each one made her body feel heavier and strange. It was almost like insatiable chains were pulling her back into the trees, moving forward became harder and harder until she was forced to her knees, long arm outstretched in an effort to keep going.

She could almost hold her old home in her hand, yet it may as well have been halfway across the world. A cry made her jump and she saw a young girl, one she recognised as the baker's daughter standing by the path. She was holding an empty bucket, with water pooled around her feet as she pointed at Inge in terror.

“Bansheeee!!!” She screamed.

Inge held up her hand, trying to ask the girl to wait but all that came out was another low wail.

“Nooooooooo~ waaaaaaaaa....”

The girl turned and fled toward her home, doors banged as people rushed to see what the commotion was and Inge knew staying was useless. She scurried back into the trees, disappearing into her new forest home before anybody could follow her. Whatever magic had transformed her into this monster, this...banshee; it clearly kept her bound to this place. As if things weren't already unfair enough.

She returned to her pool, night having fallen long ago and she sighed. There was no getting out of this, she was sure. She was going to live as a banshee for the rest of her life now, all alone, in the woods. For a few minutes she wallowed in self pity and hatred before steeling herself. No, she refused to let this accident turn her into a bitter creature, she would simply have to make the best of it.

If she was to be alone, the least she could do was ensure that nobody met the same fate she did. If people were going to be scared of her, she could at least keep them away

from the pool and ensure nobody else fell in. She couldn't be sure if the pool had been the cause and how, but it was the only logical choice.

She would become this forest's protector and in turn, she would turn it into a proper home.

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Inge looked at her reflection in the smooth pool of water, she stood almost seven feet tall now, and her build looked almost as if somebody had stretched a regular woman out on a loom. Her hands almost reached her knees and her limbs were stick thin. That paired with her paleness, the long dripping hair and the ghostly eyes; it was no wonder people who saw her thought she was a threat.

She carefully removed her dress and looked at her naked body with a combination of fascination and revulsion. Her skin was stretched and pale, all her womanly assets were still intact, but her breasts were now longer and thin to match her body and her hips barely gave her any shape at all. She was far from the beauty she had been.

She refused to lose all hope though; what she needed to do was make herself look a little more human, how hard could that be. If she made the forest a more welcoming place and made herself appear less threatening, perhaps she could encourage people to visit, then she wouldn't be alone.

All she needed really was people to give her a chance, once they realised she wasn't a threat she was sure they could come to an understanding. She spent days gathering wood and stripping bark from the trees with her long nails to help bind them together. She used clumps of clay and mud from the rivers and ponds to glue large fallen logs together. Which she painstakingly pushed into place to make herself a house.

It wasn't the prettiest, but it kept the rain off her head and at least showed that she was a civilised creature. She built her home close to the road, that way travellers might see it without her having to lead them off the path. She decorated her hair and wildflowers to try and make herself seem prettier and she waited. Eventually, people from her own village came wandering through, armed with more pitchforks and torches. Likely looking for her again but this time Inge knew what she had to do.

“What's that?”

“A hovel? A witch's hut! Perhaps that is where the creature came from.”

“You think it's some sort of demon summoned by a witch?”

The voices were already scared; some terrified and she hadn't even emerged.

"Pore Inge...I thought we raised her to be smart but the foolish girl..."

That was her father's voice! Surely he would know her! She pushed open the door, which was really more of a hatch since she had nothing to make hinges with and smiled; making sure not to bare her sharp teeth. It was the closest to a warm expression her new face could make. She waved and the effect was immediate.

"Demon!"

"Kill it!"

"Vengeance for my daughter!"

The weapons came and Inge screeched, fleeing with tears in her eyes as she watched them burn down her hut. Not that there was much to it. She realised it was hopeless; no matter how many flowers she put in her hair or how she tried to act, she was simply too monstrous to be loved. She was going to be alone for a long time.

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The months passed slowly at first; Inge learned where the best fruits, nuts and mushrooms could be foraged for, how to catch fish from the rivers that ran through her forest and even to navigate the tangled maze of trees. After a while, she knew each nook and cranny like the back of her hand; where each animal den was made and where every cave, track and cliff was.

Her body no longer seemed bothered by the temperature so even when the winter snows began to fall she could stand in the middle of the small meadows that dotted the forest, feet surrounded by icy shards and feel no pain. It was beautiful in a way; certainly more beautiful than she. Her dress was ragged by this point, barely more than rags at all. The cloth hung off her thin frame and she envied the clothes she would spy other women wearing when she went to the forest's edge.

People watching had become her favourite hobby. The best way she had to combat the loneliness, save 'talking' to the birds and deer that crossed her path. She would creep as far as the magic allowed her and watch the villages on both sides; her old home and

Jonathan's. Her heart ached when she saw a fair, red haired woman coming home with him, a new bride. She truly had been easily replaced and forgotten by the man she'd assumed would be her life partner.

Vengeful anger overtook her on more than one occasion and she felt a dark temptation to lure the woman into the woods so she would be a monster just like her. But she never gave in. Even in this form, Inge was a kind soul who didn't truly wish harm on anybody. She was painfully lonely though.

She tried on occasion to communicate with others; the rare traveller that crossed her path never lasted long. Her friendly wave was seen as creepy, her open hands, luring and her attempts to scratch a message into the dirt, a threat. In frustration she tried to file down her nails on rocks to make them less sharp but all that did was the opposite. It seemed she was doomed to a life of isolation;

At least, that is what she believed until she met Willow.

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Inge had been deep underwater, resting in her pool when she heard the scream. The water muffled the sound somewhat so she knew it had to be a truly terrible sound to have woken her. She breached the surface and clambered up the bank on all fours, moving towards the woman's scream at a breakneck pace. Whoever was making it sounded terrified.

She approached the main path and was shocked to see not just one or two people but a wagon! In the back of which sat a woman with curly brown hair and freckles across her nose. She was tied up with a line of cloth hung around her neck which had clearly been stopping her from screaming until moments ago. Several men were trying to force it back over her mouth and forced her to the ground.

"Shut up you witch!"

"Let me go! Let me go!! I 'm not a witch, you've got the wrong woman!"

"That's exactly what a witch would say." The man growled, "We'll take you to the capitol and you'll burn on a pyre."

The woman was sobbing, desperately trying to kick away while the men threw her back into their wagon. Inge saw red. She rushed forward, drawing herself up to her full height and wailed. The effect was instant, the men screamed like scared children, one even fell over

and began scrambling back. Inge didn't have to lay a finger on any of them before they were fleeing back down the path. She waved her hands dramatically and actually giggled to herself, it was almost fun. Then she remembered the terrified woman and she turned back to the wagon.

The woman was still bound, her eyes wide with fear and Inge couldn't even blame her. She lowered herself down as much as she could before reaching out a clawed hand to gently cut through the bindings. The woman stayed frozen until they were cut and Inge gently removed the gag.

“Saaaaaaaaffffeee.” She moaned, attempting a comforting smile.

“D-did you just say...safe?” The woman trembled and Inge's heart began to race, somebody had understood her!

She nodded her head enthusiastically before moving back to allow the woman space to get out of the wagon. She wrung her hands as much as their spindly shape would allow and the woman slowly got to her feet and stood before her.

“Um...thank you?”

Inge tried to say that she was welcome but wailed and the woman flinched, but didn't run.

“I'm from a village and a day or so travel from this forest. I'm Willow.” She held out her hand.

Inge stared at it; how long had it been since somebody had touched her? Since she'd touched anything that wasn't bark, water or a fish? Nervously she reached out, conscious of her sharp talon like claws and did her best to return the gesture before quickly retreating out of fear. She didn't want her nails to cut the woman at all; if she ruined this chance at contact she would never forgive herself.

“Are you okay?” Willow asked.

Inge held up her claws and raked them against a nearby tree with a high pitched whine, praying Willow didn't see it as some sort of threat.

“Oh, you're worried about those cutting me?”

Inge nodded again; this was incredible! It was almost like talking to people again, gosh she had missed company so much. Willow regarded her for a moment and if Inge was capable of blushing she was sure she would have. What must this beautiful young woman think of her, with her sunken eyes and pale skin. Nervously she raked her fingers through her long black hair, pushing it over her face self consciously.

“Are you...the monster they talk about? Months ago traders came from the other side of this forest speaking about a banshee that attacked them, and tried to hunt and eat a young girl in the village not far from here.”

Inge couldn't help it, she dug her claws into the tree in frustration. Hunt and eat that little girl? She hadn't gone anywhere near her! She'd just been trying to go home! Willow flinched but unlike anybody else, she didn't run, she stayed and waited, observing Inge and the way she moved.

“Are you angry because that's not what happened?” She asked slowly after a moment and once again Inge nodded.

Willow actually smiled.

“I thought so, if you were the sort of monster that ate children, why would you free me?”

Inge smiled again, hoping her teeth weren't putting the woman ill at ease.

“I suppose I'd better get going then, I don't think they'll be coming back but maybe there is a village I can stay at, since my own kicked me out.”

“Wooooo...wiiiiii...” Inge cursed her own stupid tongue.

“Wo-witch?” Willow asked, “Oh yes, they did think I was a witch, just because I like to talk to myself occasionally and collect herbs. Ridiculous, if I were a witch would I really have let myself be carted off like that?”

There was no way for Inge to respond so she simply moved a little closer. Her hand was still slightly warm from Willow's touch, the first time it had been truly warm in months. Yes, she

no longer really felt the cold, she had thought it was all temperature but it seemed she was wrong. Perhaps this body was just perpetually numb until it found some form of warmth.

“Do you think you could show me the way out of here?”

Inge nodded, despite her sadness; she didn't want Willow to go, she was nice and pretty and reminded her of home. But she knew it would be cruel to keep her here; just because she was trapped didn't mean this woman had to be.

She showed her the safest route through the trees, giggling a little as Willow struggled through the thick tangle of branches.

“You move like water.” Willow said, “It's beautiful.”

Inge felt her own blood heat for a moment; she never thought of herself as beautiful, not anymore. The fact that anybody could find anything even remotely attractive about her brought her just joy; she wished she could tell Willow how much it meant to her.

They moved through the trees at a leisurely pace thanks to Willow having to take her time clambering over branches in her long peasant dress. Inge took the time to admire her; it had been so long since she'd gotten to see another person up close, at least without them screaming and yelling at her.

Willow's freckles made her cheekbones stand out and her cornflower blue eyes seemed to shimmer with intelligence. They reminded her of her old eyes; before they were pale and white. Willow was clearly a beauty and Inge felt anger rise within her; no doubt some jealous older matron in her village had called the witch hunters on her out of jealousy. What a thing to do; if she ever found out who it was she would scare her half to death for daring to hurt such a kind woman. For she knew Willow must be kind, to trust something as monstrous as her.

“It's a shame you can't speak, I bet your story is fascinating.” Willow said after a while and Inge whined in response. “Do you mind if I talk? I hate silence, you know, that's why I often spoke to the birds and animals I saw. It was awfully lonely spinning wool all day and I had to fill the air somehow.”

Inge smiled and nodded, it would be nice to hear a voice that was warm and friendly again. She reached out a spindly finger and gently pressed it against Willow's dress, cocking her head to the side.

“Did I make this dress?” Willow questioned and Inge nodded. “Yes I did! I made most of the clothes in my village. I used to have my mother and sisters to help but then my mother married my sisters off, and grew ill, so it was just me. Don’t know what they will do now without me. It’ll be an itchy winter that’s for sure!”

She threw back her head and laughed; Inge thought the sound was the most beautiful she had ever heard. That’s what an angel laughing must sound like. She looked down at her rags and felt ashamed, something Willow seemed to notice.

“Hey now, it must be hard to get clothes when everybody screams at you, why don’t I make you something some time?”

Inge startled, this woman would really do that for her? She nodded eagerly, trying to convey just how much that would mean to her and Willow seemed to understand. They reached the edge of the forest, where Jonathan’s village was and Inge shrank into the shadows.

“Thank you for all your help.” Willow smiled, “How about I leave you a new dress here once it’s finished, getting the sizing right might be a bit difficult...but I’ll try, okay?”

Inge smiled, watching as her first friend walked down the hill. She hoped Jonathan’s village accepted her, she would stay and watch. Just to be safe. She watched as Willow disappeared into the small huddle of houses and Inge’s heart ached with jealousy. How warm would it be down there, with crackling fires and stews bubbling? She’d eaten nothing but raw fish and fruit for months now, she’d almost forgotten what a good meal tasted like.

At least her kind woman was safe and perhaps, if she was lucky, she would even uphold their bargain and she would see her again.

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Lacking anything better to do, Inge lingered at the edge of the forest. Hoping for a glimpse of her new friend. At night she huddled beneath the branches, running her long finger across the palm of her hand, revelling in the memory of a warm touch. Once or twice she saw Willow, it seemed she was living with one of the shepherds, that made sense. Selfishly, Inge wondered if she was keeping to her promise and making her a new dress.

She had grown used to the long rags that hung off her frame but now that the hope for something new, maybe even pretty, had been promised she couldn’t get it out of her

mind. So when she saw Willow approaching the forest once more with a bundle of cloth in hand she couldn't help but jump forward to greet her.

"Oh gosh!" Willow fumbled and nearly dropped the bundle, "Sorry, you scared me."

Inge retreated, immediately flooded with guilt. She still looked as monstrous as ever, she was getting ahead of herself being so familiar.

"Have you been waiting here...all this time? It's been weeks."

Had it? Time had started to blur together these last few months, or had it been years? Inge shuffled awkwardly, only just now realising how creepy that must have seemed.

"It's okay." Willow smiled warmly, "You must be lonely all by yourself, am I the first person to talk to you in a long time."

"Looooooooonleeeeeee..."

"Poor thing." Willow sighed before brightening, "Here, look what I have brought you!"

She unravelled the cloth, revealing a simple dress with a blue bodice and long skirt. There were a few small yellow flowered embroidered onto the fringe of the skirt. The garment looked misshapen, far too long with sleeves far too thin for a normal woman but Inge knew it would fit her.

Gently she took the garment from Willow, holding it tenderly so that her claws wouldn't ruin a single stitch. She had so many things she wanted to say; to express her gratitude but all she would manage was a low wail and wide smile.

"You like it, wonderful! Go put it on!"

Inge didn't have to be asked twice, she disappeared behind the trees, shredding off her old ratty outfit with glee and carefully putting the new one on. It wasn't a perfect fit, but it was a lot better than what she'd had before. She giggled to herself a little, wondering just how strange she must look; a banshee in a blue dress with yellow flowers. It was so out of place it was comical.

Still, she appreciated that Willow didn't laugh when she revealed herself, in fact, she looked proud.

“You look lovely.” She lied, nothing about her tone indicated untruthfulness, but Inge knew it had to be a lie. Still, she appreciated it all the same; she wasn't likely to get many compliments, if any, any time soon.

“Thaaaaaaaaa....”

“You're welcome!”

Inge beamed, it felt so good to have somebody understand her.

“You know, if you show me the way to your home, I could come visit some time?” Willow suggested after a moment, “If I am honest, you're really interesting and you seem like you could use a friend.”

“Frrrrrr....eeeeennnnnn...”

“Yeah, we can be friends!” Willow smiled, “If I come into the forest can you magically find me or something?”

Inge shook her head. Willow thought for a moment before brightening.

“I know, if I walk along the path and play this, you'll know I am there and you can come get me!” She smiled, presenting a small wooden flute. It was crude, only capable of a handful of notes but when Willow lifted it to her lips it made a beautiful, almost haunting sound. Inge knew she would be able to pick it up with her sharp, pointed ears and nodded.

“Great! I'll come in a few days, okay? I'll tell the farmer I am staying with that I am going to try my hand at fishing.”

Inge nodded again, she couldn't believe her luck! A friend, finally, after so long she had a friend.

~

Inge made herself a bed of grass to sleep on, rather than going back into her pool. She didn't want to risk ruining her pretty new dress; at least not yet. Living in the wilds as she did it was

inevitable but she wanted to prolong its beauty as much as she could. That, and she was worried about missing Willow's signal.

Each day she spent half her time listening, hoping for the tinkling of the off tuned flute. When she finally heard it her heart leapt and she rushed through the forest at twice her usual pace. Standing by the road, humming to herself as she waited was Willow, in all her glory. She was as beautiful as ever, her brown curls taking on a golden hue under the dappled light of the forest. Inge gave a small wail in greeting.

"There you are!" Willow smiled, "Think I could see where you live today?"

Inge nodded, then after a moment's hesitation offered her hand out. Willow took it and Inge gave a small moan, it felt so nice to have any form of human contact again. Willow didn't seem to mind and allowed Inge to gently guide her through the forest. Hand in hand like this, it was almost like being lovers. Inge blushed at the thought, her face feeling warmer than it had in months. What a sinful thing to think about another woman; especially when she was a banshee of all things. Even if Willow were so inclined she would never choose somebody like Inge to love.

She was so involved in her own thoughts it took Willow stopping to realise something was amiss. Inge followed her gaze and noticed two young women, girls really, not yet of marrying age, climbing through the trees.

"This is dangerous, Hilde." One whispered, "What if the monster catches us."

"There's no monster, Sofia is a liar, she just made that up and I'm going to prove it."

Inge's heart turned to ice, they were climbing over a nest of tangled roots that led to a sudden drop. The sudden drop she herself had fallen down all those moons ago and into the pool! If they weren't careful they would fall in and meet the same fate as her!

Inge hurriedly looked between Willow and the girls, there was no time to explain, there was no way she could make those girls understand. That left her only one choice. She reared up as high as she could, stretching out her long spindly body and wrapped herself around the tree before bellowing the loudest, most frightening howl she could muster. The girl's eyes went wide as they spied her and let out shrieks as they ran in the opposite direction; toward safety.

Inge deflated; knowing in her heart without even turning back that Willow would be gone too. She'd just done something monstrous, all that good will would have been shattered-

“What was that about?”

Inge turned suddenly, Willow was still there, looking confused, but not scared. Inge pointed to the pool, showing the path from the small embankment the girls would have tumbled down.

“You wanted to stop those girls falling in the pool and drawing?”

She nodded. To her surprise, Willow’s face filled with sympathy.

“And scaring them was the only way you knew to keep them safe.” She concluded, “That must have been hard.”

Inge whined and stiffened as warm arms wrapped around her thin frame. Willow was...hugging her. She'd forgotten how but after a moment she awkwardly returned the gesture, being careful not to hold the woman too tightly lest she hurt her. The hug felt indescribably wonderful, she could feel the warmth from Willow’s body melting into her own. She couldn’t believe it was happening and didn't want it to end. Willow seemed to understand and ran her hands down Inge’s back soothingly. The touch made her shiver, she could feel every curve of Willow's body against hers, reminding Inge of everything she’d lost but for the first time, she didn’t feel sad, only joy at finally having somebody touch her in a friendly way.

For the first time in months she was aware of her body as a woman, not a monster. When Willow finally did pull away Inge it took all Inge's self control not to pull her back into another embrace. Instead she focused on the lingering warmth seeping into her skin and the scent of the other woman now clinging to her dress. Another reason not to go back into the pond, lest it wash away.

"You're so brave." Willow said and Inge's heart felt as though it would burst. "Is the pool your home?"

Inge swept aside the leaves and roots and used her long nails to scratch pictures into the dirt. A stick figure woman falling into a pool, followed by another, taller figure emerging. It took a bit of gesturing but eventually Willow began to piece it together.

"You fell into the pool and that's what turned you into a banshee."

Inge moaned sadly.

"So now you make sure nobody else falls in there and meets the same fate, you're so kind." Willow placed a soft hand on Inge's arm. "It would be easy to let somebody else fall in so you wouldn't be alone, but you don't."

It felt so nice to have somebody understand and give her kind words. Inge couldn't help herself, she leaned her long body up against Willow's, feeling that warmth and an entirely new kind of heat building inside her. The kind of heat she hasn't felt since thinking about Jonathan late at night many moons ago.

Of course she kept that a secret, not that she had any choice. She was simply starved for touch after all these months. This sinful infatuation would pass, it had to.

~

Willow had started to visit the woods every other day now. Her banshee always providing her with fruit and foragables to bring back to the village to explain her long absences. She'd asked around, about the "monster" that lived in those unnamed woods.

"It killed my betrothed." Jonathan the butcher claimed, "she foolishly travelled through there alone on her way here and we saw her blood on the creature's lips. Poor Inge, she would have made a good wife but Sif has filled the hole in my heart."

Willow found it hard to believe her banshee would kill an innocent young woman. So next time she visited she mentioned the story and the banshee became very animated.

"Innnnnnn..." she moaned, "gaaaaaahhhh."

"Inge? Yes, that was the woman's name, do you know what happened to her?"

The banshee nodded quickly, poking a clawed hand at her chest; Inge felt her eyes widen as understanding washed over her.

"You're Inge?"

The banshee whined.

"Oh you poor thing, I'm sorry to say Jonathan has married another."

Inge moaned low; Willow could sense her sadness but also acceptance. Inge had come to terms with it a while ago.

"I'd tell them all, but they'd never believe me." Willow pouted, "they'd claim some enchantment or other such nonsense and hunt you down."

Inge nodded, she knew as much.

"But I promise Inge, you'll always have me."

The banshee gave a hissing, happy sound and Willow beamed. It brought her so much joy to know she was helping the poor, lonely woman. That and Inge seemed to understand her. Inge didn't mind if Willow nattered on about nothing for hours, in fact she seemed soothed by the voice. Every time Willow had apologised for talking too much the banshee had shaken her head and urged her to continue. It felt nice, to feel so wanted.

Once she'd started spending more time with the monster, she realised that the form wasn't all that monstrous really. Yes she was tall and skeletally thin, her hair perpetually wet and slightly slimy but Inge was still, at her core, a woman.

And that was a dangerous realisation.

Still, as the months passed by, Willow found herself increasingly drawn to Inge. Her strange proportions became fascinating, then beautiful. Inge always revelled in her touch, she didn't find it strange that another woman wanted to run her fingers through her hair or along her face. Not like most people.

"Inge," she said one day, "could I tell you something about myself?"

They were sitting atop a fallen log by the edge of a meadow, Willow threading flowers through the banshee's hair as she braided it. Inge gave a low wail, her way of saying 'yes'.

"There was another reason the people in my hamlet thought I was a witch..." Willow took a deep breath. "The person who turned me into the witch hunters was somebody I was in love with."

Inge stiffened.

"I loved them and I thought they loved me but then when their brother found out, he convinced her that I was a witch using magic to charm her into acting out of sin."

"Heeeeeeeeeerrrrr?"

There was the sticking point.

"Yes...my lover was a woman."

It felt strange to say it out loud.

"I've always been like this, always more drawn to women romantically and well, every way that comes after that. I know it's wrong but I can't help it."

Inge turned slowly, reaching out a long hand to cup Willow's cheek. She gave a low moan, her pale eyes wide but understanding. She was saying she didn't care and Willow felt her eyes burn with tears of happiness. A banshee had shown her more kindness than any human ever had.

"Thank you Inge." She whispered. "I'm sure I don't need to tell you how good it feels to be accepted for who you are."

The banshee made a hollow, windy sound. The sound Willow had learned was Inge's way of saying her name.

The banshee hesitated for a moment before pressing her cool forehead against Willow's, almost nuzzling her. Willow felt her skin turn hot beneath her dress in a way that was so very inappropriate. The banshee needed a friend, not a lover, of that she was sure. She couldn't bear the thought of hurting the poor woman. Inge had already suffered so much.

When the banshee pulled back there was an odd look in her pale eyes; for a moment Willow thought it might be yearning; the same yearning she felt, but then she dismissed it.

She was letting her own lust and emotions cloud her judgement. She pulled away, but it was so much harder than it should have been.

When she went home that night she tossed and turned in her bed; wondering where Inge was and if she was warm and safe. After several months of communicating she had managed to piece together that Inge slept at the bottom of her pool most nights; only after carefully folding up the dress Willow had made her of course. She wondered what it was like to sleep deep beneath the cool water. Sometimes she even entertained the idea of slipping into it to find out but Inge had never let her get close; she didn't want her friend confined to the forest as she was.

She imagined Inge's naked body curled up under the water, then stretching in the moonlight with her dark hair floating all around her. Willow felt herself grow wet and shamefully her fingers lingered southwards toward her womanhood. She had to bite her lip to keep from crying out and when she was finished shame filled her; it was so wrong, but it felt so right.

A routine formed; she no longer bothered sneaking away anymore, Willow walked brazenly into the forest each day despite the other villagers warning and spent her time with Inge. They gathered herbs and flowers, even sang a few songs together and just enjoyed one another's company. The banshee would swim along the rivers, gathering fish and pretty rocks and Willow would sit and watch her while she embroidered new outfits and wove fabric. In a way; the forest was starting to feel like home.

Inge was starting to feel like home.

It was a random day in mid spring when the realisation crashed down on her like a waterfall. The banshee had just emerged from the river, a small bunch of slightly wet water lilies clutched in her thin fingers which she handed over to Willow with a smile and a low coo. Willow took them and felt her heart begin to race as she finally realised that somewhere along the line her friendship and lust had turned love.

She was in love with a banshee.

As if being attracted to women wasn't deviant enough; now she was in love with a monster. No, not a monster, despite her appearance Inge was the furthest thing from a monster. She was kind and decent...and beautiful in her own way. Willow put down the damp bouquet in the grass at her side and reached for her banshee, taking Inge's hand and bringing it up to cup her cheek.

“Inge...I wanted you to know, you’re the most important person in my life.”

Inge whined, she looked...guilty.

“No, look at me.” Willow grabbed the banshee’s face gently, “You are a person, Inge, not a monster. You’re beautiful and kind and better than most normal humans I know.”

The banshee whined, tears appearing in the corners of her eyes. She leaned forward and pressed her forehead to Willow’s and the temptation became too great, Willow leaned herself forward and pressed her lips to Inge’s cold ones. They were damp from the water, or perhaps she was almost that way, it didn’t matter. Maybe it should have felt wrong kissing her, with her long tongue and sharp teeth but in truth, Willow had never felt something more right in her life.

Those long limbs wrapped around her, pulling her into the banshee’s thin body and holding her tight as their kiss deepened. What they were doing was taboo on so many levels and yet that only made her more excited.

Willow ran her hands up and down Inge’s sides before pulling back just slightly in order to get her hands onto the banshee’s chest. She could feel the misshapen breasts there and slowly kneaded them making Inge moan and wail; these sounds were different to her usual ones though. Even a stranger would have to know they were sounds of pleasure. With expert hands she pulled at the ties keeping the bodice of the banshee’s dress together and reached inside to touch the bare skin. Within seconds it was warm, the nipples even hardening and Inge wailed.

Willow continued to play with the banshee’s body, unable to reach between her legs thanks to the height she focused on those breasts. Tweaking the nipples and playing until she felt Inge shudder and gasp in that distinctive way. Seeing the banshee experience pleasure for what might have been the first time made Willow smile and her own pussy grow moist.

She wrapped her legs around Inge’s thin torso and pulled her close. Due to the height difference they could never make love the normal way but Willow didn’t need to worry, Inge seemed to know what to do.

Willow let herself be laid down on the soft grass of the meadow and Inge’s long nails gently scraped along the seams of her dress, taking it off with ease in such a way that it could be easily re sewn. It was an odd way to undress a lover to be sure but then again, nothing about them or their relationship was normal.

Willow shivered, feeling those long and dangerous clawed fingers gently feeling along her inner thighs. Her heart was beating so loudly in her ears that it blocked out every

other sound, well, almost every sound. Inge was moaning and the sound was only making Willow feel more and more wet.

A moment later, she felt something wet lick across her pussy; Inge's tongue. For a moment Willow saw sparks. That long, flexible and strangely dexterous tinge began to lap at her, curling her clit over and over and occasionally diving into her hole. She was in rapture, unable to do anything but arch her back and moan as Inge pleased her. She could feel the pressure getting higher and higher, building up inside her no matter how hard she tried to stamp it down to prolong the experience. It was so much better than she had ever imagined.

Eventually the stimulation became too much and Willow tumbled over the edge with a wail that could put Inge to shame. She shuddered, letting Inge lap up the wetness that squirted from her before the banshee crawled up her body to curl around it protectively. For a few moments the two lay together in their meadow, catching their breath.

"I love you." Willow whispered and Inge gave a low moan, Willow knew she was returning the sentiment. "I think I'll stay here, in the forest with you. I don't need that village or other humans. We can protect this place together. Forever."

"Eveeeeeeeeer."

The two curled together and Willow smiled; perhaps being caught by witch hunters was the best thing to ever happen to her.

~

And so those dark woods became not quite as foreboding as they once had been. Stories lingered for decades of the banshee and the witch who dwelt there and many turned away in fear. But those who did venture forth found a forest brimming with life and passed through without harm befalling them.

As the years passed rumours passed from whispered ear to lip, that any woman with a cruel husband or nowhere else to go could find safety and shelter within those trees. Thanks to them, the unnamed place was finally given the title Maiden's Forest; and became known as a place of safety and refuge for any woman who sought it.

To this day the pool lays at the forest's centre and there are those who whisper that the spirits of Inge and her lover linger there, protecting the forest and those who pass though; even in death. The eternal guardians of their own garden of Eden.